

THE ENDURING VALUE OF CORPORAL MORTIFICATION

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(A shorter version of this article appeared in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, July, 2005.)

Recently, the practice of corporal mortification has become somewhat of a “cause celebre” as a result of the anti-Catholic novel The Da Vinci Code. In it, an Opus Dei monk beats himself in gruesome bloody rituals which caricature and sensationalize the Church’s traditional practices of penance and love for the cross. (By the way, in Opus Dei there are no monks, only lay people and secular priests.) On the other hand the Mel Gibson film, The Passion of the Christ, confronts viewers of all religious traditions with the reality of suffering as an integral aspect of love and union with God. The purpose of this essay is to explore the biblical, spiritual, and historical roots of corporal mortification, and to show its continued pertinence to men and women of today’s world.

“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:24-25). Such are Christ’s paradoxical words, seemingly so harsh in their expression yet so beautiful in their promise. Their immediate context is his coming passion and death, which will bring salvation to the world, but in Christian literature they are also used to explain the method and purpose of personal mortification. By quoting directly from the Founder of Christianity, the author of the fourth Gospel urges his reader to remember the positive effects that can come from generous self-sacrifice.

Mortification is not a pleasant sounding word to the modern ear. It conjures up pain, humiliation, and perhaps even cruelty. But when embraced generously, according to the Gospel message, it can elevate and purify a human being, both in body and soul. We may define it as the struggle against our bad inclinations or tendencies in order to do the will of God.¹ It is therefore not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Corporal mortification, in particular, is that type of

penance or self-denial which is practiced upon the bodily senses. Contrary to all appearances, corporal mortification done for the right reason produces a kind of inner joy and fortitude: in a most profound and personal way, it constitutes a close imitation of Jesus Christ himself, who was buffeted, scourged, crowned with thorns, mocked, and crucified thus bringing reconciliation, hope, and love to the entire human race.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The practice of corporal mortification and penance has deep biblical foundations. From the very first chapters of Genesis, human suffering is shown to be a result of sin, and it has a purifying aspect. God tells Adam that the earth will be cursed because of his sin, and that “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Gen.3:19). In similar fashion, Eve would be subject to the pain of childbirth and domination by her husband, a fate that God did not will for woman at first. But since original sin had placed a disorder in the souls and bodies of Adam and Eve, that disorder had to be rectified by hard work, pain, and humiliation.

Delving into that revealed truth, the later books of the Hebrew Scriptures show how corporal mortification is an effective way to win God’s favor again. For instance, in 2 Kings 19:11, after all human negotiations and means had been exhausted, Hezekiah clothes himself with sackcloth and humbly prays for deliverance from the Assyrian invaders at the gates of Jerusalem. Along with the prayer and support of the prophet Isaiah, his corporal mortification adds power to his petition, and the city is finally delivered from its enemies (cf. 2 Kgs 19:35). Queen Esther, the beautiful Jewess, finds herself in a similar situation when she tries to liberate her people from destruction in Persia. She resorts to fasting (Esther 4:16), and asks all the Jewish people in the capital city of Susa to do the same. Her relative Mordecai had already spent a long time in sackcloth and ashes (cf. Esther 4:1-3). In this way, their prayer is given much more power, and in the end the Jewish people were liberated (cf. Esther 8). Another great heroine, Judith, wears sackcloth and covers herself with ashes as she prays for the deliverance of her people from the Assyrian invaders (Judith 9:1).

A brief survey of the Old Testament shows that sackcloth can be used for mourning the loss of a loved one, as Jacob does for his son Joseph in Gen 37:34. It is a sign of sincere repentance for sin, as Nehemiah makes public confession of the people’s sins after the exile had ended, and the people had returned to Jerusalem (Neh 9:1). The

prophet Jeremiah makes a similar call to repentance with sackcloth and ashes, in order to avert God's punishment (Jer 4:8). Other prophets call for this means of corporal mortification to lament a disaster that has befallen the people because of their sins (cf. Joel 1:8; Amos 8:10). Within this tradition are Christ's own words about the unbelieving towns of Chorozain and Bethsaida, whose citizens should have donned sackcloth and ashes because of his clear signs to them (cf. Mt.11:21).

The Old Testament even affirms that non-Hebrew people can win favor with God through corporal mortification; the people of Niniveh, Capital City of Assyria, moved by Jonah's warning, proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth, "from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). As a result of that voluntary collective penance, God spares the city, though Jonah himself becomes displeased at the result (cf. Jonah 4).

The Hebrew prophets are continually urging the people to atone and make reparation for their sins, particularly those in violation of the Mosaic covenant. In Isaiah 53 we begin to see an expanded concept of sacrifice which includes *meriting for another*. Written several hundred years before Christ, this famous text speaks of a man who would be scourged for the people and who would bring redemption to them: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:4). From here to the Christian practice of offering mortification for others, there is a clear connection. Not only does this mysterious, suffering man (not identified) atone for the people's sins, but he also heals their souls.

FULFILLMENT OF SACRIFICE IN CHRIST

St. Mark begins his gospel with a message of penance and conversion, as he describes the words and actions of John the Baptist. John mortifies himself in both a private and public way to carry out his spiritual mission: "he was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle about his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey" (Mk 1:6). Camel's hair (Latin *pelis carmeli*) seems related to the sackcloth (Latin *cilicium*) used in Old Testament mortifications. It was an uncomfortable, itching garment² that John wore upon his flesh as a sign of true penance. With it, John wanted to afflict his body—similar to many holy men before him—in order to be a purified instrument for proclaiming the coming of Christ, for making atonement of sin, and for giving example to the people of true repentance.

