

POST #11 - THE ASCETICAL LIFE AND PASTORAL CHARITY

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Pastoral Charity and Our Desires

In their years of discernment, seminarians sift through their desires, often confused by their conflicting desires, or desires that appear one moment and are gone the next. It is good to direct the men to bring this shifting landscape of desire to the Lord. With time, they come to recognize which are the deeper desires, which are the desires that give not only pleasure, but joy. This recognition, found in times of prayer, is not something we can “do” for the men. They have to enter within, acknowledge the apparent randomness of the recognition, the confusion, and consistently bring that experience to the Lord. The Lord’s light clarifies the desires and helps the men identify which desires best serve mature love.

The Ascetical Life and Pastoral Charity

One of the spiritual directors at Sacred Heart used to tell his directees, “If continence is the only form of mortification you practice, eventually you won’t practice *it*.” A lifestyle of restraining selfishness, so that we truly love more, is necessary for our men.

As all pastors know, the mortification of selfishness is necessary for every state of life in the Church; it is only more clear in preparation for ecclesial celibate vocations. And, in each state of life, mortification never works if it is directed toward self-perfection. Only when it is directed toward love of God and love of others does it work in the Christian dispensation.

Daily Life

The first form of asceticism for the men is the mortification of their selfishness in the daily life of the seminary. Regularly ask the men about how they are doing with living the seminary schedule. For those who are used to setting their own agendas, following the seminary horarium is very difficult. Check with them on this. For younger men, encourage them to bring their irritations with classmates, professors, and formators to the Lord in their holy hour. Often, in the early years of their formation, seminarians are horrified and angered by the lack of virtue they see in others around them. Those others around *them* are, of course, similarly repulsed and ticked off by *their* lack of virtue. Encourage the men to bring to the Lord their exasperation and anger. Many men have little skill in managing conflicts when they enter the seminary. Coach them in bringing these problems to the Lord: when do they need to clear the air or bring something to someone’s attention? When do they need to let go? When do they need to talk to a formator?

Fasting

Jesus tells His Disciples that some evil can be driven out only by prayer and fasting. Suggest that your men combine prayer with moderate fasting. Tell them to choose something to pray about that they really want, not just something that sounds good. When we find those intentions and link them to our fasting, the combination helps lay the ground for further ascetical practice and pastoral charity. Men find that this philosophy of fasting works; they perceive a purpose, a clearer focus, a greater strength.

Regarding the fasting, direct the seminarians to keep it moderate. Because of the just demands of community life, fasting may mean that the man chooses, on certain days, the entrée he does not like, or foregoes dessert. If the man can be faithful to community life and keep up his energy level, more serious fasting can be good. For some men, eating three meals a day in the company of their brothers is itself a heavy mortification. You may want to encourage some men to eat more with others as a form of asceticism.

Especially for young men in the seminary, the temptation to demonstrate their virtue to others by demonstrating their ascetical efforts can be strong. Encourage them to watch for “performing their righteous deeds for men to see,” especially if they are fond of Jesus’ words “let your light shine before men.” A particular expression of asceticism that makes its rounds in seminaries is sleeping on the floor. If you should decide that the man’s motivation is good, and if he can sleep on the floor without impairing his energy level, make sure that he is very attentive not to let others know he does this. This kind of behavior can easily become a display of virtue, and some younger men are prone to this form of self-glory.

Similarly, after the men have begun their fasting or whatever ascetical practice they have reviewed with you, ask them if they are seeing an uptick in their temptations to pride or criticism of others who are less virtuous. Such temptations are common and need to be exposed quickly. Usually bringing the temptations to the light in prayer and direction is enough to wither the roots of the temptation.

Praying Always

Jesus tells His disciples to simply *pray always*. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells us twice to pray always. In 18:1, He tells us to *pray always without becoming weary* (Luke 18:1). In Luke 21:36, He tells us to *be vigilant and pray always*. St. Paul, who has learned to pray always, to watch and not lose heart, is moved by the Lord to tell us in I Thess 5:17 to *pray without ceasing*; and in Ephesians 6:18, he exhorts us to *pray at every opportunity with all perseverance and supplication*.

