

The Purpose Of Christian Mortification

Its Practice

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The aim of Christian mortification is to counteract the evil influences which original sin continues to exert on our souls, even after Baptism has regenerated them.

Our regeneration in Christ, while completely wiping out sin in us, leaves us, none the less, very far indeed from original rectitude and peace. It was recognised by the Council of Trent that concupiscence, which is to say the triple covetousness of the flesh, the eyes and the pride of life, makes itself felt in us even after Baptism, in order to rouse us to the glorious struggles of the Christian life.

{Footnote: The actual words of the Council of Trent, Fifth Session, Decree on Original Sin are:

Manere autem in baptizatis concupiscentiam vel fomitem, haec sancta Synodus fatetur et sentit; quae cum ad agonem relictæ sit, (...) Hanc concupiscentiam, quam aliquando Apostolus “peccatum” (see Romans 6:12 and following; Romans 7:7; Romans 7:14-20) appellat, (...) quia ex peccato est et ad peccatum inclinatur.

Which may be translated:

But there remains in the baptized concupiscence, or an incentive (to sin), and this holy Synod confesses and is sensible of this; whereas it is left for our exercise, (...) This concupiscence, which the Apostle sometimes calls “sin”, (see Romans 6:12 and following; Romans 7:7; Romans 7:14-20) (the holy Synod) declares that (...) it is of sin, and inclines to sin. } It is this triple covetousness, which Scripture calls sometimes the old man, as opposed to the new man who is Jesus living in us and ourselves living in Jesus; and sometimes the flesh or fallen nature, as opposed to the spirit or to nature regenerated by supernatural grace. It is this old man or this flesh, that is to say the whole man with his twofold, moral and physical life, that one must, I do not say annihilate, because that is an impossibility so long as our present life continues, but mortify, which means to cause it to die, to reduce it almost to the powerless, inactive and barren state of a corpse; one must prevent it from yielding its fruit, which is sin, and nullify its action in all our moral life.

Christian mortification ought therefore to involve the whole man, to extend to every sphere of action in which our nature is able to operate.

Such is the purpose of the virtue of mortification; we shall explain its practice by running through, one after another, the many forms of activity in which it is manifested in our lives:

— Organic activity or bodily life.

— Sensible activity, which comes into play either under the form of sense-knowledge through the external senses or the imagination, or else under the form of sensible appetite or passion.

— Rational and free activity, the principle of our thoughts and our judgements and of the decisions of the will.

— The exterior manifestation of the life of the soul or our exterior actions.

— Our relations with our neighbour.

Practice of Christian Mortification.

Note Well: All the practices of mortification which we have collected here are derived from the examples of the Saints, especially Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Teresa, Saint Francis de Sales, Saint John Berchmans; or they are recommended by acknowledged masters of the spiritual life, such as the Venerable Louis de Blois (1506-1566), Alonso Rodriguez (1526-1616), Giovanni Battista Scaramelli (1687-1762), Monsignor Charles Louis Gay, Abbé Allemand, Abbé Hamon, Abbé Dubois, et cetera.

Mortification of the body.

1 — In the matter of food, restrict yourself as far as possible to simple necessity. Consider these words, which Saint Augustine addressed to God: “O my God, You have taught me to take food only as a remedy. Ah! Lord, who is there among us who does not sometimes exceed the limit here? If there is such a one, I say that man is great, and must give great glory to Your name.” (Confessions, book 10, chapter 31.)

2 — Pray to God often, pray to God daily to help you by His grace so that you do not overstep the limits of necessity and do not permit yourself to give way to pleasure.

3 — Take nothing between meals, unless out of necessity or for the sake of convenience.

4 — Practise fasting and abstinence, but practise them only under obedience and with discretion.

5 — It is not forbidden for you to enjoy some bodily satisfaction, but do so with a pure intention, giving thanks to God.

6 — Regulate your sleep, avoiding in this all faint-heartedness, all softness, especially in the morning. Set an hour, if you can, for going to bed and getting up, and keep strictly to it.

