

Asceticism and the Christian Life

BY

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If we mention the word "asceticism" to the average Christian, he or she will think immediately of mortification, self-denial or some other term that connotes deprivation, negation and suffering. Some persons may even think of penitential practices, although there is a world of difference between penance and asceticism. Penance looks to the past with sorrow for sins committed and then gives expression to certain penitential practices by way of atonement. Asceticism looks to the future out of the present with a view to the avoidance of sin and growth in the Christian virtues. Unfortunately, this positive aspect of growth in grace and virtue has too often been overlooked because beginners in the spiritual life will necessarily have to concentrate on the avoidance of sin through self-denial and mortification. Yet, even St. John of the Cross, the Mystical Doctor of the dark nights, has an eminently positive orientation in his writings, namely, to lead the soul ultimately to the intimacy of the transforming union. He could hardly do otherwise, since Christian perfection consists primarily in the perfection of charity, which is the bond of intimate union with God. Nevertheless, all along the path to that perfection, in both the ascetical and the mystical stages, one must use the negative practices of self-denial and the positive practices of growth in grace and virtue.

ASCETICISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The term "asceticism" comes from the Greek word "askesis," which signifies the exercise or training of athletes in preparation for their participation in the athletic games. Obviously, the training of athletes demand various kinds of restrictions and self-denial, but it is always for the purpose of competing in order to win. This is the way St. Paul applies the concept of asceticism to the Christian life.

You know that while all the runners in the stadium take part in the race, the award goes to one man. In that case, run so as to win! Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. They do this to win a crown of leaves that withers, but we a crown that is imperishable. I do not run like a man who loses sight of the finish line. I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. What I do is discipline my own body and master it, for fear that after having preached to others I myself should be rejected (I Cor. 9:24-27).

It is worth noting that the ancient Greek philosophers also advocated the practice of the basic human virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice and prudence; accordingly, they insisted on the need to control the movements of the passions and the demands of self-centered love. Not only that, but we find similar teaching in the pagan religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but always for the purpose of freeing the individual from the desires and cravings of the sensate life in order to rise to a state of illumination and transcendence.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, the period of persecution, the faithful scrupulously avoided excessive contact with the world, and especially the pagan feasts and games, which were often marked by immorality and cruelty. The community liturgy was necessarily celebrated in private, but the faithful also practiced personal prayer several times each day; on Wednesdays and Fridays they fasted from food and drink until the middle of the afternoon. However, what won the admiration of the pagans was their fraternal charity and the way they cared for each other. "These Christians, how they love one another!"

With the Peace of Constantine (313), Christians were given full citizenship in the Roman Empire. This new freedom gave rise to what would become the monastic movement in the Church. Thus, Paul Evdokimov states: "It is no longer the pagan world that fights and

eliminates the world from his being" (*The Struggle with God*, p. 94). In the same context, Fenelon wrote: "The persecution made less solitaries than did the peace and triumph of the Church. The Christians, simple and opposed to any softness, were more fearful of a peace that might be gratifying to the senses than they had been of the cruelty of the tyrants" (*Oeuvres*, vol. 17, p. 396).

Under the leadership of St. Pachomius and St. Basil the monastic way of life was characterized by certain ascetical practices such as separation from the world, solitude, celibacy, poverty, fasts and vigils, bodily penitential practices, manual labor, life in community and obedience to a superior. At the same time there was an increasing number of women who embraced the life of consecrated virginity but remained in the city and in their own homes. In time the Church drew up regulations governing this type of life and gave these consecrated women a special garb, of which the veil was the most important article of clothing. Both the monks or hermits and the consecrated virgins were considered to be "ascetics"; that is, they were persons dedicated to a lifestyle that was inspired and regulated by the Gospel. Logically, they soon became witnesses and models of Christian holiness and for that reason were held in veneration. Throughout the history of the Church the consecrated life has taken various forms, but generally it always preserved the practices of asceticism with a view to growth in holiness.

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR ASCETICISM

Although the Christian receives the life of grace at baptism and is thereby incorporated into the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ, the supernatural life does not bring with it the preternatural gifts of soul and body that adorned our first parents at their creation. Rather, the consequences of their original sin still make the human nature a wounded and divided nature. As St. Paul puts it: "The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; the two are directly opposed" (Gal. 5:17). For that reason, to respond to the vocation to holiness, it is necessary to wage a relentless warfare against the world, the flesh and the devil, because each in its own way is a source of temptation and sin.

The attainment of sanctity is, of course, above all the work of God, but it calls for cooperation on the part of the individual Christian. St.

Augustine put the matter so clearly when he said that God gives us the grace to love him, and when we love him, he gives us the grace to love him more. This is an important statement because throughout the history of Christian spirituality there has been a tendency either to make the human being the total master of his spiritual destiny (Pelagianism) or to make God the exclusive and unique agent (Quietism). As so often happens, the truth lies in the middle of the two extremes. It is not a question of "either — or" but of "both - and."