The real center and source of Christian mortification are found of course in the words and actions of Jesus Christ himself. His life on earth begins with deprivation, being born in a stable and laid in a manger (cf Luke 2:7). Before his public ministry, filled with preaching and miracles, he chooses to make a rigorous fast of forty days and forty nights, and allows himself to be tempted by Satan (cf. Mt 4:2). Though without sin himself, he suffers affliction to make reparation for sin, and in the words of St. Augustine's famous commentary on Christ's temptations, he shows us through this action the way of victory.³ In his public ministry, he presents sacrifice and self-denial as an essential condition for following him: "If anyone would be my disciple, let him take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). His path therefore is not an easy one; it involves pain and effort, and a certain dying to self, as he expresses so powerfully in his famous saying quoted at the head of this essay: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). To lead a truly happy and generous life, therefore, to become a true participant in Christ's redemptive sacrifice, one must undergo a kind of death to oneself. He himself even refers to a certain good violence when speaking of the hard life of John the Baptist and others who were seizing heaven by force (cf. Mt 11:12), or when he prescribes very graphic means to get rid of the roots of sinfulness within: "For if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away, and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Mt 27: 29-30). These direct and powerful passages have to be interpreted appropriately of course, but nobody can deny their urgent forcefulness, and their testimony to the great value of voluntary penance and mortification.

At the center of redemption and atonement is Christ's own death. Though he did not directly cause his own death, or the sufferings attached to it, he fully willed both things as part of his Father's plan for saving the human race. His rebuke of Peter, who out of a false compassion wanted him to forego the suffering of the cross, is very significant in this respect: "Get behind me, Satan, you are a hindrance to me. For you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mt 16:23). He describes his death as the means of uniting all men with himself, including the entire universe: "And I, if I be lifted from the earth, will draw all things to myself" (Jn 12:32). This being "lifted" refers most literally to his own crucifixion, which was a lifting of the victim's body to the cross and his arms to the patibulum or cross-beam, from which he would hang, dying an agonizing death from loss of blood combined

with asphyxiation. The physical sufferings of Christ were immense, in reparation for human pride, impurity, and alienation from God. I recall the classical work of Pierre Barbet, a French physician who did detailed research on the methods of Roman punishments in the first century, and whose book had such a powerful effect on Pope Pius XII when he read it. In one passage for instance Dr. Barbet describes the Roman method of scourging or flagellation, with a whip made of leather cords with balls of lead at the end of them. Here is the way he reconstructs Christ's own scourging:

“There are two executioners, one on each side of Him..They alternate their strokes, with great zest. At first, the strokes leave long livid marks, long blue bruises beneath the skin. Remember that the skin has already been affected; that it is sore owing to the millions of little intra-dermic hemorrhages brought about by the sweat of blood (*in Gethsemani*). Further marks are made by the balls of lead. Then the skin, into which the blood has crept, becomes tender and breaks under fresh blows. The blood pours out; shreds of skin become detached and hang down. The whole of the back is now no more than a red surface...”⁴

I don't think I need to go on. Suffice it to say that many biblical writers believe that Pontius Pilate commanded even more strokes than usual for Jesus' scourging at the pillar, so that he could satisfy the mob's thirst for blood, and somehow avoid crucifying a man he knew was innocent.

Such, Christians believe, was the cost of our redemption. And we have not even begun to list the spiritual and moral sufferings of Christ, which were even greater than the physical sufferings. The main point is that we were not redeemed by fine words, or by an army, or technological advances, or a new financial plan. Nor were we redeemed by holding each other's hands and feeling good about ourselves. But we were redeemed by the God-man suffering alone on a cross, with tremendous physical and moral pain, and giving everything to his Father God. Such was the suffering which brought hope and love to the world, prefigured in the Old Covenant, and which would lead mankind back to God by canceling the slavery of sin. It was this voluntary personal sacrifice that brought true justification to the human race. Speaking of Christ's salvific mission, Pope John Paul II connects Christ's suffering, and indeed all human suffering, with God's love for man: “Christ goes toward His own suffering, aware of its saving power; He goes forward in obedience to the Father, but primarily He is *united*

to the Father in this love with which He has loved the world and man in the world."⁵

That voluntary pain and sacrifice which redeemed each one of us, and indeed the whole world, provides the foundation for all forms of Christian mortification. The sacrifice of the cross at first scandalized and horrified Christ's disciples, but they later learned to love it and embrace it, and to transmit its message to future generations of Christians. They felt themselves so closely united to Christ that they wanted to live his own life, and even die his own death, in order to be freed from sin and to live with him forever. And God granted their desire: the apostles, from what we learn in early Church traditions, were privileged to undergo the same kinds of sufferings as their Master: imprisonment, mockery, banishment, scourging, and crucifixion. And they even learned to rejoice in those sufferings.

THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SAINT PAUL

Perhaps the deepest wellspring for teachings on Christian mortification is found in the life and writings of Saint Paul. He conceives of the spiritual life as requiring a true dying to oneself—to the old man inside—so that the new man can live. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). In numerous passages, he describes the need and the value of Christian mortification, not only to configure oneself with Christ's sufferings, but also to expiate sin from within. In a famous text, which has a taste of modern existentialism about it, he sees the goal of his life and yearns for deliverance from the obstacles in himself that separate him from Christ. It is a yearning for deliverance that every man and woman has felt in some way throughout history. "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:22-24)

We cannot interpret this text as a condemnation of the body as evil in itself; this would be a kind of Manichaeism, which contradicts the goodness of God's creation, along with the consistent teaching tradition of the Church. That tradition has always held that the human body and its appetites are good, but they are disordered by sin. They are the staging ground for the disordered movements of the human soul: lust, jealousy, anger, laziness, vanity, etc. Looking closely at the original text of Rom 7:22-24, cited above, one discovers that St. Paul does not say "deliver me from this body of death," but "deliver me from

the body of this death.” (The Latin *Nova Vulgata*, which is a more exact translation of the original Greek text, says: “*Quis me liberabit de corpore mortis huius?*”) This is not a mere difference in semantics, but there are clear theological implications in the more exact translation. There is a kind of *death* working in the feelings and passions of men that separates them from the true good of their life, and from their own identity; from this they must be liberated.

