

Consilium 59  
Translated by Alice Browne

On epilepsy and taking holy orders

**Argument.**

When D. Ioannes Baptista de Symeonibus requested ordination, it was objected that he had an impediment of ineligibility on account of the epilepsy which was presumed to afflict him. It was clear that he had sometimes suffered from epileptic symptoms, which he did not deny, but he asserted that he was completely cured, and these symptoms could no longer be an impediment to his ordination. So there are two questions to be determined, 1. Whether he was perfectly cured of epilepsy, 2, whether his previous epilepsy was an obstacle to his ordination.

**Summary.**

1. An epileptic cannot be ordained.
2. Epilepsy is a shameful disease, and causes the worst kind of symptoms.
3. Even a cured epileptic should not be ordained without caution, and the reasons why.
4. There are two kinds of epilepsy.
5. If an epileptic is completely cured, he can be ordained.
6. When epilepsy should be called mild.
7. When epilepsy must be called frequent.
8. Who should be said to be cured.
9. When someone must be said to be healthy.
10. How one should test whether an epileptic is cured or not.

*Prima facie* it seems that D. Ioannes Baptista de Symeonibus should be barred from ordination to holy orders, since he had suffered from epilepsy in the past: the need for caution about this is expressly stated in your letter, Quaest. 2. Caus.7 &c. seq. For, as it says there, it is indecent and dangerous for someone

administering the sacraments to be subject to this malady, and to risk falling to the ground overcome by this disease while consecrating the Eucharist. The disease is shameful, and causes shameful and terrible symptoms, some of them described in the above-mentioned text, such as sudden falling, confused shouting, frothing at the mouth, contortions of the body and limbs; also involuntary emission of semen, feces and urine, and other symptoms of this kind, which are described by doctors in their treatises on epilepsy. See especially the following treatises on the subject: above all, Hippocrates, *De morbo sacro*; Arnold of Villanova, Hieronymus Gabucinus [Girolamo Gabuccini], Jean Fernel, Jason Pratensis [Van der Velde], and last, [Honoré] Bouche in his book *De morbis scelestis* [i.e. *De morbo scelesto*], as well as many other ancient and modern practitioners.

An epileptic is not only barred from ordination while he is afflicted with the said disease, but even if he seems to be cured, because this disease does not only have unpredictable or even predictable onsets, exacerbations, and attacks, but it can easily relapse. As a result, even after many days, indeed many months, or occasionally years, it can attack a person unexpectedly, when we had thought all risk of recurrence had vanished. So it was wise of the canon law to recommend that before we ordain someone who has ever suffered from epilepsy, we should perform numerous long tests of the complete restoration of his health, because sometimes a person can relapse into this disease from a trivial cause, such as eating bad food, violent mental passion, breathing bad air, and other extrinsic causes of this type.

Nonetheless, in the case we have to decide, as far as a doctor's opinion is concerned, that D. Ioannes Baptista de Symeonibus is not deservedly barred from holy orders, because in accordance with the texts cited above and with your letter, epilepsy is of two kinds. One is frequent and serious; the other attacks rarely and mildly. It is certain that the impediment to ordination, and to celebration of the sacrament in those already ordained, only applies to the first kind of epilepsy, not to the second, as stated there. The reason, which doctors can explain, is that serious and frequent epilepsy comes from a defect in an organ, and is essential, and comes from a cause which has become habitual in the brain, so that even if it seems to have gone into remission, it can easily

return, and is incurable. But most people agree that mild epilepsy often comes from an extrinsic cause and so can be cured. Besides, those shameful symptoms, which serious epilepsy abounds in, are not associated with mild epilepsy, so that there is no question of the indecency which results mainly from those symptoms. Since D. Ioannes Baptista suffered from mild epilepsy, and always from external causes, as we all agree and as is clear from the witnesses' statements, he should not be barred from ordination.

However, the texts cited above make use of another distinction, taken from the condition of the sick person: that is, either an epileptic is perfectly cured, or not. In the first case he should not be barred from ordination, but only in the second. This distinction is absolutely necessary, and should be accepted universally, to avoid the greatest absurdity. For if anyone who has ever suffered from epilepsy is ineligible, and cannot be ordained for that reason, very few people – I would say no one – are free of that disqualification, for very few people – I would say no one – have never suffered from epilepsy, at least in childhood, as even the purblind and barbers know, not just us doctors. And although some people consider that this disease of children, which we call infantile epilepsy, is not truly epilepsy, it certainly is not a dissimilar illness, and children often suffer from epilepsy properly so called. See Hippocrates, *De morbo sacro* 9, 10, also Galen, book 6. *Epidem*, comm. 1, text. 5, and Avicenna, book. 3, also Mercurial. [Ghirolamo Mercuriale] Book 2 *De morbis puerorum*, c.3. So according to this second classification of the texts, D. Ioan. Baptista should not be barred from ordination, as he is now perfectly recovered from epilepsy.