The ascetical struggle has a two fold aspect, one negative and the other positive. The negative aspect is sometimes called mortification, purgation or self-denial, and by this is meant the effort to destroy sin and its effects in our lives, to control our evil inclinations and eventually to renounce anything that could be an obstacle to our growth in the love of God and of neighbor. The practices of mortification and self-denial must be continued throughout one's lifetime because we are always faced with temptations to satisfy our selfish desires and inclinations. Not only that, but according to the teaching of St. John of the Cross, even when we have done all we can to purge ourselves of the effects of original and personal sin in what he calls the "active" purgation, it is still necessary for the Holy Spirit to complete the purification by means of the "passive" purgation. St. John of the Cross treats of these two types of purgation in his work, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

THE PRACTICE OF MORTIFICATION

Since the human person is composed of body and soul, flesh and spirit, it is necessary to purge or mortify oneself on both the sense level and the spiritual level. But one should begin with mortification of the sensate life because, as St. John of the Cross has stated, if we stop the enemy at the gates (the external senses), he cannot get inside to destroy the city. For that reason a basic rule for Christian living is to avoid the occasions of sin; that is, to recognize what persons, places or things constitute a temptation for a given individual. One of the greatest protective measures against sin is resolutely to distance oneself from anyone or anything that would be an obstacle to one's growth in the spiritual life. This rule makes just as much sense as to tell a diabetic to avoid sugar or to insist that a dangerously overweight person should adhere to a strict diet.

That, however, is only the first step on the journey through the "dark night" of purgation. Little would be accomplished in terms of the spiritual life if one avoided all occasions of sin but remained in the grip of concupiscence. This is the term -concupiscence- that the theologians and spiritual writers traditionally used in order to designate one's predominating self-centered desire. The first law of nature is self-preservation, which means that we have obligation to satisfy our vital needs. But we also have a "wounded" nature that suffers from the effects of original sin, augmented by the effects of our own personal sins. As a result, we readily overshoot the mark and tend to go to extremes in satisfying our own personal desires. In fact, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, every sin, no matter what its label, is ultimately a sin of self-centered love; choosing self when one should choose God or neighbor.

Consequently, the individual Christian who wants to make progress in grace and charity must eventually deal with this inner conflict and warfare. One must not only avoid occasions of sin and put sin out of one's life; one must also quench the flame of desire that afflicts and torments him. The teaching of St. John of the Cross is very helpful in this respect.

He that loves a creature becomes as low as that creature and, in some ways, lower; for love not only makes the lover equal to the object of his love, but even subjects him to it. Hence in the same way it comes to pass that the soul that loves anything else [apart from God] becomes incapable of pure union with God and transformation in him . . . Therefore, it is supreme ignorance for the soul to think that it will be able to pass to this high estate of union with God unless it first rids itself of the desire for all things, natural and supernatural, which may be a hindrance to it . . .

It is well known by experience that when the will of a person is attached to one thing, he prizes it above everything else; although some other things may be much better, he takes less pleasure in it. And if he wishes to enjoy both, he is bound to depreciate the more important one because he makes an equality between them. Therefore, since there is nothing that equals God, the soul that loves some other thing together with God, or clings to it, does a serious wrong to God. And if this is so, what would the soul be doing that loves anything more than God? (*Ascent*, Book I, chap. 5).

One statement in the above quotation needs a clarification. If the love of something beneath us brings us down to the level of what is loved,

then how can God love us, his creatures and still remain the infinite God that he is? The answer lies in the distinction between the various kinds of love. If one loves a lesser good with an exclusively self-centered love such as the sensate love that the theologians called "concupiscible," then the object that is loved will draw the lover to itself. But if one loves with the generous gift love that the theologians described as "beneficent" love, then the effect of that love is the greater perfection of the one who is loved. For that reason, St. Thomas Aquinas stated that God does not love us because we are good, but that we are good in the measure that God loves us.

PSYCHOLOGY OF MORTIFICATION

It may come as a surprise to some persons to find that St. Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, and St. John of the Cross, writing in the sixteenth century, formulated certain psychological principles that contemporary psychologists can support wholeheartedly. One of these principles is what is called today the "principle of reality." What it means is simply that is opting for one of two incompatible choices, the individual must give up one of the alternatives. This same psychological principle lies at the heart of mortification and it is expressed as follows by St. John of the Cross:

The more closely a thing is drawn to one extreme, the farther removed the withdrawn it becomes from the other; and when it comes to rest perfectly in the one, it will also have withdrawn itself perfectly from the other. Therefore there is a commonly quoted spiritual maxim which says: . . . "After having tasted the things of the spirit, everything carnal is unpalatable." . . . And this is clear, because if it is spirit, it has nothing to do with the sensate; and if sense can comprehend it, it is no longer pure spirit. Hence, the more one can grasp it through natural apprehension and sense, the less it has of spirit and of the supernatural (*Ascent*, Book II, chap. 17).