The root cause of this rebellion goes back to the origins of the human race, with what Catholics call *original sin*, as discussed above: it is that wound in human nature that produces disordered passions and desires. The emotions of anger, fear, sorrow, and love (which includes pleasure-seeking) have all been disrupted by sin, and like unruly rebels they wish to dominate our lives. They are exaggerated and selfish tendencies that need to be controlled and disciplined, and yes, even punished at times.

The Apostle describes just such a punishment when he compares the spiritual life to an athletic contest. To win the contest, one must be hard on oneself, and not give into the softness and weakness of the flesh. The Lord himself had said something very similar to his sleeping apostles, “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mk 14:38). In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul describes his own attitude: “I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” The Latin word for pommel is *castigare*, which has more the connotation of punishing something. The audience he was addressing were weak Christians who were wavering in their faith, and who lived in a city (Corinth) known for its many vices of the flesh. They needed to be spurred to greater penance and mortification for their own good.

Perhaps we could take a brief detour at this point. Is it not true that all human beings—not only Christians—need a degree of mortification to improve themselves? The impulses of pride, greed, and lust affect every individual human being in one form or another from the earliest age. Unless a person knows how to say no to them, and discipline himself, he could soon become a criminal. Therefore no man or woman can grow in virtue or self-control without some kind of self-renunciation; this is the whole point of moral education, which has such an important effect on society as a whole. In addition, though not for moral or spiritual purposes, millions of Americans put their bodies through the most rigorous hardships in order to lose some pounds, and to improve their physical well-being: rigid diets, fasting, tough workouts, jogging in all kinds of weather, painful surgeries that include the

shedding of their own blood. People who suffer from addictions must be prepared for even greater self-denial, especially if their medications can no longer help them. The reason is clear: these addictions—to alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography—violate the good of the human person, and have to be eliminated. It is well known that one of the best ways to eliminate a vice is to develop a good habit that will overcome it: the over-eater must develop temperance, the sexual addict must develop chastity, and the gossip must develop charity. All of these involve a certain violence to oneself for the good of oneself. And the result is truly liberating, in merely human terms.

It is just such a liberation that Saint Paul expresses when he writes of mortifying the body, not for death, but for life. “For if you live according to the flesh you will die,” he writes, “but if by the Spirit you put to death the desires of the body you will live” (Rom 8:13). That strong term “put to death” (Latin *mortificare*), from which the English word mortification comes, is also used in Colossians 3:5, where he speaks of the need to die with Christ in order to be truly alive: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Though he does not mention specific practices of mortification in this text, he is certainly establishing the theological and moral basis for them, not only for himself, but also for generations of Christians to come. He sees corporal mortification as essentially liberating, not something masochistic or sadistic, as the enemies of the Christian life have often asserted. Concerning such people he says succinctly: “the unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him (1 Cor 2:14). These people will not understand sacrifice and self-denial; they will ridicule it, because they do not appreciate its hidden, liberating power. “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” Paul asks dramatically in the same letter. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:20-21, 23-25).

But going back to the saving efficacy of Christ’s own sufferings, Paul sees mortification as a necessary means for bringing forgiveness and love to the world. Certainly, in the contemporary world, pain and sacrifice are also seen as commendable when offered for one’s family or country, or some great social cause. But Paul’s insight goes deeper than this. By connecting his sufferings with Christ, the Apostle is able to bring grace and hope to those around him. In other

words, his own suffering becomes magnified and transformed into the suffering of Christ for the good of souls. In a text much misunderstood, he demonstrates the apostolic power of mortification with Christ, which builds up the Church and leads to a great joy. “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church(Col 1: 24). Corporal mortification in union with Christ truly extends the presence and power of Christ’s sacrifice to the whole world, though in themselves the merits of Christ are already infinite through his passion and death. Thus, without adding to Christ’s merits, the person of sacrifice somehow taps into them through his personal mortification, and becomes a true co-redeemer.

Before considering the development of mortification in Christian tradition, let’s briefly summarize the why and wherefore of corporal mortification in the Bible. Based on what has been said, the following points are clear: Some form of mortification is needed for a person to control the disordered tendencies of original sin within him or her: pride, laziness, greed, anger, lust, etc. This need applies to all human beings, not simply those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. When done with humility, mortification is very effective for winning God’s favor in difficult moments, as seen in many examples from Sacred Scripture, and also for making reparation and atonement for sin. All of these in some way unite with the greatest winning of grace and the greatest act of reparation, done by Jesus Christ on the cross. The most central goal of Christian mortification is to conform oneself voluntarily to the suffering Jesus Christ; this truly liberates the human person, and brings hope and joy to the world. It is also a sign of true conversion. This liberation and suffering is extended in a mysterious way through the suffering of Christ’s people throughout the centuries.