7 — In general, take your rest only in so far as it is necessary; give yourself generously to work, not sparing your labour. Take care not to exhaust your body, but guard against indulging it; as soon as you feel it even a little disposed to play the master, treat it at once as a slave.

8 — If you suffer some slight indisposition, avoid being a nuisance to others through your bad mood; leave to your companions the task of complaining for you; for yourself, be patient and silent as the Divine Lamb who has truly borne all our weaknesses.

9 — Guard against making the slightest illness a reason for dispensation or exemption from your daily schedule. “One must detest like the plague every exception when it comes to rules,” wrote Saint John Berchmans.

10 — Accept with docility, endure humbly, patiently and with perseverance, the tiresome mortification called illness.

Mortification of the senses, of the imagination and the passions.

- 1 — Close your eyes always and above all to every dangerous sight, and even — have the courage to do it — to every frivolous and useless sight. See without looking; do not gaze at anybody to judge of their beauty or ugliness.
- 2 — Keep your ears closed to flattering remarks, to praise, to persuasion, to bad advice, to slander, to uncharitable mocking, to indiscretions, to ill-disposed criticism, to suspicions voiced, to every word capable of causing the very smallest coolness between two souls.
- 3 — If the sense of smell has something to suffer due to your neighbour's infirmity or illness, far be it from you ever to complain of it; draw from it a holy joy.
- 4 — In what concerns the quality of food, have great respect for Our Lord's counsel: "Eat such things as are set before you." "Eat what is good without delighting in it, what is bad without expressing aversion to it, and show yourself equally indifferent to the one as to the other. There," says Saint Francis de Sales, "is real mortification."
- 5 — Offer your meals to God; at table impose on yourself a tiny penance: for example, refuse a sprinkling of salt, a glass of wine, a sweet, et cetera; your companions will not notice it, but God will keep account of it.
- 6 — If what you are given appeals to you very much, think of the gall and the vinegar given to Our Lord on the cross: that cannot keep you from tasting, but will serve as a counterbalance to the pleasure.
- 7 — You must avoid all sensual contact, every caress in which you set some passion, by which you look for passion, from which you take a joy which is principally of the senses.
- 8 — Refrain from going to warm yourself, unless this is necessary to save you from being unwell.
- 9 — Bear with everything which naturally grieves the flesh, especially the cold of winter, the heat of summer, a hard bed and every inconvenience of that kind. Whatever the weather, put on a good face; smile at all temperatures. Say with the prophet "Cold, heat, rain, bless ye the Lord." It will be a happy day for us when we are able to say with a good heart these words which were familiar to Saint Francis de Sales: "I am never better than when I am not well."
- 10 — Mortify your imagination when it beguiles you with the lure of a brilliant position, when it saddens you with the prospect of a dreary future, when it irritates you with the memory of a word or deed which offended you.
- 11 — If you feel within you the need to daydream, mortify it without mercy.
- 12 — Mortify yourself with the greatest care in the matter of impatience, of irritation or of anger.
- 13 — Examine your desires thoroughly; submit them to the control of reason and of faith. Do you never desire a long life rather than a holy life, wish for pleasure and well-being without trouble or sadness, victory without battle, success without setbacks, praise without criticism, a comfortable, peaceful life without a cross of any sort, that is to say a life quite opposite to that of Our Divine Lord? Mortify these false-hearted desires.
- 14 — Take care not to acquire certain habits, which, without being positively bad, can become injurious, such as habits of frivolous reading, of excessive playing at games of chance, et cetera.

15 — Seek to discover your predominant failing and, as soon as you have recognised it, pursue it all the way to its last retreat. To that purpose, submit with good will to whatever could be monotonous or boring in the practice of the examination of conscience.

16 — You are not forbidden to have a heart and to show it, but be on your guard against the danger of exceeding due measure. Resist attachments, which are too natural, particular friendships and all softness of the heart.

Mortification of the mind and the will.

1 — Mortify your mind by denying it all fruitless imaginings, all ineffectual or wandering thoughts, which waste time, dissipate the soul, and render work and serious things distasteful.

