

Asceticism in Modern Life

Introduction: Statement of the Problem

The cross and the resurrection represent the negative and positive poles of death and life in Christian existence. They are correlatives. The evangelical demand of total renunciation (Lk. 14, 26) is the direct and immediate counterpart of the law of total love (Mt. 22, 37). Like poverty of spirit and contemplation in St. John of the Cross, unselfishness and charity are practically the same thing; they exist in direct proportion to each other. Total commitment to Christ is total abnegation of self-centeredness.

Death to the old man and a full life in the Spirit are achieved by the process of asceticism. This human effort under grace is complemented by the passive purifications and mystical graces. In the past asceticism has emphasized the negative pole and devised exercises and observances to chastise the body and bring it into subjection (1 Cor. 9, 27), to mortify the works of the flesh (Gal. 5, 16-21), to suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with him (Rom. 8, 17). Asceticism's task has been one of discipline and control, its purpose the achievement of a dynamic equilibrium or detachment which is the proper disposition for possessing God in contemplative union. St. Teresa of Avila summed up this point of view rather neatly: "When we empty ourselves of all that is creature and rid ourselves of it for the love of God, that same Lord will fill our souls with himself."¹ Self-denial, renunciation, penance and sacrifice have thus been the first order of business in a spiritual life dominated by the cross and oriented to a loving knowledge of God.

Our age has reacted against this type of asceticism as artificial and opted for a more positive, outgoing, resurrection-centered spirituality. People today are impatient with a

cross separated from the resurrection, with fabricated penances, but especially with any device that would separate them from the challenges and suffering of a full-time, involved life with their fellow human beings. It is not a matter of being less willing to suffer or to strive, but rather of accepting the self-denial inherent in a love of God *and* this world. "I would like to be able to have a great love for Christ," wrote one of the clearest spokesmen for this new asceticism, Teilhard de Chardin, "in the very act of loving the universe. ... Besides union with God and union with the world, is there not a union with God through the world?"² Such a goal will bring its own brand of asceticism; the asceticism of material negations and explicit reduction of interests and involvements will cede the place of honor to one which accepts the unpredictable demands of daily life and duty, the trials and disappointments, the Teilhardian "diminishments" inevitable in the progress of human life.

This new approach appeals to modern man. Is it viable? Is it as effective as the old asceticism of frontal attack and strategic flight? Can the committed Christian of the 20th century find sanctity without cultivating the silence and withdrawal, the long formal prayers and spiritual readings, the penances and mortification, all of which were key points in the spiritual life of his forebears? In a word is the old asceticism *passé*? These are the questions of the present paper.

I. Basic Principles

All Christian life is a living of the paschal mystery and consists in the passage from death to life sacramentally expressed, especially in baptism and the holy eucharist, and existentially lived in one's daily life. More concretely, the spiritual life is a process

of mortifying egoism and deepening charity. The passage may be characterized by its negative or its positive element, i.e., by a preoccupation with mortification or with growth in virtue.

Theologically speaking, either emphasis is acceptable because mortification implies charity, and acts of virtue are implicit acts of mortification. In other words, Christian asceticism is always and only ordered moral activity. Only inordinate self-love and selfish preferences need be rejected, even when it is a question of total abnegation which is a *sine qua non* for high sanctity. Total abnegation and perfect moral virtue are exact equivalents. Total abnegation does not imply that every natural desire is evil. It accepts willingly ordered loves of earthly values, enthusiastic involvements in human affairs and activities, or the “passionate indifference” of Teilhard de Chardin.

Whether the ascetical effort, therefore, is explicitly abnegation or virtue, it inexorably moves the person to detachment and charity. The Christian’s fundamental option is not only an orientation to God but a conversion from inordinate self-love; hence it is equally serviced by negative and positive acts. Proper spiritual direction decides the individual proportion of involvement in the world and withdrawal from it, of the use or the renouncement of human goods. Detachment actually implies a rich love of the world, since it is nothing less than freedom rooted in charity. It is an utter openness to reality and a willingness to respond to whatever call God gives. Each Christian must be totally detached; pride and concupiscence must never get in the way of his service of God. But the detachment can be expressed as much in dedication to building up the earth as flight to the desert. “We at once see,” wrote Cardinal Suhard, “on what conditions human endeavor is made possible and legitimate; it is not a question of how much, or of where, but of the spirit.”³

II. Forms of Asceticism

The state of perfect detachment and perfect charity is attained only gradually. Heirs of original sin, we enter the world alienated from God and disintegrated within ourselves. As Christians we are redeemed, it is true, and there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8, 1). But the work of progressive redemption remains. We still experience conflict between the law of God and the law of the members within (cf. Rom. 7) and we still must struggle against enmity toward our neighbor without (cf. Eph. 2, 14); asceticism is necessary to achieve integration within and unity without. The work is the Spirit’s from beginning to end, but he calls upon our free response and cooperation. The two forms of asceticism are two such responses.

