

Asceticism

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The Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

This is the goal of asceticism: to situate the life of the Christian in the domain of beauty, which in Christianity is another name for holiness

"We are not born Christians, we become Christians" (Tertullian). This 'becoming' is the space in which Christian asceticism reveals its meaning. The word asceticism is suspect today, if not completely absurd and incomprehensible for many people, including - and this is particularly significant - quite a few Christians. Derived from the Greek verb *askein* (to train or practice), the term asceticism indicates a form of methodical training, a repeated exercise, an effort directed toward the acquisition of a specific ability or area of competence. We might think of an athlete, an artist, or a soldier - each trains by repeating over and over the same movements or gestures in order to reach a high level of performance. Asceticism, therefore, is first of all a human necessity, because our growth and 'humanization' includes a dimension of interior growth that should correspond to our physical development. We need to know how to say 'no' if we want to be able to say 'yes': "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things," writes St. Paul (1 Corinthians 13:11). In Christian life, which is rebirth to a new life in Christ and the conformation of our own life to God's life, we need to learn 'unnatural' capacities such as prayer and love for our enemies - and this is impossible without practice and constant effort.

Unfortunately, the current cultural myth of spontaneity and permanent adolescence, which sees effort and authenticity as opposed to one another, is a serious obstacle to human maturation and makes it difficult for us to understand why asceticism is essential to spiritual growth. Of course, it should be said clearly that Christian asceticism always remains a means directed toward an end, toward the only goal we can pursue in the spiritual life: love for God and our neighbor. It is impossible to practice asceticism without encountering setbacks, failure, and sin, and this helps us realize that Christian asceticism, understood correctly, is always inseparably connected to grace: "It is not possible to triumph over one's own nature," writes John Climacus. In Christian history there have been numerous exaggerations in ascetic practice, and such excesses have at times threatened to reduce Christian life to a series of heroic feats. At the same time, though, Christians have always spoken out against these excesses, often with a sense of humor: "If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride; if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and glorify himself" (Isidore the Elder).

In Christian life, asceticism is not about personal perfection but about growing in freedom and in our relationships with others - the goal is always love. Asceticism takes seriously the fact that we cannot serve two masters, and that the alternative to obeying God is serving idols. We need to 'educate' our inner life, refine and purify our love, and continue to make our relationships more intelligent and respectful - this is what asceticism tells us! The "sweat and struggle" (Cassian) of our ascetic efforts open us to the gift of God and help us prepare our entire being, our entire existence, to receive the gift of grace. We can summarize the Christian dimension of asceticism in this affirmation: salvation comes from God in Jesus Christ. Asceticism means nothing more than accepting the fact that we are who we are only because of the grace of that Other in our lives named God. It means, in other words, agreeing to receive our identity in our relationship with this Other. Physical asceticism, which has often been viewed in purely negative terms and associated with disdain for the body, especially following the widespread acceptance of a dualistic anthropological model, actually tells us that our experience of God necessarily involves our entire body! Without this dimension, Christianity is reduced either to an intellectual exercise - that is, to *gnōsis* - or to its moral dimension alone.

Asceticism is at the service of the Christian revelation that attests that our true freedom is revealed when we are open to the gift of God and capable of giving ourselves for love of God and our neighbor. Our ascetic discipline has the effect of liberating us from *philautía* (self-love, egocentrism) and transforming us from individuals into people capable of communion, love, and the free gift of ourselves. Again, the words of a desert father reveal that the early Christian tradition recognized its own errors: "Many have prostrated themselves without the slightest discernment, and have left without gaining anything at all. Our mouths smell bad because of our fasting, we know the Scriptures by heart, we recite all of the Psalms, but we do not have what God seeks - love and humility." We need to be intelligent and discerning in our asceticism if we want to please God, and if we want to become more, and not less, human. An intelligent asceticism can help us in our task of making our life a masterpiece, a work of art. Perhaps it is not by chance that the verb *askein*, in ancient Greek literature, is also used to designate the work of the artist. This, then, is the goal of asceticism: to situate the life of the Christian in the domain of beauty, which in Christianity is another name for holiness.

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