2 — Every gloomy and anxious thought should be banished from your mind. Concern about all that could happen to you later on should not worry you at all. As for the bad thoughts, which bother you in spite of yourself, you should, in dismissing them, make of them a subject for patience. Being involuntary, they will simply be for you an occasion of merit.

3 — Avoid obstinacy in your ideas, stubbornness in your sentiments. You should willingly let the judgements of others prevail, unless there is a question of matters on which you have a duty to give your opinion and speak out.

4 — Mortify the natural organ of your mind, which is to say the tongue. Practise silence gladly, whether your rule prescribes it for you or whether you impose it on yourself of your own accord.

5 — Prefer to listen to others rather than to speak yourself; and yet speak appropriately, avoiding as extremes both speaking too much, which prevents others from telling their thoughts, and speaking too little, which suggests a hurtful lack of interest in what they say.

6 — Never interrupt somebody who is speaking and do not forestall, by answering too swiftly, a question he would put to you.

7 — Always have a moderate tone of voice, never abrupt or sharp. Avoid – very, extremely, horribly – all exaggeration.

8 — Love simplicity and straightforwardness. The pretences, evasions, deliberate equivocations which certain pious people indulge in without scruple greatly discredit piety.

9 — Carefully refrain from using any coarse, vulgar or even idle word, because Our Lord warns us that He will ask an account of them from us on the day of judgement.

10 — Above all, mortify your will; that is the decisive point. Bend it constantly to what you know is God's good pleasure and the rule of Providence, without taking any account either of your likes or your dislikes. Be submissive, even to your inferiors, in matters that do not concern the glory of God and the duties of your position.

11 — Look on the smallest disobedience to the orders or even the desires of your superiors as if it were addressed to God.

12 — Remember that you will practise the greatest of all mortifications when you love to be humiliated and when you have the most perfect obedience towards those to whom God wishes you to be subject.

13 — Love to be forgotten and counted as nothing; it is the advice of Saint John of the Cross, it is the counsel of 'The Imitation of Christ': speak seldom either well or ill of yourself, but seek by silence to make yourself forgotten.

14 — Faced with a humiliation, a reproach, you are tempted to grumble, to feel sorry for yourself. Say with David: "So much the better! It is good that I should be humbled."

15 — Entertain no frivolous desires: "I desire few things," said Saint Francis de Sales, "and the little that I desire, I desire very little."

16 — Accept with the most perfect resignation the mortifications decreed by Providence, the crosses and the labours belonging to the state of life in which Providence has placed you. "There, where there is less of our choice," said Saint Francis, "there is more of the good pleasure of God." We would like to choose our crosses, to have a cross other than our own, to carry a heavy cross, which would at least have some fame, rather than a light cross, which tires us by being unceasingly there: an illusion! It is our cross we must carry, not another, and its merit is not in what sort of cross it is, but in the perfection with which we carry it.

17 — Do not let yourself be troubled by temptations, scruples, spiritual dryness: "What we do in time of dryness has more merit in the sight of God than what we do in time of consolation," says the saintly Bishop of Geneva.

{Footnote: Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622), who is so frequently quoted in this essay, was Bishop of Geneva.}

18 — Do not fret too much about your imperfections but humble yourself because of them. To humble oneself is a good thing, which few people understand; to be troubled and vexed at oneself is something that everybody knows, and which is bad, because in that kind of distress and vexation self-love always plays the greater part.

19 — Let us beware alike of the timidity and despondency which sap our courage, and of the presumption which is only pride in action. Let us work as if everything depended on our efforts, but let us remain humble as if our work were useless.

Mortifications to practise in our exterior actions.

1 — You ought to show the greatest exactitude in observing all the points of your rule of life, obeying them without delay, remembering Saint John Berchmans, who said: "Penance for me is to lead the common life"; "To have the highest regard for the smallest things, such is my motto"; "Rather die than break a single rule."

2 — In the exercise of your duties of state, try to be well-pleased with whatever happens to be most unpleasant or boring for you, recalling again here the words of Saint Francis: "I am never better than when I am not well."

3 — Never give one moment over to sloth: from morning until night keep busy without respite.

