

Asceticism

This article will describe Christian asceticism, establish its foundation, and survey its practice.

Christian asceticism

The Christian life has two aspects, one ascetical, the other mystical. Both terms can describe the whole spiritual journey, but usually they are used in a restrictive sense. The word “ascetical” comes from the Greek *askesis*, which means exercise, training, discipline. Accordingly, ascetical life is either the whole project of appropriating the divine gift of grace or, more frequently, the work of purification. Ascetical practices are methods and programs designed to restrain the influence of sin and maximize union with God. The whole work is under grace, and grace is the mystical element of christian life. Mysticism is the experience of grace, especially those acts which are consciously beyond ordinary initiative and control, such as contemplation or miraculous powers.

Christian life is radically and ultimately mystical. But it is received and fostered in the personal engagement and struggle of asceticism. Ascetical practices are human strategies for spiritual living. They have elements of effort and method, deprivation, and voluntary suffering. Asceticism addresses the effects and vagaries of sin, which in turn are the source of further sins. Concupiscence in both blatant and subtle forms as well as systemic sin that infects social reality are encountered in the world, the flesh and the devil. The ensuing struggle involves effort and pain, though the difficulty or suffering do not determine the spiritual value of the enterprise. Effective asceticism is the work of grace, not heroic will power or high tolerance of pain. Salutory collaboration with God is often an experience of human

weakness, poverty, and defeat after the manner of the cross of Jesus.

Foundations

Christian asceticism is concerned with obstacles to the life of grace, but it is not negative in the same way as classical non-Christian systems like Stoicism or Buddhism. Historically certain Christian movements have looked deceptively like these and similar self-denying or world-denying philosophies and religions. But biblical Christianity is not dualistic, as if the body or the world were evil and only the immaterial spiritual soul were good. The world that is the enemy is the flawed world in function of sin as portrayed in John’s gospel. The flesh is not the human body or sexuality as such, but the human person acting apart from grace; the spirit is that same person under the Holy Spirit. The devil is “the enemy of human nature” (Ignatius of Loyola).

Christian asceticism, therefore, is not anti-human, or anti-body or anti-world, though these qualities have sometimes surfaced in history. Such spiritual movements take these mistaken directions from alien sources and sometimes go to the extreme of heresy, as with Gnosticism, Montanism, or Manichaeism. The primary reason for asceticism is not the natural constitution of the world, but the kingdom, the call to transcendence, the demands of the eschatological reality of the gospel. Sin is the refusal of this divine offer. Once it has entered the scene, the infection spreads to every level of human life, there is progressive fragmentation and division in individuals, society, and the world itself. Christ alone is

the antidote; he is savior and redeemer. But he calls human beings to collaborate with him and the cooperation is christian asceticism. Sometimes the strategy is to fight, sometimes flight, and contemporary wisdom emphasizes that all potential obstacles, whether from within, like concupiscence or pride, or from without, like sinful social structures or demonic forces, must be recognized and dealt with in whatever way is wise and prudent.

The climate in the post-Vatican II church is incarnational, not apocalyptic or excessively eschatological. The goodness of things rather than the transitory quality of life or the pervasive presence of sin is emphasized. Today's asceticism looks to total, human development, the human and the divine coinciding; the goal is the integration of all life, personal and social, in Christ Jesus. The language of denial and mortification is unpopular today, because ascetical choices are seen as giving life, not hurt or punishment or suffering for its own sake, as if to compensate for guilt or put oneself down. Christian asceticism never attacks or denies what is already integrated in Christic redemption. Such integration, however, must be full and complete, since it means that the object is sought totally in God.

The positive approach is the new asceticism of our time. The American bishops in their 1985 pre-synodal statement called for an "elaborating of a new asceticism and spirituality for Christians who are in but not of the world." Such a this-worldly spirituality does well to follow the balanced formula of the ancient church, which saw its life expressed in prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The formula comes from Judaism, which had no doctrine of original sin, hence no penchant for negative asceticism. The formula summed up the Christian vocation in key, symbolic acts that expressed the triple relationship to God, self, and others. Today the formula is most frequently used as the call to renewal and penance in the season of Lent. It is a

formula that aptly expresses the meaning of christian asceticism.