The older form conceives the Christian life in terms of personal transformation rather than service or apostolate. Transformation comes first; service is an addition or effect. This older spirituality is frankly contemplative; it centers the life of the Christian in prayer, i.e., in conversation with God that begins here and continues into eternity. It singles out the otherworldly, transcendent aspects of the mystery of Christ, concerns itself almost exclusively with the individual’s relationship with God and not his relationship to his fellowmen or his world and pays scant attention to man’s responsibility of building up the new heaven and the new earth. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of souls, whose salvation is the “one thing necessary”, the one absolute. All else is relative. Human affairs, for example, or temporal realities have no permanent significance; they are mere means, valuable in proportion to their usefulness for the salvation of souls, but in themselves destined for the dust heap.

In this perspective and in view of man’s weakness the only logical course of action for the Christian is to consider this world a hazard and pitfall and to flee from it.

Tutorism takes over and counsels withdrawal from earthly concerns lest one be led astray. The practices of mortification aim to neutralize the body's influence; the senses and faculties are denied their proper objects in order to promote better equilibrium and allow for the peaceful search of contemplative union with God. Silence and solitude discourage dissipation and worldliness. Inordinate self-love is ruthlessly sought out in one's every action and directly dealt with either by rejection of the action or by protest; an insurance against inordinate self-love is to seek the difficult rather than the easy, the unappealing instead of the pleasant.

Detachment rather than charity thus directs the ascetical efforts in this system. If God is to be encountered in prayer and religious acts, it behooves a man to purify himself of the profane and prepare his soul for the meeting. This he will do by putting off the old man and putting on the new. This conversion is to be achieved by frustrating his own earth-bound will, refusing his own comfort, searching out the divine element in all his acts. In the past this divine element meant the good intention; a man had to justify his works by the purity of his intention, since this gave the primary spiritual significance to his acts. In short, the spiritual life was a struggle between the two contraries of love of God and (inordinate) self-love. Cancel out the latter and the former will stand revealed in a man's life. The simplicity of this system has much to recommend it, but today one can easily detect its weakness in its neglect of the dimension of the temporal and created.

The new asceticism differs from the old in many ways. Whereas the Christian of yesterday feared egoism and worldliness and tended to seek God outside this world in pure adoration, the Christian of today begins with himself and the world as he finds them and expects to find God there. The resurrected Christ lives and works now in the community of his followers, and the Christian through his

own apostolic activity is caught up with Christ. The spirituality of today is profoundly this-worldly, incarnational, even "religionless" in Bonhoeffer's sense. The world has been corrupted and used for sinful purposes, but it is also a redeemed world, on its way to complete redemption (Rom. 8, 21). There is less concern today about sin in the world than grace for the world, less thought about impure or ambivalent motivation in the Christian than his being an instrument of grace contributing to the extension of the kingdom of Christ on earth. Sin and selfishness continue to be the blocks hindering the progress of the kingdom, but these impediments are eased out by the works of positive charity as effectively as by direct confrontation. Today's Christian looks upon efforts to neutralize or frustrate inordinate love as something outside the main axis of the spiritual endeavor. He is not concerned with purification but with commitment, and for him this means action, work, doing for others. He is very optimistic, sometimes quite presumptuous, in appropriating human motivations and identifying his projects as the work of the Lord. He accepts difficulties; he knows he must rise above ambivalent or selfish feelings and overcome frustrations, ingratitude and the other obstacles to persevering efforts on his part. He thus finds abnegation and suffering in abundance. Self-imposed mortifications seem contrived compared to the unavoidable crosses of the human condition.

This effort is sanctifying in proportion to its virtuous character. It is a valid implementation of the paschal mystery insofar as it is the incarnation of genuine charity. The difference in the new asceticism, in other words, is one of emphasis. The old asceticism fought a rear-guard action and attempted to keep the enemy outside the perimeter, to hunt down and kill infiltrators that had penetrated into one's own lines. The new asceticism is offensive rather than defensive and carries the battle to new fields. It seeks to extend one's

own perimeter. It looks outward instead of inward; in fact, the new asceticism suspects introspection, even for the purpose of scrutinizing motives, and thinks introversion is a bad word. The new asceticism teaches a way to God by extroversion, by action. It tends to neglect contemplation, and this is one of its great weaknesses. But while the thrust of Christian love today is concern for the redemption of the world rather than contemplative union with the Lord, the apostle soon realizes that these two goals coincide and that both of them prosper or recede together.

