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CHRISTIAN ASCESIS: THE AXIS OF HARMONY
OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Abstract

This article presents a very important topic that aims at the balance of the spiritual life, namely asceticism. Asceticism is the state developed by the divine energies that sustain man's spiritual progress. A believer, the more he practices on the path of doing good, the better and more virtuous he will become. The more he seeks to eliminate sin from his being, the purer and godlier he will become. This exercise is called in spiritual language: asceticism. Man is a reality of divine harmony, but we must keep in mind that this gracious presence cannot be expressed conceptually because it belongs to a transcendental, metaphysical reality. Therefore, Christian asceticism refers to the acquisition and perfection of life in Christ. In this endeavor man is not left alone. God's grace helps him to achieve the state of holiness, of perfection.

Keywords: asceticism; perfection; divine grace; purification; illumination;

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, man increasingly needs a redefinition of his relationship with the world, with himself and with God in order to free himself from evil. The Orthodox Church has always provided man with all the means necessary to achieve this goal, and all these means are generically defined by asceticism. The word asceticism takes on different meanings and is applied over time: to the exercise of the body, in the case of athletes and soldiers; to the exercise of intelligence and will, of artistic or technical work; but also to the exercise that strengthens the moral virtues, to the cult and to religious life. Asceticism is only a means by which man can accomplish one of his goals, that of making that self-evaluation so that he can then set out on his way to God. The purpose of Christian asceticism as it is understood in the Eastern and Western tradition involves the discipline of the whole person, body and soul, so that he may learn to live not only as a human being, but as sons of God.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

On the road to seeking God, asceticism is a conscious and persevering training, and it involves constant tension. It requires both spiritual and physical effort, for both sides of our being sigh after



salvation. There are three fundamental dimensions of Christian asceticism: fasting, almsgiving, and, of course, prayer. This is because all fundamental dimensions of our being are called to participate in the purification and sanctification of the whole man. Fasting is directly related to the body. Acts of almsgiving, the deeds of which we know to be both bodily and spiritual in nature, start from the soul, and prayer is connected with the human spirit.

Prayer is man's entry into connection with God. The Holy Fathers say that prayer is the raising of man with his mind, heart, faith, and voice to God, to glorify Him, to thank Him, and to ask of Him all that we need spiritually and physically, knowing that He hears and helps us. In order to be obeyed by God, it must meet several conditions: sincere and true faith, obedience to the commandments (out of love for God), and perseverance in prayer.

Fasting involves a complex and very effective exercise in educating the will. When it is dedicated to God, it is the second most powerful "weapon" of the Christian against bodily and spiritual temptations, the means of strengthening the faith, exercising almsgiving, and acquiring Christian humility.

Charity. When made out of love of God and our neighbor, almsgiving is the third "weapon" and consists of the material and spiritual help of those in need. True Christian almsgiving must spring from a sincere love of our neighbor and be done discreetly, not in a spirit of pride (Matthew 6: 2-4).

Christian, selfless, and spiritual love is not touched in an instant. It is the project of the believer's whole life. It presupposes a sustained struggle, a continuous asceticism, a constant effort to achieve genuine repentance, a radical conversion of our way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Orthodox spirituality pursues the perfection of the believer in Christ. And since perfection cannot be attained in Christ except by participation in His divine-human life, it can be said that the goal of Orthodox spirituality is the perfection of the faithful man by his union with Christ and his fuller imprint on the face of Christ's humanity, full of God. It can therefore be said that the goal of Orthodox Christian spirituality is the union of the faithful man with God, in Christ. But as God is endless, the goal of union with Him, or of our perfection, never corresponds to an end from which it can no longer advance. All Eastern parents say, therefore, that perfection has no boundary.

Thus, our perfection or union with God is not only a goal, but also an endless progress. However, two great stages can be distinguished on this path: one, of advancing towards perfection, through efforts to purify passions and to acquire virtues; and another, of life ever more advanced in union with God, in which the work of man is replaced by the work of God, man giving on his part more receptivity, or openness to fill himself with more and more divine life.

Thus, the following features of Orthodox Christian spirituality can be detached:

1. The culmination of the spiritual life is a union of the soul with God.
2. This union is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit, but until it is obtained man is indebted with a long effort of purification.
3. This union takes place when man has reached "the likeness of God" and it is also knowledge and love.
4. The effect of this union consists, among other things, in a considerable intensification of the spiritual energies in man, accompanied by many kinds of charisma.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The word asceticism is currently associated with a negative meaning. Asceticism would be, on the whole, restraint, control, negative strive. This opinion is explained by the fact that the sinful tendencies of nature, the habits that lead to its death, have come to be considered as the positive side of life. In fact, the ascetic endeavor, apparently negative, confronts the negative element in our nature, following, through the permanent opposition that it poses, its elimination.