THE CHRISTIAN PRACTICE OF MORTIFICATION THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Guided by the Holy Spirit, true sanctifier of the soul, good Christians throughout history have appreciated and tried to live a generous spirit of self-denial and mortification. In the great classic writings of Christian spirituality, mortification is always considered to be a necessity.⁶ These mortifications have taken different forms: the *passive* mortifications, which are sent by God for the purification of the soul, such as sickness, toil, humiliation, financial problems; the *active* mortifications, which a person voluntarily chooses in order to discipline himself, to win graces, and to conform himself more to the sufferings of

Christ, such as fasting, sitting on an uncomfortable chair, using a hair shirt, taking a cold bath, and many others.⁷ We should also make the distinction between the *internal* mortifications, which have to do with the control of interior thoughts and desires such as pride, lust, jealousy and greed, and the *external* mortifications, which concern the discipline and purification of the bodily senses. Whatever form they take, their purpose is to help the individual to get rid of the “old man” inside and put on the “new man” made in the image of Christ (cf. Eph 4:22-24). In other words, mortification is meant to help a person find a true and lasting happiness, and not be a slave to sin.⁸ It is also an indispensable way of bringing Christ’s redeeming love into people’s lives.

In the early Church, given the Christians’ fervent desire to unite themselves to Jesus Christ even to the point of martyrdom, it was customary for the catechumens preparing for Baptism to fast for forty days, besides many other voluntary sacrifices and penances. In this way they would be prepared to die with Christ in order to rise with him again (cf. Col 3:3-4). Besides the fast days of Lent, other times of special fasting and penance called *Ember Days* were prescribed for Christians in Rome during June, September, and December, in preparation for the great feasts of Pentecost, the Exaltation of the Cross, and Christmas. We know that as part of the sacrament of Reconciliation, severe penances of fasting, sackcloth and ashes, which could last for long periods of time, were given to public sinners in the early Church. There must have also been many personal means of mortification in use, of which we have no historical record; this is perfectly understandable, since the whole idea of personal mortification is that it should be private, and not for public display. This would normally be the case throughout Christian history. Given the heroic endurance and sufferings of so many early Christian men and women, we can affirm that they were persons used to penance and sacrifice in their lives, and probably in very painful forms.⁹ The use of hair shirts can be dated back to the most ancient days of the Church, and was practiced by both priests and lay people. Saints Jerome, Athanasius, and John Damascene all bear witness to its use. The private and discreet use of hair shirts by individual Christians would continue throughout the centuries.

Many fathers of the Church speak of the importance of penance and mortification as a way of atoning for sins, and obtaining the goods that God has promised us.¹⁰ The first monks and hermits in the desert, from the third century onwards, practiced severe austerities. The men and women who joined these communities desired to be purified from their sins, and to practice heroic sacrifices in order to reach holiness. From their example and way of life the first religious

communities were founded, beginning in the fourth century. These were to have a profound influence on the Church for centuries to come.

With the coming of the religious orders, the use of corporal mortification became more standardized and widespread. The hairshirt evolved into a more sanitary form, the chain cilice with sharp points, which continues to be used to this day. The whip (also called the discipline) was at first used for punishment for those who broke the monastery rules, or whose conduct was scandalous. This use of the whip goes back to Old Testament times, when it was reserved for those who broke the Mosaic laws, or who committed other kinds of sins (cf Deut 25:2). The actual practice whipping oneself—self-flagellation—probably goes back to the earliest times of Christianity as a private mortification, but it is first publicly promoted in the tenth and eleventh centuries by Saint Dominic Loricatus and Saint Peter Damian.¹¹ Because of Saint Peter Damian's prestige, the practice spread to different religious orders and associations, not as a punishment for others, but as a mortification for oneself. Among medieval lay saints who used the disciplines were St. Louis IX of France and St. Elizabeth of Thuringia. There were surely many more fervent Catholics in these times who voluntarily gave themselves a sample of Christ's sufferings in this form, and whose names are known to God alone.

Saint Francis of Assisi had such a love for poverty and penance that he was favored by the stigmata, the impressions of the wounds of Christ himself upon his own body. One modern biographer records that before his stigmatization Francis had prayed: "Lord Jesus Christ, I entreat you to give me two graces before I die: first, that in my lifetime I may feel in my body and soul as far as possible the pain You endured in the hour of Your most bitter suffering; and second, that I may feel in my heart as far as possible that love by which You were inflamed to undertake so cruel a suffering for us sinners."¹² God answered his prayer with the gift of the stigmata. Seven centuries later, while he was making his thanksgiving after Mass, one of his spiritual sons, Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, also received the same gift on his hands, feet, and side. It was on September 20th, 1918, just three days after the feast of the Stigmata celebrated by all Franciscans.¹³

Saint Catherine of Siena, who had such a profound influence on the Church of the 14th century, also had a great devotion to the Crucified Lord and his saving blood. At the beginning of her calling to serve God more generously, she wore a sackcloth and would scourge herself three times a day in imitation of Saint Dominic. She also used chains to punish her body, beating herself to the point of blood.¹⁴

Saint Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England under Henry VIII, used to wear a hair shirt beneath his elegant robes of State, according to the testimony of his biographer, Thomas Stapleton, who wrote an account of his life in 1588. Throughout most of his life, he also used a discipline with knotted cords, something not known to his family for many years.¹⁵ In other biographies, it is recorded that he considered the crucifix to be the center of the world and of history. Perhaps most significant about More's penances is the fact that he was not a religious, but a layman. As a fervent Catholic lay person he felt compelled to give to himself the sufferings of Christ not only for the purification of his flesh, but for the good of the Church and souls.