The isolated choice of a sensate satisfaction or pleasure, even in sinful matter, can be remedied rather quickly as long as one's intention remains firmly fixed on God. This is the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas regarding those whose life is normally free of serious sin (*Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 186, art. 10). But when a sensate or sinful choice becomes habitual, it can easily reach the stage of an addiction. This is

the area of compulsive activity, as is evident, for example, in drug addiction or alcoholism. The sensate addiction is so strong that the will of the individual seems to be powerless when confronted with the sensate stimulus or, as theologians would say, the occasion of sin. At this point the words of St. Paul take on an added significance:

Those who live according to the flesh are intent on the things of the flesh; those who live according to the spirit, on those of the spirit (Rom. 8:5).

We know that the law is spiritual, whereas I am weak flesh sold into the slavery of sin. I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do, but what I hate. When I act against my own will, by that very fact I agree that the law is good. This indicates that it is not I who do it but sin which resides in me. I know that no good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; the desire to do right is there but not the power. What happens is that I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend. But if I do what is against my will, it is not I who do it, but sin which dwells in me. This means that even if I want to do what is right, a law that leads to wrongdoing is always ready at hand. My inner self agrees with the law of God, but I see in my body's members another law at war with the law of my mind; this makes me the prisoner of the law of sin in my members. What a wretched man I am! Who can free me from this body under the power of death? All praise to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! So with my mind I serve the law of God but with my flesh the law of sin (Rom. 7:14-25).

From the teaching of St. Paul and St. John of the Cross it is evident that addiction to sensate satisfactions and pleasures cannot be fully broken until one has laid the axe at the root of the problem: one's sensate desires. The sensate inclinations may spring from our natural body needs in the area of sex and nutrition, for example, or from the artificial body needs that the individual has cultivated, such as the use of drugs, smoking or drinking. But in either case the addiction can be so strong that the individual feels powerless to resist it. Consequently, in addition to avoiding occasions of sin and praying (as it is said that St. Augustine prayed before his conversion: "Lord, make me *want* to love you!"), one should also take steps to cultivate the virtues that are the basic elements of a good Christian character and maturity.

POSITIVE ASPECT OF ASCETICISM

We have already stated that the negative phase of asceticism comprises self-denial and mortification; the positive aspect pertains to the cultivation of the virtues. When we speak about the virtues, we are speaking about strength of character and morally good habits. We are creatures of habit, and whereas our natural and sensate inclinations flow largely from our temperament, the formation of our character depends on the types of habits we have cultivated and perfected. To put it another way, we all have moral predispositions to good and to evil, and in order to form a good and right character, it is necessary to control and deny our evil inclinations and at the same time practice the virtues that are the basis of an integrated personality: justice, temperance, prudence and fortitude.

It is there that the moral theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, expounded in the Second Part of his *Summa Theologiae*, comes into play. Unlike many contemporary moral theologians, St. Thomas did not restrict moral theology to a study of problematic cases of morality; although this type of moral theology, as written by St. Alphonsus Liguori, is necessary and helpful for confessors. But Thomistic moral theology is really spiritual theology in the best sense of the word because it treats of the human person's journey back home to God. Moreover, it is eminently Christocentric, as St. Thomas points out:

"It is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given through faith in Christ, which is predominant in the law of the New Covenant . . . so before all else, the New Law is the very grace of the Holy Spirit, given to those who believe in Christ" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 106, art. 1).

One's personal, responsible actions are the steps by which the Christian journeys back to God, and in order that one may make progress in this journey, God gives to the baptized Christian a supernatural principle of life, which is sanctifying grace, and the spiritual energies or powers which are the theological and moral virtues and also the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Our interest is in the supernatural, infused virtues, which become operative and are perfected under the control of the person who possesses them. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, are not under our direct control; they operate only when we are properly disposed and when the Holy Spirit wills.

Growth in virtue, which is the positive aspect of asceticism, means working towards the integration of one's personality. What this means is that the Christian, who has received from God sanctifying grace and the infused, supernatural powers or energies, must actuate those energies by the repetition of virtuous actions. And since grace works through nature - or the human personality - one can see the importance of applying the sound psychological principles that have been established by the professionals such as Erik Erikson, Gordon Allport and Conrad Baars.

In addition, the Christian who is serious about progress in the spiritual life will benefit beyond measure from following the teaching of St. Ignatius of Loyola on the necessity of practicing discursive meditation and of making the examination of conscience each day. Discursive meditation, first of all, is an exercise in which the individual looks at self in relation to a particular virtue, an event in the life of Christ, or some revealed truth. It comprises three essential acts: to think about one of the topics mentioned in order to understand its meaning; then to apply that knowledge to one's own life, here and now; and finally, to resolve to do something positive in view of one's greater perfection. The examination of conscience, on the other hand, enables one to check one's progress or failure each day in order to insure a constant and determined effort to improve. It should be evident, therefore, why the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola have been and still are a most effective instrument for conversion and for continued progress in the practice of the virtues proper to one's state of life.

A quotation from Pascal's *Pensées* serves as a fitting conclusion to these reflections on the ascetical phase of the spiritual life:

The Christian religion teaches men these two truths: that there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature that makes them unworthy of God. It is equally important to men to know both of these truths, and it is equally dangerous for men to know God without knowing their own wretchedness, and to know their own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer, who can free them from it. The knowledge of only one of these truths gives rise either to the pride of philosophers, who have known God and not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness, but not the Redeemer.