In reality, asceticism has a positive purpose. It seeks to strengthen the flesh and free it from the burden of the sin that gnaws at it, which promotes its corruption. Asceticism sows virtues instead of passions, which presuppose a truly strengthened nature. It is true that the ultimate goal of asceticism is to free the flesh not only from the movement of sinful lusts, but also from the ideas of things that come to mind after the cleansing of passions. But this, only to gain independence from created things, which have enslaved nature through passions, and to desire God even more.

Asceticism, as a path of the most rigorous practical reason and of the fullest knowledge of the reasons of things, is the proof that living the union with God is not reached by bypassing reason, but by using in advance all its possibilities, so that from this one the nature can also be chosen with a supreme capacity to become a vessel of superhuman understanding, communicated by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

4. FINDINGS

Asceticism (from the Greek ἄσκησις, "exercise" also called "asceticism") is a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from some worldly pleasures. There are also, in religious language, a set of physical and spiritual exercises, considered to be purifying, performed by some monks. The opposite of asceticism is debauchery. The Greek word ἀσκέω, ἀσκητις is difficult to determine etymologically. Homer uses it to render the idea of an artistic (Iliad 10, 438; 23, 743) or technical (Iliad 3, 388; 4, 110) activity. Isocrates identifies *askesis* with the practices of godliness in Egypt. In Pythagoras and later in the Neoplatonists, *asketai* defined those who made the promise to perfect the human nature.

The Stoics give it a moral meaning, understanding the methodical exercise for restraining the passions and committing the virtues (Tomas Spidlik, 1997, 211).

Asceticism in pre-Christian antiquity had the following meanings and applications:

1. the exercise of athletes and soldiers.
2. the exercise of intelligence, will and moral sense.
3. application to cult and religious life.

At the beginning it defined the physical exercise, very intense, systematic and uninterrupted, practiced in the gymnasium to obtain athletic performance. The Stoics give this term a moral meaning, understanding the exercise for the acquisition and practice of virtue.

The Holy Apostle Paul takes these terms and applies them to the new faith and life in Christ, where they will receive a specific meaning. Christians will henceforth be called athletes and soldiers of Christ. Applying these terms to Christian life, the Apostle shows that whoever struggles restrains himself from everything, in order to obtain a crown. Like the runner in the arena, the athletes of Christ do not run at random, but according to certain rules (I Corinthians 9, 24-25; Philippians 3:13, 14). . Christ's athletes and soldiers, exercising their soul and body, make a sustained effort to reach their goal. And this is Christ.

The etymology of the ascetic word ἀσκέω, ἀσκητις, originally designated several techniques or practices for a particular purpose, accompanied by physical exertion. Homer defines asceticism as an artistic (Iliad 10, 438; 23, 74), or technical (Iliad 3, 388; 4, 110) activity. In the Stoics, asceticism has a moral meaning, being an exercise in virtue. Origen will pass from the writers of the second century, for whom martyrdom was present, to the writers of the third and fourth centuries, who formed the idea of spiritual martyrdom rendered by asceticism, which represents not only an abstinence from lusts and pleasures, but also a struggle toward continuous growth in virtue. As Clement of Alexandria and Origen show, the approach to God is achieved through asceticism (Nicolae, Metropolitan of Transylvania, 1969, 341). They introduce the terms asceticism and ascetic. Of course, they are related, in a restricted way, to the monastic life.

From the very beginning it should be noted that in Christianity asceticism is different in its meaning from the way it was practiced in the various pre-Christian philosophical or religious currents. We start from the fact that salvation is realized as life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. And salvation means the restoration of the image of God in man, that is, of order, harmony and balance in human nature, reconciled with God, with himself and with all creation, through an act of free acceptance by man. This unrestricted definition has a dynamic character, manifesting itself through a continuous exercise of collaboration with divine grace. As the collaboration is more intense and deeper, the better the human nature heals itself through the liberation from sins and passions. Therefore, Christian asceticism refers to the acquisition and perfection of life in Christ. In other words, asceticism is like preparing and cultivating the earth to bring forth the seed of divine grace, the new life in Christ.

Its material and spiritual structure offers it the possibility and even obliges it to participate both in the earthly world here and now, and in the spiritual life of eternal communion with God in the age to come. Embodying our nature with all its affections except sin, the Savior presented it through His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, to the Father, at the same time offering it to us as a source of holiness and deification. He thus showed us that neither the senses nor the affections carry in them the

stigma of impurity, but our attitude toward them may be right or wrong. Therefore, holiness refers to the personal or hypostatic qualities that one acquires through the ascetic struggle against temptation and sin, as well as through the attainment of virtues.

Asceticism based on restraint, self-control has a spiritual aspect and another concerning the material part of the senses. Asceticism, as the power of the soul, is not devoid of science, that is, of measure as the right reckoning. It will not go against the senses, but will act upon their discipline. At the same time, it will not eradicate affections, but will convert them to virtue.

Asceticism mainly means a fortification of the world and man in God. This would be the positive side of asceticism because, in general, through asceticism it is perceived only in a negative sense, through the suffering and restraint that man must fulfill in order to approach God.