One of the greatest female saints of all times, Saint Teresa of Avila, Foundress of the Discalced Carmelite nuns, wrote, as part of her constitutions, that on certain days of the week her nuns would apply the disciplines to themselves.¹⁶ But she was used to being much harder on herself than on her nuns, and at one point of her spiritual formation gave herself much greater mortifications.¹⁷ Centuries later, another great Carmelite saint, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, used the same means of mortification in her convent. Though she is most known for her "little way" of finding God through small and hidden penances, she was very loyal to the rules of her order and used all the means at her disposal for Christian holiness; this included the use of the discipline and other means of penance.¹⁸ When someone once mentioned that the body naturally stiffens upon the pain of the disciplines, the fervent little Soeur Thérèse was reputed to have said "On the contrary I keep my body supple, so that the discipline may hurt me as much as possible."¹⁹

All the great saints had a true hunger to share in the sufferings of Christ, for love of God and of souls. Saint Jean Marie Vianney, patron saint of all parish priests, who did such good for souls in the small French village of Ars, and who moved visitors from all over Europe to repent and find God again in their lives, used to sleep on the bare boards of the attic of his rectory, and every night would scourge himself with disciplines enhanced by sharp iron points.²⁰ The founder of the Claretians, Saint Anthony Marie Claret, actually describes his practices of corporal mortifications on a day-by-day basis in his famous autobiography;²¹ he also refutes those that he calls "worldly people" for opposing corporal mortification, affirming that they lack the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Self-flagellation, however, was abused and exaggerated by some in the Middle Ages, especially by certain fanatical sects in Italy and Germany in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These individuals would publicly flog themselves to the point of shedding

blood, while proclaiming their sorrow for sin and warning about the fast-approaching end of the world. Some of these groups fell into heretical teachings, denying the power of the sacraments, or trying to form their own kind of religion with their own leaders. They and their organizers were condemned by the hierarchy of the Church repeatedly.

This leads us to an important note in our discussion. While there may be forms of self-inflicted pain that come from psychological illness or other disorders, true Christian mortification is different from these; it is not a form of masochism, as some reductive forms of modern psychology would posit, which have become very popularized. These theories look at pain, and indeed all human suffering, from a limited point of view. They fail to take into account the history of religions in general, the body-soul dynamics of the human person, and also the demonstrated fact that some kinds of pain can truly heal and liberate an individual psychologically, socially, and emotionally.²²

Because of pride and other human weaknesses, corporal mortification can be exaggerated. For this reason, great spiritual directors of Christians throughout the ages have always counseled prudence and moderation in the use of these practices. Certainly fasting, the cilice, and the discipline may be used to conform oneself with the sufferings of Christ, but they should not be exaggerated to the detriment of physical or mental health. In the prudent words of Saint Francis de Sales, author of the highly influential *Introduction to the Devout Life*: “A continual and moderate sobriety is preferable to violent abstinences, practiced occasionally, and mingled with great relaxations...The discipline has a wonderful power to awaken the appetite of devotion when it is used in moderation. The hair shirt mortifies the flesh exceedingly, but the use of it, generally speaking, is not proper either for married persons or delicate constitutions, or for such as have other great pains to support. However, upon some remarkable days of penance, it may be used by the advice of a discreet confessor.”²³ He goes on to state, wisely, that corporal mortifications are ultimately a means, not an end in themselves. Their purpose is the discipline and purification of the disordered tendencies within us, and he mentions specifically the vices of pride, vanity, and impurity. As seen before, it is not the body itself which is bad in these cases, but it is the twisted will and affections that misuse the body. We could add to this that it is precisely through afflicting the body, in a moderate yet effective way, that one can tame these disordered desires, which are often so united to bodily pleasures.

In the sixteenth century, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, speaks of the goal of “continual mortification” in his Constitutions. It is something very much connected with the pursuit

of holiness that he was proposing for the men of his Order. Speaking of specific observances for each of his religious he states: "The better to arrive at this degree of perfection which is so precious in the spiritual life, his chief and most earnest endeavor should be to seek in our Lord his greater abnegation and continual mortification in all things possible."²⁴ Since some in the twentieth century seemed to be wavering or failing in the spirit of mortification, Jesuit Father General Janssens reminded members of the Order in a 1953 letter about the importance of corporal mortification and its intrinsic connection to the "love and following of Christ humiliated and suffering" which was so central to their Founder's spirituality.²⁵ While not imposing specific corporal penances on members of his Society, Saint Ignatius encouraged a generous practice of them, along with proper use of the disciplines.²⁶ He himself, out of love for Christ crucified, gave himself very painful penances.²⁷ One of his greatest disciples, Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, who died of the plague while ministering to the sick, would give himself severe penances even as a young man living in very wealthy conditions.²⁸

Saint Peter Claver, who cared for so many African slaves arriving on boats to Cartagena, Colombia, and brought them into the Church, slept on a bare floor every night, scourged himself and wore a rough hair shirt. He also wore near his body a rough wooden cross "studded with points."²⁹ In writing about his sufferings and about his heroic efforts among African slaves, his biographer states that his sufferings should not be considered as a morbid aberration, but rather the sign of a special vocation which certain saints have, to share more closely in the work of Calvary, and to "offer up a life of heroic mortification as their contribution to the work of atonement for the sins of the world."³⁰

After the 17th century, the onset of "Enlightenment" rationalism brought about an attack on religious belief, and a decline in spiritual practices in general. As in pagan times, man became the measure of all things: what he thinks, what he feels, what he desires were considered more important than the objective truth about himself. Original sin and its effects were dismissed as vestiges of a superstitious religion which tried to restrain man from reaching his potential. In a similar way, with the coming of the industrial revolution, it was thought that man could liberate himself through the establishment of a new social order, and with scientific and technological control over nature. The creation of anesthetics in the mid-nineteenth century gave him a remarkable liberation from pain during surgeries and other illnesses, something his ancestors never experienced. It is no wonder

that the entire practice of mortification and penance would gradually become misunderstood and even ridiculed. If man is truly the summit of the universe, why does he have to deny himself, much less inflict pain and suffering on himself? From here it is an easy jump to the modern society of consumerism and comfort, where any kind of suffering or inconvenience is rejected almost with horror.