Both propositions, i.e. that the epilepsy from which the said D. Io. Baptista suffered was mild, and that he is completely cured of it, are easily proved. As to it being mild, witnesses state that it was never associated with any symptoms worth considering or noting: all that it consisted of was a certain dizziness, and he did not suddenly or unexpectedly fall to the ground, but would lean on something nearby and gradually lower himself; he never stretched or distorted his limbs, never frothed at the mouth, never cried out, never soiled himself with any kind of incontinence, and the seizure lasted barely the fourth part of a quarter of an hour. When it was over, he did not suffer any

paralysis, any dulling in his mind, any idiocy or insanity, any numbness in his limbs, or any loss of memory as a result of the attack, but only embarrassment about the symptoms he had just endured.

This epilepsy was not only mild because of its symptoms, but also because it happened rarely; it is clear from the witnesses' statements that the said D. Io. Baptista was rarely troubled with this disease. We talk about frequent epilepsy when, because of great weakness in the brain and head, it can cause an attack for any insignificant reason: especially conjunctions and oppositions of the stars, major changes in the weather, any chance error in diet, a strong passion in the soul, and even some powerful smell, or other similar chance events. It is not frequent if the disease only strikes once or twice a year, because this low number of attacks shows the power of the disease is weak, and this feebleness is inherent and ingrained, so the disease is not only likely to pass, but needs no treatment: the rarity of the attacks shows the disease itself is weak, and easily overcome by nature.

So it is obvious from the above that this disease did not arise from a marked, harmful imbalance of the head and brain, or a flaw in the organs, which are always the cause of serious and incurable cases of epilepsy. This is confirmed all the more definitely by the fact that this patient only suffered from attacks of the disease as a result of extrinsic causes. He was most troubled by it when he went hunting, or carelessly exposed himself to inclement weather, sun or wind; without these triggers he was never troubled with symptoms of this kind, as is clear from the witnesses' statements. So clearly D. Io. Baptista can be ordained, all the more so because his ordination will prevent him from going hunting, and he will never risk another attack of the disease.

Finally, it is clear that D. Io. Baptista is now perfectly cured of the disease. A person is said to be cured if he has returned to his original and natural state. *L. Quod ita sanatum ff. De Aedil. Ed. Ex Medicis Galen, lib. 9 Method. Cap. 15.* The proof that someone has returned to his natural state is the soundness of his nature, when he is no longer afflicted in any part of his body, and is not hindered in fulfilling any of the duties of his life; then a person is said to be healthy. Galen, lib. 6 *De sanitate tuenda*, cap. 5 & 9, lib. *De differ. morb.* Cap.

2. Besides, anyone should be described as healthy, even if he has been ill in the past, once he retains no more traces of his former illness, otherwise no one should be described as healthy, since everyone has been ill at some time. Therefore a person who has been cured so that (in the words of the text) he has returned to his original state should be considered as though he had never been ill. So it should not disqualify D. Io. Baptista that he suffered from epilepsy in the past, if it can be shown that he has returned to his original state.

A further proof: because epilepsy can easily be induced by mistakes in diet, if a poor constitution and the roots of the disease are still present, it obviously follows that if a person makes these mistakes several times, and yet there is no sign of epilepsy, it can be said to have completely disappeared. This is why Gelasius, in c. Nuper Causs. 7 Quaest. 2, recommends offering a person suspected of suffering from epilepsy all different kinds of meat, in order to test whether he has fully recovered from this disease by offering foods that are unhealthy and bad for epilepsy. If he is not perfectly cured and eats foods of this kind, he can easily relapse into epilepsy. Gelasius does not recommend trying this for just a day or two, but for thirty days; if the patient suffers no harm from these dietary mistakes during this time, there is no doubt that he is completely free of epilepsy. So, since in our case the disease has been inactive for two years, in spite of numerous mistakes in diet, and D. Joannes Baptista has never been troubled by it, we must say that he is completely cured, and not only are there no grounds for barring him from ordination, but he should be admitted as though he had never been ill.