

WHY SACRIFICE AND SELF-DENIAL?

John Reeves

After Simon Peter's confession of faith in Christ's divinity on the outskirts of Caesarea Philippi, Our Lord greatly praised His disciple: *Blessed art you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.*⁽¹⁾ He then made Peter the foundation stone of His Church. Soon afterwards, Jesus began to tell His closest followers that the Son of Man had to go up to Jerusalem, suffer a great deal at the hands of the Jews and die, and on the third day rise again.⁽²⁾

The Apostles failed to understand this message, since they still clung to a temporal conception of God's Kingdom. *And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.*⁽³⁾ Carried away by his great affection, Simon tried to turn Jesus away from the path of the Cross; he could not comprehend God's chosen means for redeeming us. St. John Chrysostom commented that Peter's outlook was strictly human: he saw any talk of suffering and death as beneath Christ and worthy of reproach.⁽⁴⁾ Peter failed to understand, St. Augustine says, that there was no more fitting way to save humanity from its plight.⁽⁵⁾

Perhaps many Christians throughout history have also been tempted to avoid sacrifice, to react as Peter and the Apostles did when their faith was not yet strong. However, Christ responds emphatically, as he did to the tempter in the desert: *Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of me.*⁽⁶⁾

Aim of Voluntary Sacrifice

Preaching the Cross and voluntary mortification - sacrifice sought as a means for salvation - will always clash with those who have an exclusively human outlook. St. Paul had to warn the first Christians against those who live *as enemies of the cross of Christ*. He told them: *Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.*⁽⁷⁾

Many accept sacrifice when it is necessary for the sake of physical well-being, but they live as enemies of the Cross of Christ in whatever has to do with the health of the soul. Their sight is set only on material and tangible goods, as if these alone were real. *Many people undertake great voluntary sacrifices for merely human motives, which are more or less noble. To improve their physical appearance, they fast, go on a diet, do exhausting exercise and even undergo painful surgery.*

Nevertheless, these very people and many others do not understand the Christian sense of corporal mortification. When all is said and done, it's not so much the mortification they can't understand - they accept greater hardships - what they cannot

accept is the purpose for which it is done. If done for the health of the body or for vanity, it's quite acceptable. But if it's for the growth of one's soul, for the love of God and men, it seems absurd to them, even scandalous.⁽⁸⁾ That point from *The Way* continues to be applicable today: *What great fear people have of atonement! If what they do to please the world were done with purified intention for God, what saints many would be.*⁽⁹⁾

Many ask: why do we have to give up what is most appealing, be mortified, pursue arduous goals? Why fast or use corporal mortification, be uncomfortable or give up licit pleasure? Are these sacrifices really of use to God? A good many people, Christians among them, think this way. Others simply resign themselves to pain as something unavoidable and put up with sickness and suffering. It is also common to find people ready to give up something for the sake of others, to render the small services social life entails. This in itself is a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, they fail to see the purpose of voluntary mortification, of apparently useless sacrifice.

For this reason, it is necessary to meditate often on the meaning of voluntary sacrifice and to explain it to others. Christians do not seek pain for its own sake, which would be absurd. They love sacrifice for a purpose higher than physical beauty or bodily health: namely, the desire to co-redeem with Christ. *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.*⁽¹⁰⁾ And St. Paul adds: *Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I buffet my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*⁽¹¹⁾

The Need for Voluntary Mortification

The wounds and disorder left in the soul by original sin are compounded by personal sins, especially when these beget vices. But divine grace heals and elevates human nature; while mortification purifies the disordered tendencies and fosters stable dispositions for the struggle. As our own experience confirms: *the body must be given a little less than it needs. Otherwise it will turn traitor*⁽¹²⁾

Christian corporal mortification and voluntary sacrifice have nothing to do with masochism: we do not seek pain for its own sake. Nor is it Manicheism: we do not punish or despise the body as inherently evil. On the contrary, we have the highest esteem for the human body: created by God, it is intrinsically good,⁽¹³⁾ and has been greatly exalted by the Incarnation of the Son of God. Our bodies are destined to be glorified at the end of time, like Christ's glorified body.⁽¹⁴⁾ Through voluntary mortification, we try to *extinguish the vices of the flesh, not the flesh.*⁽¹⁵⁾ In a word, corporal mortification is ordered directly to God: by holding in check our natural tendency to enjoy specific goods, it prevents these tendencies from becoming

disordered and separating us from our highest and true Good.