Cartesian idealism also makes existence, including bodily existence, completely dependent upon thought; this is the logical consequence of Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*, which was initially meant as a method for obtaining absolute mental certainty, but which quickly became the foundational premise for modern philosophy in its consideration of man and the world. Transferred to the spiritual realm, this would mean that any progress in the spiritual life will depend only upon one's thought or intellectual experience. The bodily senses will therefore have little to do with sanctification or perfection. This is truly a disastrous dichotomy, both philosophically and spiritually, since it is obvious that man's nature is really an integral union of body and soul. An over-intellectualization or rationalization of man eliminates the need for corporal mortification, since the body is considered to be inferior or of small account. As a result, many modern spiritualities, like the New Age, are really neo-Gnostic since they do not integrate the sanctification of the body with the soul.

Furthermore, the ideas of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century began to undermine the need for Christian penance and mortification. First of all, if, as Martin Luther asserted, one is saved by faith alone, there is little need for penitential works. They would be superfluous and foolish. And secondly, if, as Luther taught, human nature was made intrinsically corrupt and degenerated by original sin, it is useless to practice penance and mortification since we can never be truly purified or cleansed from within. The earthly body will always be dominated by concupiscence and sinful desire, without hope of transformation.

Yet despite the pervasiveness of these ideas, the need to be liberated from one's lower tendencies and disorders remains present in every human being, and it always will, as long as there are men and women tainted by original sin. The remedy for this is the power of Christ's sacrificial death that continues to operate throughout the centuries, as the supreme model of reconciliation with God, and as the cause of the interior freedom and renewal that all people desire. Just after the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI, who himself, according to some reports, wore a hairshirt for many years, felt obliged to affirm the need for personal mortification in his famous Apostolic Constitution

entitled the *Poenitemini*: “The necessity of mortification of the flesh stands clearly revealed if we consider the fragility of our nature, in which, since Adam’s sin, flesh and spirit have contrasting desires. This exercise of bodily mortification—far removed from any form of stoicism—does not imply a condemnation of the flesh which the Son of God deigned to assume. On the contrary, mortification aims at the liberation of man, who often finds himself, because of concupiscence, almost chained by his own senses.”³¹ Throughout the writing, he continually connects the reality of penance with real personal conversion from sin (*metanoia*), so prevalent in both the Old and New Testaments.

Even in our materialistic age, the tradition of mortifying oneself for love of Christ and others continues. This generous self-denial does not take on rigid forms, but adapts itself to the life and condition of each person: love has a certain creativity and ingenuity. For instance, besides sacrifices such as fasting and abstinence from meat, which Catholics practice on certain days of Lent, many present-day priests and lay people regularly deprive themselves of legitimate comforts, and practice self-denial in small things such as keeping good posture while alone, controlling their imagination or curiosity, and guarding their speech and their sight. These mortifications are not meant to be seen publicly, but only before God, as Christ himself stated: “When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:16-18).

Recently, the media and certain popular writers have tried, quite unjustly, to exploit the private devotional practices of certain Christians, by exaggerating them, or making them the object of “controversial” news stories. Knowingly or not, they distort the context of free religious commitment and generous love in which those mortifications are done. Hidden and silent sacrifice has a powerful and positive effect on the human soul, which a secular culture cannot understand. The real truth is that voluntary mortifications are not “secretive” or “sinister,” or the results of a sick or masochistic mentality, as we have discussed previously. For instance one generally thinks of Pope John XXIII (who initiated the Second Vatican Council) as a man known for his warmth and humanity. But it is significant that right from the beginning of his vocation, as a young seminarian, he made the resolution to mortify his feelings and discipline his sight,

particularly regarding women. This careful following of his spiritual advisor's direction greatly helped him in his priestly life, and did not make him any less natural or open in dealing with others. He also struggled against his pride, as he rose in the ecclesiastical world, frequently recalling to himself his humble origin, and avoiding the temptation to look down upon his village relatives.³²

Saint Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei who died in 1975, practiced many personal mortifications as he began this institution in the Church during the late 1920's and the early 30's, always under the guidance of his spiritual director. This included fasting from food and water, using the discipline and cilice, and numerous other sacrifices. He called mortification "the prayer of the senses,"³³ since by it the body in its own way is able to adore God humbly, and make atonement for sin to him. In order to increase the spiritual power of his sacrifices, he ministered to the poor and sick in Madrid's slums and hospitals,³⁴ and after caring for them, he asked them to offer their sufferings for the work he was undertaking. In this way, he received the divine graces that he needed to begin Opus Dei, which now serves the Church in some sixty countries. He recognized that it was precisely by union with the sufferings of Christ, and by being souls of expiation, that many people could become saints, and help bring the truth and love of Christ to the middle of the world.

Yet throughout his life and in his writings, Saint Josemaria did not stress extraordinary mortifications as a path to holiness. He taught that in normal circumstances the most effective way for gaining grace is through the persevering fulfillment of one's duties, especially one's daily work, with all the effort and sacrifice that this involved; thus work becomes something sanctifying and sanctifiable. In his teaching he favored the kind of mortification that a person could do silently and without fanfare, usually in small ordinary things, such as being cheerful with others. From the minor irritations of each day to the big disappointments of life, he would often affirm that the best mortification was to smile. "If things go well," he writes in his first book, entitled *The Way*, "let's rejoice, blessing God who makes them prosper. And if they go wrong? Let's rejoice, blessing God, who allows us to share the sweetness of his cross."³⁵