So, how do we pray always? I suggest that, as directors, we teach our men different ways of praying that help us stay in the Lord’s presence. The ways offered here are union with Christ through His Name, through Love for Him, through gratitude, through His will, through the members of His Body, and through a relationship with the angels. So, the ways I suggest are: 1.) reciting the Jesus Prayer; 2.) doing everything for the love of God; 3.) doing repetitions of past graces; 4.) asking God what His will is for the unscheduled moments that we have; 5.) praying to the saints; 6.) praying to the angels. These ways help us *stay recollected*, as is often said in the West, and to *stay awake* to the Lord, as is said in the East:

1.) *By continuously calling on the Name of Jesus*, we invoke His Presence and we stay in His Presence. In his work, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, St. Hesychius of Mount Sinai¹ teaches us to stay awake to the Lord. The purpose of the book is to help us become more watchful and awake to the presence of God. To be watchful and awake, Hesychius suggests two things: one, an embrace; the other, a refusal. He suggests that by embracing the name of Jesus, we can be transported to what other authors call being born again, reaching true charity, walking in the Spirit, going beyond the third mansion. This invocation has to be accompanied by the refusal of temptations.

¹ Hesychius, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, pp. 162-198.

The Jesus Prayer is, most simply, the Holy Name of Jesus. In its fullest form, it combines the Lord's teaching about justifying prayer and St. Peter's divine confession of faith, *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner*. In Matthew 16:16, we learn that Peter's naming of Jesus as the "Messiah, the Son of the living God" was revealed to him by the Father, so we invoke Jesus by that name. In Luke 18:13, the publican calls out, "*O God, be merciful to me a sinner.*" Jesus says that with this prayer, the man went home justified. So, we invoke Jesus as the Father instructs, and we humble ourselves by acknowledging that we are sinners.

St. Hesychius teaches in sentence 98, *Whenever we are filled with evil thoughts, we should throw the invocation of our Lord Jesus Christ into their midst. Then, as experience has taught us, we shall see them instantly dispersed like smoke in the air.*² I would add that when I invoke the name with more faith, remembering the power of the Name of Jesus and invoking it with faith, it has more efficacy. If I am not resolute, it is not as effective.

In Matthew 12:43-45, we read:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a person it roams through arid regions searching for rest but finds none. Then it says, "I will return to my home from which I came." But upon returning, it finds it empty, swept clean, and put in order. Then it goes and brings back with itself seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they move in and dwell there; and the last condition of that person is worse than the first.

So, how do we keep the evil spirits from entering? By making sure that though the house is swept and clean, it is not empty. By keeping the Name of Jesus in our souls, in our tabernacles, in the house, the evil spirits will keep out. St. Hesychius teaches us that we stay with the Lord when *the heart breathes and invokes, endlessly and without ceasing, only Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and Himself God. It confesses Him who alone has power to forgive our sins and with His aid it courageously faces its enemies.*³

2.) *By doing everything, every gesture, every act for the love of God*, we also pray always. At times, we can only do this by intention, but when we can, if we do it consciously and with attention to the Lord, we find that our lives are transformed. It is good to let our men know that after the three hundredth time of doing anything, no matter how noble the activity, we can grow bored with it, or calloused. When we do what we do, whether it is walking down the hall, typing a paper, listening to something we find boring, if we do it for the love of God, it will be transformed and will transform us.

We should teach our men to try it, and to calmly try it again when they find they are not doing things for the love of God. We should tell them to ask for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Very often, because we are focused on the love of self, we do things because we have to, because we want to avoid trouble, or because we want to be seen as good. By doing things for the love of God, our vainglory is constantly battered, and we find we can always be in God's presence.

This centering of our service on the love of God is expressed clearly in the interviews and letters of Brother Lawrence. When interviewed by the Abbé Joseph de Beaufort, Brother Lawrence said:

That he had always been governed by love, without selfish views; and that having resolved to make the love of GOD the end of all his actions, he had found reasons to be well satisfied with

² Ibid., p. 179.

³ Ibid., n. 5, p.163.

his method. That he was pleased when he could take up a straw from the ground for the love of GOD, seeking Him only, and nothing else, not even His gifts.⁴

As Brother Lawrence continued, “That he found the best way of reaching for God was that of doing ordinary tasks, which he was obliged to perform out of obedience entirely for the love of God and not for the human attitude toward them.”⁵

Brother Lawrence wrote to a religious, “Let us often reflect ... that our only concern in this life is to please God. What can anything else be but folly and vanity?”⁶

⁴ Brother Lawrence, “Second Conversation,” *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New York: Image Books, 1977), p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.