Practice

The gospels call for total renunciation for the sake of the kingdom (e.g., Mk 8:34-35) in absolutes that have never been superseded by subsequent schools or authors. The original call to repentance (*metanoia*; see Mk 1: 15) is as thoroughgoing as the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12). The repentance-kingdom image of the gospels becomes the dying and rising of the paschal mystery in Paul. The paschal mystery subsumes all of life's vicissitudes (2 Cor 11:23- 33) and places both suffering and consolation at the service of the community (2 Cor 1:4-7). Paul's comparison of the athlete (1 Cor 9:24-27) relates particularly well to the word "ascetic." His images of flesh warring against spirit (Rom 8:5- 13), the old man versus the new man (Eph 4:22-24) and the demonic struggle (Eph 6:12) are vivid dramatizations of ascetical struggle.

In early Christianity physical martyrdom was the first recognized form of christian perfection. A spiritual form of martyrdom developed among celibates in the local communities who were called virgins or ascetics and lived an austere lifestyle of prayer and penance. Later this group moved away from pagan society and became the fathers and mothers of the desert. They cultivated specific ascetical practices, such as vigils, fasts, exposure to heat and cold, deprivation of human comforts, silence and solitude, and spiritual combat with demonic powers. After the peace of Constantine (311) cenobitic communities gradually replaced the hermitages, and the common life, expressed in service inside and outside the monastery and celebrated in liturgy, gave balance to the asceticism. This monastic mode became the paradigm of fervent christian living, no doubt with some prejudice to lay life in the world. But a lay model took shape in its own right in the form of an elaborate catechumenate and

post-baptismal training; the experiences in question have been repossessed, put back into practice in our own time in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)*.

Medieval asceticism added a few new elements to this basic perspective, notably, a deeper sense of the humanity of Christ, a desire to imitate his suffering, and the wish to retrace his earthly steps in pilgrimage. St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), troubadour of creation but bearer of the stigmata as the first recorded case in history, illustrates the bursting of new life that could no longer be contained in the monastic structures from the past. He is a penitent, though not given to the excesses of the flagellants, an apostolic missionary who would bring the good news to the poor, a warm human being whose ascetical rigor and apostolic zeal left intact his amiable simplicity, joy and fraternal spirit. With Dominic, too, there was a similar conjunction of rigorous asceticism in the form of study and a full community and apostolic life.

At the beginning of modern times the great harbingers of contemporary spirituality—Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales—continued the strong tradition of asceticism. Protestant reformers downplayed asceticism and rejected some traditional forms, notably celibacy and monasticism, in order to proclaim the pure gratuity of grace. The above leaders in the Counter-Reformation, while eminently mystical persons themselves, asserted the necessity of asceticism and taught a rigorous practice. In the context of their own

times they were moderates, who disapproved of foolish extremes in mortification and self-denial, but at the same time taught the value of suffering. Suffering was a grace, not for its own sake, but as a sign of identification with Jesus and a proof of pure love of God. Later teachers perhaps exaggerated this doctrine into a now discredited mysticism of suffering.

An enlightened contemporary spirituality attempts to keep continuity with the past but also to relate the knowledge explosion in the human and sacred sciences into a viable practice. Today ascetical practice searches especially for growth in human authenticity and the achievement of human community, especially through the promotion of justice and peace. Asceticism comes out of life's circumstances; it is less prepackaged and more the response of love. But it hopes to assimilate the wisdom of the past. Vatican II in its secular, human, and social thrust has promoted, not only a new anthropology and theology, but a new way of living out the Christian life. The formation of the new asceticism is ongoing.

Rosemary Rader, "Asceticism," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 24-28. Jean Gribomont and Jean Leclercq, "Monasticism and Asceticism," in *Christian Spirituality* (eds., Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, New York: Crossroads 1985) 89-131. John Francis Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982).