Fasting and other corporal sacrifices do not jeopardise our health, unless practised imprudently. On the other hand, they do undermine laziness, selfishness, sensuality, comfort-seeking.... In fact, despite ill-founded scandal, our corporal mortification is almost nothing compared to what many undergo for purely human motives. The acts of self-denial we do are done out of the love for Christ. They are a manifestation of the complete holocaust of our lives that we have made to God. Through them, we seek to console our Lord, to accompany Him on the Cross, to co-redeem with Him.

Suffering in Christ

The true meaning of voluntary sacrifice is found only in the mystery of Christ: through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death become meaningful. Viewed apart from their Christian meaning, they would overwhelm us.⁽¹⁶⁾ Even in light of revelation, we cannot completely understand why God chose to carry out the Redemption through the passion and death of His Incarnate Son. To begin to fathom this mystery, to see the role of mortification in imitating Our Lord and identifying ourselves with the Redeemer on the Cross, we need to consider the close relationship between love and suffering. It was not so much Jesus' pain which brought us superabundant satisfaction for sin, but rather His love for and obedience to the divine will,⁽¹⁷⁾ *usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis.*⁽¹⁸⁾ Pope John Paul II writes: *The purpose of penance is to overcome evil, which under different forms lies dormant in man. Its purpose is also to strengthen the goodness both in man himself and in his relationships with others and especially with God.*

But in order to perceive the true answer to the "why" of suffering, we must look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists. Love is also the richest source of the meaning of suffering, which always remains a mystery... Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the "why" of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love.⁽¹⁹⁾

We should frequently consider Christ's passion and death on the Cross as the greatest expression of His self-surrender to the Father and of His love for us. Certainly, Jesus' least act of love, His smallest deed even as a child, had infinite merit. It sufficed to gain the grace of redemption and the help needed to reach heaven for all men and women, past, present and future. In spite of this, He still wanted to suffer the terrible pain of His passion and death on the Cross, in order to show us the extent of His love for His heavenly Father's will and for each one of us. On occasions, He manifested the urgency of His superabundant love: *I have a baptism to be baptised with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!*⁽²⁰⁾ And the Holy Spirit teaches through St. John: *For*

God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.⁽²¹⁾ Jesus willingly gave up His life for us: Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.⁽²²⁾

Christ reveals his irrepressible desire to lay down His life for the sake of love.⁽²³⁾ If we truly want to follow Jesus and become identified with Him, how can we shun the cross, the self-sacrifice that is so closely bound up with love and dedication? God does not ask for sacrifice for its own sake, but rather for the sake of love, freely saying “No” to ourselves in order to say “Yes” to His love.

There is a paradox, a mystery, in mortification which only faith and love can discern: behind the appearance of death lies Life. Whoever tries to keep his life for himself will lose it: *whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.⁽²⁵⁾* To be supernaturally effective, we need to die to ourselves through voluntary self-sacrifice and to forget about our comfort and selfish concerns. *Don't you want to be a grain of wheat, to die through mortification, and to yield stalks rich in grain? May Jesus bless your wheat field!⁽²⁶⁾*

In Christ's Footsteps

Through voluntary mortification we imitate Jesus Christ who *suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in His steps,⁽²⁷⁾* St. Peter wrote. We imitate Him above all when mortification is sought as a sacrifice for love's sake, or willingly and gladly accepted when it comes unexpectedly. Our Lord did not instigate His own death, but He did sacrifice Himself. More than just passively accepting His passion and death, He died because He wanted to, in the fullest sense of the term: *For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.⁽²⁸⁾*