4 — If your life is, at least partly, spent in study, apply to yourself this advice from Saint Thomas Aquinas to his pupils: "Do not be content to take in superficially what you read and hear, but endeavour to go into it deeply and to fathom the whole sense of it. Never remain in doubt about what you could know with certainty. Work with a holy eagerness to enrich your mind; arrange and

classify in your memory all the knowledge you are able to acquire. On the other hand, do not seek to penetrate mysteries which are beyond your intelligence.”

5 — Devote yourself solely to your present occupation, without looking back on what went before or anticipating in thought what will follow. Say with Saint Francis: “While I am doing this I am not obliged to do anything else”; “Let us make haste very calmly; all in good time.”

6 — Be modest in your bearing. Nothing was so perfect as Saint Francis’s deportment; he always kept his head straight, avoiding alike the inconstancy which turns it in all directions, the negligence which lets it droop forward and the proud and haughty disposition which throws it back. His countenance was always peaceful, free from all annoyance, always cheerful, serene and open; without however any undue merriment or indiscreet humour, without loud, immoderate or too frequent laughter.

7 — Saint Francis was as composed when alone as in a large gathering. He did not cross his legs, never supported his head on his elbow. When he prayed he was motionless as a statue. When nature suggested to him he should relax, he did not listen.

8 — Regard cleanliness and order as a virtue, uncleanness and untidiness as a vice; do not have dirty, stained or torn clothes. On the other hand, regard luxury and worldliness as a greater vice still. Make sure that, on seeing your way of dressing, nobody calls it “slovenly” or “elegant”, but that everybody is bound to think it “decent”.

Mortifications to practise in our relations with our neighbor.

1 — Bear with your neighbour’s defects; defects of education, of mind, of character. Bear with everything about him, which irritates you: his gait, his posture, tone of voice, accent, or whatever.

2 — Bear with everything in everybody and endure it to the end and in a Christian spirit. Never do it with that proud patience which makes one say: “What have I to do with so and so? How does what he says affect me? What need have I for the affection, the kindness or even the politeness of any creature at all and of that person in particular?” Nothing accords less with the will of God than this haughty unconcern, this scornful indifference; it is worse, indeed, than impatience.

3 — Are you tempted to be angry?

For the love of Jesus, be meek.

To avenge yourself?

Return good for evil; it is said the great secret of touching Saint Teresa’s heart was to do her a bad turn.

To look sourly at someone?

Smile at him with good nature.

To avoid meeting him?

Seek him out willingly.

To talk badly of him?

Talk well of him.

To speak harshly to him?

Speak very gently, warmly, to him.

4 — Love to give praise to your companions, especially those you are naturally most inclined to envy.

5 — Do not be witty at the expense of charity.

6 — If somebody in your presence should take the liberty of making remarks that are rather improper, or if someone should hold conversations likely to injure his neighbour's reputation, you may sometimes rebuke the speaker gently, but more often it will be better to divert the conversation skilfully or indicate by a gesture of sorrow or of deliberate inattention that what is said displeases.

7 — It costs you an effort to render a small service: offer to do it. You will have twice the merit.

8 — Avoid with horror posing as a victim in your own eyes or those of others. Far be it from you to exaggerate your burdens; strive to find them light; they are, in reality, much more often than it seems; they would be so always if you were more virtuous.

Conclusion.

In general, know how to refuse to nature what she asks of you unnecessarily.

Know how to make her give what she refuses you for no reason. Your progress in virtue, says the author of 'The Imitation of Christ', will be in proportion to the violence that you succeed in doing to yourself.

"It is necessary to die," said the saintly Bishop of Geneva, "it is necessary to die in order that God may live in us, for it is impossible to achieve the union of the soul with God by any means other than by mortification. These words 'it is necessary to die' are hard, but they will be followed by a great sweetness, because one dies to oneself for no other reason than to be united to God by that death."

Would to God we had the right to apply to ourselves these beautiful words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: "In all things we suffer tribulation... Always bearing about in our body the death of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodies." (2 Corinth 4:8-10.)