The ascetic life results in the acquisition of divine saving grace which strengthens and hardens human nature by sanctifying it. Acquiring holiness is not a source of praise for us because we have done only what we were indebted to. The only reason that gives us the opportunity to boast is praise in suffering, knowing that suffering brings patience, patience trial, and trial hope, and hope does not shame because it brings into the heart the Grace of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5: 3-5).

The method of Christian asceticism places life in lack of suffering, in virtue, accomplished by work, judgement, or by restraining yourself from the lusts of the flesh.

To be able to bear the image of the heavenly One, *σῶμα πνευματικόν*; to reach "the stature of a perfect man" (Ephesians 4:14), man must unite himself with Christ. This union with Christ is first realized through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and continues throughout his life through the other Sacraments. The Savior considers the Sacrament of Holy Baptism to be indispensable for the attainment of perfection: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5) and "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16). The search for God, on the one hand, presupposes a descending (katabatic) view in which God imprints His image in the depths of the soul and at the same time realizes the continuous liberation of passions (katharsis) towards spiritual growth in Christ (Ephesians 4:1) specific to the first stage in the spiritual ascent (*ἀνοδος*), that is, the phase of purification, which emphasizes the knowledge given by Holy Baptism, and corresponds to the knowledge that Moses receives in the burning bush. The union with Christ that is achieved at Baptism is still only brotherhood with Christ, as Theophanes of Nicaea says, it is the beginning of communion and life in Christ, and believers still increase by cooperating with the grace received at Baptism.

Nicholas Kabasilas says that: "Anointing incorporates us into the humanity of Christ, opens holiness to us, it being the direct outpouring of uncreated divine grace in the souls of the anointed" (N. Kabasilas, 1948, p.27).

Full unification is achieved between us and Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. And because unification between people can continually increase, or weaken, and must be restored, we often share in Christ. Through this unification Christ is imprinted into our flesh and blood, producing a true communion of flesh and blood, purified and penetrated by the Spirit. The Eucharist is par excellence the Sacrament of unity and ecclesial community.

Purification

Purification, the first stage of the spiritual life, is one of sustained and unceasing struggle of the soul that longs fully for the fulfillment of the perfection offered by the possibility of sharing in the joyful gifts springing from the being of God. The "unseen war" is waged against sin and passion, realities that mark "the lowest level to which the human being can fall" (D. Staniloae 1993, p. 65.).

The first step in the Christian's path to perfection is the cleansing of sins. Man in the practical phase is called *πρακίς* - worker, whose orientation is identified with the liberation from passions and the acquisition of virtues, he is a man of action, who aims at acquiring the triune love that liberates from passions (*απαθεία*), by union with Christ, becoming a contemplative (*θεωρητικός*), spectator, seer, of Reason which is reflected in the whole creation, due to divine love.

The cleansing of sins "means receiving God in full knowledge, for you did not allow yourself to be sold, enslaved by the devil, but turned your body into the Temple of the Holy Spirit" God living in you with all His fullness.

Illumination

The enlightenment phase causes the spiritual man, by virtue and knowledge, after rising through faith from the irrational to the rational, to concern himself with the knowledge of God in creatures as the fruit of impatience and love.

The second stage in the spectacle is the *ascent - enlightenment*, which leads to contemplation in the spirit through the unity of the sensible, not working and not being worked on through feeling, but working on those above.

Perfection

By dwelling in God, by sharing in grace, by settling in Him by *exaltation - perfection*, man attains holiness, full love: "for the perfect act of virtue from the time of the advance (the first phase) is the work of faith, justice, and of the truthful fear of God, like the natural contemplation without error in the time of the ascent (the second phase), is the work of solid hope and of undented understanding; Finally, deification by ascension (the third phase) is the fruit of love, perfection and the mind completely immobilized, willing in the sense of overcoming things", in God.

Achieving holiness means full transfiguration and renewal of body and soul. This reality means the acquisition of perfection as the sum of virtues, because the soul that has been totally united with God is filled with the splendor of the ineffable light of divinity, no longer contemplating the bodily, being warmed by the warmth of the Holy Spirit, and subject to spiritual afflictions, high, like the Savior, on the mountain of Tabor, a moment when he realizes the exit of man from history, from time and his anchoring in eternity.

5. CONCLUSION

In their desire for perfection until they get to the likeness of God, people have the Savior as a model, for He is the "way" (John 14: 6) through which one can reach the Father "perfection is constant progress, uninterrupted increase, incessant ascent on the golden ladder that leads to the light palace of happy life, enlightened by truth, holiness, unspoken joys. Completion is never finished, it does not have a climax, from which it does not continue. Completion is flight from peak to peak, that is, from a high peak to an even higher one, becoming ever higher peaks lost in the azure of the sky, on which it ascends." The Savior calls us to this perfection when He tells us, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

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