On Calvary, Jesus is both Victim and Priest. Addressing the crowds on a certain occasion He said: *if any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.⁽²⁹⁾* Christ thus invites us to freely mortify ourselves, as well as accepting the sufferings we encounter without seeking them, which He had mentioned on other occasions.⁽³⁰⁾ *Now that so many people want to hear only about physical wellbeing and not about sacrifice, about roses and not about thorns, we must pay special attention to the warning written by Blessed Josemaria in an early document. When someone expresses the desire to ask for admission to Opus Dei, **it is important for them to be told clearly that, when they come to the Work, they come not to Tabor,** (the mountain of the transfiguration) **but to Calvary** (Instruction, January 9, 1935, no. 283),⁽³¹⁾ they come to sacrifice their likes and their lives for love's sake.*

On Calvary at Jesus' side, we encounter willing and cheerful sacrifice, never

sadness. As our own experience shows, mortification is closely related to cheerfulness. With purified hearts, we become humbler in dealing with God and those around us. This is the great paradox of Christian mortification: to accept and even seek mortification at first would seem to make Christians the saddest people in the world, the ones who have the toughest time. But the reality is quite otherwise: sacrifice accepted out of love for God always brings joy in its wake, the joy of fulfilling God's will and loving Our Lord with deeds. Good Christians live *quasi tristes semper autem gaudentes*,⁽³²⁾ as though sorrowful yet always rejoicing. Bishop Alvaro wrote: *How well Blessed Josemaria knew this from experience! **Having the Cross means finding happiness and joy. And the reason, which I now see more clearly than ever, is this: having the Cross means being identified with Christ, it means being Christ and therefore a son of God. It is worthwhile nailing ourselves to the Cross, because thus we enter into Life, we grow drunk in the Life of Christ*** (Meditation, April 28, 1963)⁽³³⁾

Faith leads us to understand and experience how without sacrifice there is no love, no true joy: our soul is not purified and we don't find God. The path to sanctity passes through the Cross, and all apostolate is based on it. The Cross is a *living book that is always open, where we definitively learn who we are and how we should act.*⁽³⁴⁾ Every day we should read from it, to learn who Christ is, how much He loves us and the way to follow Him. Whoever seeks God without sacrifice and the Cross will fail to find Him. *The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual struggle (II Tim 4). Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.*⁽³⁵⁾

Without sacrifice and voluntary mortification there can be no progress in the interior life. St. John of the Cross teaches that few reach a high degree of union with God because many do not want to be subject to greater affliction and mortification.⁽³⁶⁾ He writes: *If you want to possess Christ, never seek Him apart from the Cross.*⁽³⁷⁾ And Blessed Josemaria adds: *you will have as much sanctity, as you have mortification done for Love.*⁽³⁸⁾ *We must bring into our life, to make our own, the life and death of Christ. We must die through mortification and penance, so that Christ may live in us through Lord. And then follow in the footsteps of Christ, with a zeal to co-redeem all mankind*⁽³⁹⁾

Eager to atone

When united to Christ's redeeming sacrifice, voluntary mortification takes on value as expiation, penance, for our own sins and those of others. This is one of the ways the faithful exercise their common priesthood. St. Paul exclaims: *I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the Church.*⁽⁴¹⁾

As Christians, we know that our salvation and path to heaven lies in the loving

acceptance of suffering and sacrifice. Could human life ever be truly fruitful without gladly accepting suffering in union with our Lord? To rise with Christ we must accompany Him on the way to Calvary: *per passionem eius et Crucem ad resurrectionem gloriam perducamur.*⁽⁴²⁾ *If we are generous in our voluntary atonement, Jesus will fill us with grace so that we can love the trials He sends us.*⁽⁴³⁾

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.⁽⁴⁴⁾ And this means to renounce self-centeredness. A true disciple's focus should be Christ. He constantly refers his thoughts and desires and ordinary work to Him, in order to convert it into a worthy offering to God. This is the self-abnegation of the mortified soul.