The Founder of Opus Dei was not the only canonized saint of the twentieth century who recognized the value of voluntary mortification. Saint Edith Stein, renowned intellectual and martyr during World War II, wrote of what she termed the *Kreuzwissenschaft*, the Science of the Cross, and that it must be something active, taking root and actually filling a person's life: "If we speak of the Science of

the Cross, this is not to be understood as science in the ordinary sense: it is no mere theory. It is indeed known truth—a theology of the Cross—but it is living, actual, and active (*wirkliche und wirksame*) truth: it is placed in the soul like a seed, takes root in her and grows, gives the soul a certain character, and forms her in all she does or leaves undone, so that through this she herself shines forth and is recognized.”³⁶ Edith Stein’s love for the crucified Christ, which would culminate in her martyrdom at Auschwitz, is well expressed by her chosen professed name as a Carmelite nun in April of 1934: Teresa Benedicta a Cruce, Theresa, Blessed by the Cross. She wrote a marvelous poem dedicated to the suffering of the Mother of Jesus, the *Mater Dolorosa*, and in one particular line she tries to express the power and fruitfulness of Mary’s faithful love at the cross of her son: “And with the lifeblood of your bitter pains, you purchased life anew for every soul.”³⁷

Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, in her heroic service for the poorest of the poor—especially the old, the needy, and the sick—exemplifies the complete gift of self in union with Christ. One of her biographers, who was spiritual advisor for many years to her religious Congregation, the Missionaries of Charity, describes it thus: “Mother puts before her nuns this ideal: to quench the thirst of Jesus crucified for souls. To do this they should be ready to suffer with Christ and even wish to be similar to Him and to suffer for the redemption of souls.”³⁸ She, like Saints Catherine of Siena and Therese of Lisieux, also went through a “dark night” of the soul for many years without receiving any spiritual consolations, but she bravely offered it all to her crucified Lord: “If my pain and suffering, my darkness and separation give you a drop of consolation, my own Jesus, do with me as you wish. Imprint on my soul and life the suffering of your heart. I want to satiate your thirst with every single drop of blood that you can find in me.”³⁹

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Founder of the International Association of the Knights of Mary Immaculate, who was executed by lethal injection in Auschwitz after he volunteered to give his life in the place of a condemned prisoner, had a great desire to suffer and offer his life out of love for the Blessed Mother. Ever since a boyhood vision involving a conversation with her, he had the conviction that Mary had heard his prayer, and that he would be a martyr.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, years before entering Auschwitz he stated that he would like to die on a feast of Our Lady and “to be ground to dust for the Immaculate Virgin and have the dust be blown away by the wind all over the world.” He was actually killed on the vigil of the Assumption (August 14th, 1941), and on August 15th his remains were cremated, with the ashes blowing from the chimney of an Auschwitz crematorium.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

No matter what the century or circumstances, the root cause and purpose of Christian mortification is love of God and neighbor. The entire history of the people of God, including the Jewish tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures, supports both the need and effectiveness of voluntary suffering offered for a higher cause. This is evidenced constantly in the history of the Catholic Church, not only in the New Testament and in theological writings, but also in the daily lives and practices of her faithful sons and daughters.

Mortification is not meant to be an end in itself, but should always be united to an integral effort to seek holiness, which includes prayer and good works. It is not motivated by pride, fear, or self-hatred. A certain amount of mortification, including corporal mortification, is necessary for every human being to become virtuous, and to overcome harmful passions or instincts. In the Christian tradition, this self-denial has an even greater significance. By renouncing inferior loves or pleasures, a person opens himself or herself to the all-embracing Love of God and becomes truly Christ-like. United with Christ on the cross, he or she is truly liberated from egotism and self-indulgence, thus participating in the redemption of the human race by bringing love, hope, and forgiveness to many souls. As we have seen in this essay, this is truly the secret of the saints, and those striving to be saints: they are like the seed that dies to itself, rendering great fruit.

Notes

1. Cf. A. Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life. A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (Tournai, Belgium: Desclée and Co., 1932), p. 364.

2. In later years, the sackcloth would become the hair shirt, which was a garment of goats' hair produced in the region of Cilicia, now part of Northern Turkey. In Medieval times, the hair shirt took a more sanitary version when it became a chain with sharp points. This is also called the cilice. Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1910), pp. 113-114.

3. See St. Augustine, *Commentary on Psalm 6, 2-3*; CCL 39, 766.

4. See Pierre Barbet, *A Doctor at Calvary* (Harrison, NY: Roman Catholic Books, 1953), ch. 12, pp. 163-164.

5. Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (“*Salvifici Doloris*”), St. Peter’s in Rome, Feb.11, 1984, n.16 par.3. In the previous paragraph, he states that precisely by means of the cross, Christ strikes “at the roots of evil, planted in the history of man and in human souls.”

6. “We cannot attain to union with God without mortification, without detaching ourselves from the inordinate love of creatures. This necessity follows from what we have said of the nature of perfection, which consists in the love of God unto sacrifice and the immolation of self.” See A. Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life*, p.366. The great spiritual classic by Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, which has inspired souls of all centuries, puts it even more directly: “In proportion as thou dost violence to thyself the greater progress wilt thou make.” (Bk I, C.25) *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, published in 1967, two years after the Second Vatican Council, states that “mortification, or what Saint Paul calls the crucifixion of the flesh with its vices and concupiscences (Gal.5: 24), has become a distinguishing mark of those who are Christ’s. All theologians agree that mortification is necessary for salvation because man is so strongly inclined to evil by the threefold concupiscence of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which, if not resisted, must lead to grievous sin.” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume IX, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), p. 1153.

7. In his discussion of the severe mortifications of Saint Dominic, who scourged himself three times a night to preserve absolute chastity, the well-known writer of *Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, R. Garrigou-Lagrange, also speaks of a more moderate use of the discipline that ordinary Christians can do: “Doubtless such mortification (that of St. Dominic) presupposes exceptional graces; but there are certain austerities that we can all practice instead of seeking our own comfort. For example, the habit of taking the discipline preserves us from many faults, keeps alive the love of austerity, expiates many negligences, and helps us deliver souls from the bonds they have made for themselves. (R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Volume I (New York and London: Herder Book Co., 1949), p.335. Note that the term, “taking the discipline,” means applying a small knotted rope to one’s own flesh.