Such, then, are the two asceticisms, described in black and white and hence caricatured to some extent. What is their relative value? Can the second form replace the first as the asceticism of our time? This is the question of the final section.

III. Evaluation of the Two Asceticisms

Vatican Council II reminds us that we must continue to “bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made manifest in our bodily frame”.⁴ The Pauline phrase suggests the new asceticism, a putting to death of evil by indirection, i.e., by simply being a good Christian, fulfilling obligations, accepting hardships and responding fully to the leading of the Spirit. Pauline asceticism is the gradual implementation of the exigencies of grace in all areas of a person’s life. It is not a technique of neutralizing or deadening lower appetites in man in order to express later a higher activity, but rather a response to the call of God to transcend oneself here and now in an act of love and service. The struggle is between sarkic-psychic man or man without grace and the spiritual or pneumatic man who lives by the Holy Spirit.

The approach we have called the new asceticism is expressly taught in some of the particular decrees. To cite but one example, the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*

presents a priestly asceticism of labor and care⁵ priests are encouraged to “cultivate the asceticism proper to a pastor of souls, renouncing their own conveniences, seeking what is profitable for the many and not for themselves”.⁶

The main advantage of this kind of asceticism is that it finds God where God chooses to come to us, in the people we meet, the work we do, the secular city we live in. This down-to-earth emphasis precludes an unhealthy emotional withdrawal from the world about us on the plea of spiritual life. One can begin by striving to love nothing but God and end by loving neither the world nor God. This is a hazard of monastic flight or of a fear of attachments that is premature or excessive. In other words, detachment, consciously or unconsciously, can be used as an excuse for apathy to cloak over a selfish refusal to be interested in others or to be involved in human tasks. This, of course, is a bogus spirituality that has received ample criticism in our time.

But there are also hazards in the new asceticism. Perhaps the most obvious one is excessive optimism. Devotees tend to approve all morally justifiable love and use of this world’s goods as authentic Christian action, without asking whether the usage or involvement is ordered and according to God’s will. “Incarnational” spirituality, as it is sometimes called, thus becomes the excuse for self-indulgence. True incarnational spirituality is actually more demanding than the “eschatological” approach because it demands that the Christian relate positively to all reality as containing its own measure of the mystery of Christ. Intellectual honesty and objectivity as well as a purer love are demanded. Eschatological attitudes can be pragmatic and utilitarian. It is often easier, moreover, to strike out an attraction at one blow than continue to indulge the desire in proper moderation. “The royal road of the cross is no more nor less than the road of human

endeavor supernaturally righted and prolonged,” said Teilhard de Chardin.⁷ However, the point is that the supernatural righting and renewal are a real asceticism. Without constant checking a person can be swallowed up by his work or his pleasure, his projects facily identified as God’s will, duties neglected in favor of personal preferences. The new asceticism remains an asceticism because it is the response to graced reality in love and service. It is the way of the cross.

The most positive incarnationist must therefore periodically withdraw, momentarily or at regular intervals, and, figuratively at least, go into the desert where he is face to face with himself and with God. He must reflect, pray, reorient himself. Otherwise he will increase and the Lord decrease. Spiritual exercises like *lectio divina* and acts of voluntary self-denial retain a real if limited and less central place in his life. Some of the old exercises, such as the discipline, can be discarded; others such as fasting need renewal and reformation according to their real meaning and modern conditions. In any case

his spiritual life is not structured around the problem of inordinate desires and attachments, precisely because it is oriented to immediate action.

Granting the new asceticism, will it bring the Christian to high sanctity? There seems to be no good reason for limiting its usefulness. A complete transformation must take place, and this total love is won at the price of total abnegation. But the total abnegation need not take the form described by a St. John of the Cross. The Christian saint may well reach the heights in the world and through the world; however, it will be through approaching his life more and more as a service, a dedication and a love to the point where he is totally for the other, for God and his fellowmen, and transcends his very self. Until that point is reached he is serving two masters. (Mt. 6, 24). But in the opinion of many authors today there is no reason why a Christian cannot become totally identified with the one Master through the asceticism of love and service of God in the world.

¹ *Interior Castle*, “VII Mansions”, ch. 2, n. 7

² H. deLubac, *La pensie religieuse du Pere Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Aubier, 1962), p.350.

³ “The Meaning of God,” in *The Church Today* (Chicago: Fides, 1953), p.211.

⁴ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 12, citing 2 Cor. 4, 10 (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1964), p. 36.

⁵ Cf. nn. 5, 6, 12.

⁶ Cf. n. 13.

⁷ *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 78.