God counts on suffering, voluntary sacrifice, poverty, trials, unexpected illness. Far from separating us from God, all this can unite us more closely to Him, at the same time as we gain merits and atone for our sins and those of others. *The redemption was consummated when Jesus died on the cross, in shame and glory, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness (1 Cor 1:23). But the redemption will, by the will of God, be carried out continually until Our Lord's time comes. It is impossible to live according to the heart of Jesus Christ and not to know that we are sent, as he was, to save all sinners (1 Tim 1:15), with the clear realisation that we ourselves need to trust in the mercy of God more and more each day. As a result, we will foster in ourselves a strong desire to live as co-redeemers with Christ, to save all souls with Him, because we are, we want to be, ipse Christus: Christ Himself, and He gave Himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6)*⁽⁴⁵⁾

In the holy Mass, the renewal of the Sacrifice of the Cross, let us offer our Lord everything we find difficult and trying. In this way, by uniting our small sacrifices to Christ's redeeming Sacrifice, our human fear of suffering will diminish. We will know how to joyfully accept and seek out suffering, to derive from it great benefit unseen by eyes of flesh. *The great Christian Revolution has been to convert pain into fruitful suffering and to turn a bad thing into something good. We have deprived the devil of this weapon; and with it we can conquer eternity.*⁽⁴⁶⁾

Footnotes

- (1) Matt. 16: 17.
- (2) Cf Ibid., 21.
- (3) Ibid., 22.
- (4) Cf. St. John Chrysostom, in Matthaicum homiliae, 54,4.
- (5) Cf. St. Augustine, De Trinitate 13, 10, 13.
- (6) Matt. 16:23.
- (7) Phil. 3:17-19.
- (8) Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, Letter, March 19, 1992, no. 42.
- (9) The Way, no. 215.
- (10) I Cor. 9:5.

- (11) Ibid., 26.
- (12) The Way, no. 196.
- (13) Cf.Gen.I:1.
- (14) Cf. Phil. 3: 1; Second Vatican Council, Past. Const. Gaudium et Spes, no. 14.
- (15) St.Gregory the Great, Moralia 20, 41, 78 (PL 76, 185).
- (16) Second Vatican Council, Past. Const. Gaudium et Spes, no.22.
- (17) Cf. Rom. 5: 19.
- (18) Phil. 2:28.
- (19) John Paul II, Encyc. Salvifici Doloris, February 11, 1984, nos. 12-13.
- (20) Luke 12:50.
- (21) John 3: 16.
- (22) John 15:13.
- (23) Letter, January 9, 1993, no. 10.
- (24) Matt. 16:25.
- (25) John 12:24-25.
- (26) The Way, no. 199.
- (27) I Pet. 2:21.
- (28) John 10:17-18.
- (29) Luke 9:23.
- (30) Cf. John 16:33.
- (31) Letter, January 9, 1993, no. 9.
- (32) II Cor. 6:10.
- (33) Letter, January 9, 1993, no. 9.
- (34) John Paul II, Address, April 1,1980.
- (35) Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2015.
- (36) Cf. St. John of the Cross, Llama de amor viva 2, 7.
- (37) St. John of the Cross, Letter to P. Juan de Santa Ana, 23.
- (38) The Forge, no. 1025.
- (39) Way of the Cross, Station 14.
- (40) Cf. Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium, no. 10.
- (41) Col. 1:24,
- (42) Prayer Gratiam Tuam of the Angelus.
- (43) The Way, no. 221.
- (44) Matt. 16:4.
- (45) Christ is Passing By, no. 121.
- (46) Furrow, no. 887