8. “Mortification is necessary for all, and especially for beginners, until they succeed in dominating their passions by subjecting the flesh to the spirit. In addition to their reparatory aspect as regards past sins, bodily

mortifications have two lofty goals: the immolation of self in the imitation of Christ and a positive contribution to the Mystical Body by means of the apostolate of suffering. These two purposes pertain to the saints as much or more than to imperfect souls, for no one is excused from practicing bodily mortification in one form or another. St. Vincent de Paul says rightly: “He who has little regard for bodily mortification, under the pretext that interior mortifications are much more perfect, demonstrates very clearly that he is not mortified either interiorly or exteriorly.” A. Royo and J. Aumann, *The Theology of Christian Perfection* (Dubuque, Iowa: Priory Press, 1962), pp. 293-294.

9. See Phillip Hughes, *A History of the Church* Vol. 1 (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), pp. 140-41.

10. See, for instance, St. Cyprian, who chides his reader for avoiding reparation and suffering for his sins, even though Christ the Redeemer had suffered so much for him (Letter 56 to Cornelius, sent. 6, Tric. T. 1. p. 296). St. John Chrysostom in Hom. 17, ad Hebr., sent. 150, Tric. T. 6, p. 328 speaks of the positive results of penance and mortification; Pope Saint Leo the Great deals with the mortification of both body and spirit in Sermo 90, c. 1, sent. 68, Tric. T. 8, p. 399.

11. Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VI, (New York, 1909), p. 93.

12. Myles Schmitt, O.F.M. Cap. *Francis of the Crucified* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), p. 64.

13. Nesta de Robeck, *Padre Pio*, (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 44-45.

14. Igino Giordani, *Catherine of Siena—Fire and Blood*, translated by Thomas J. Tobin (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1959), p. 19.

15. Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, first published in 1588, (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 69.

16. Cf. *Constituciones de las Carmelitas Descalzas* (1562-1607) (Roma: Teresianum, 1995), chapter XVIII, p. 47.

17. When asked by her confessor to give herself greater penances, one of her contemporary biographers records the following: “She wore a

shirt of tin plate pierced like a grate, which left the tender flesh of her body streaked with wounds. She very frequently took disciplines, not with the whips or cords used by ordinary penitents, but sometimes with nettles, sometimes with a bunch of keys, which she laid over her back until the blood flowed.” These penances she describes in an off-handed way as “not very delightful” and moves on to speak of other things, so as not to call attention to herself. (William Thomas Walsh, *Saint Teresa of Avila, A Biography* [Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co,1943], p. 126.)

18. See Fr. Henry Petitot, OP, *Saint Teresa of Lisieux*, Burns Oates and Washbourne LTD., London, 1927 pp. 37-38. He also reports that “Soeur Therese kept the strictest fasts with the perfection she brought to everything. She took the discipline three times a week, scourging herself with all the strength and speed of which she was capable, smiling at the crucifix through the tears which bedewed her eyelashes” (p.37).

19. *Ibid*, p.38.

20. Abbe Frances Trochu, *The Cure of Ars* (Westminster, MD Newman Press, 1950), p. 120.

21. “Besides mortifying myself in sight, hearing, speech, taste, and smell, I also strove to practice some particular acts of mortification. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I took the discipline. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays I wore the cilice. If circumstances were such that I couldn’t take the discipline, I would do some equivalent penance such as praying with my arms outstretched in the form of a cross or kneeling on my fingers.” Cf. *Saint Anthony Mary Claret, Autobiography, Section on Mortification* (Chicago: Claretian Publications, 1976, n.411, p.135. Edited by Jose Maria Vinas, C.M.F., Director Studium Claretianum, Rome, 1976.

22. For an interesting discussion of these questions, along with a study of the defects of various modern masochistic theories, particularly of Freudian origin, see Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.85-89 It should be noted that this book, though not specifically Christian in theme or purpose, presents certain positive aspects of self-induced pain from a study of world religions and neuro-psychology.

23. Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1950) Section XXIII, p.134. Despite his measured and prudent words, Saint Francis de Sales himself practiced intense mortifications for the love of God and good of souls. Though as a bishop he had very good quarters and fine clothing, he would often wear a hair shirt beneath his robes. He would also deprive himself of sleep voluntarily and apply the disciplines to the point of blood. (See Louis Sempe, *Saint Francis de Sales* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1932 pp. 44-45).

24. See Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St.Louis, 1970, ch.4, n.46. Translated, with an Introduction and a Commentary, by George E. Ganss, S.J.

25. See *Letter on Continual Mortification* by Jesuit Father General John Baptist Janssens (Woodstock College Press, 1953), p. 5.

26. “ What seems to be most suitable and safe in the matter of penance is that the pain should be felt by the flesh but not penetrate to the bones, so that it may give pain, and not cause infirmity. For this purpose it seems better to scourge oneself with small cords, which cause pain outwardly, than to do so in other ways which might cause serious inward infirmity. “ See *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, with a Commentary by W.H. Longridge (London: A.R. Mombray & Co, 1955), pp. 74-75.

27. For a description of the hair shirt and the heavy iron chain that he wore, see Christopher Hollis, *Saint Ignatius* (New York: Harper, 1931), p. 41.

28. These included scourging of himself three times a week, fasting to the point of eating nothing, and wearing a belt of spurs on his flesh. See F.S. O’Connor, S.J. *Life of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga* (New York: Saint Francis Xavier’s College, 1891), pp.59-60.

29. Arnold Lunn, *A Saint in the Slave Trade—Peter Claver* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p.204.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

31. Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Constitution Poenitemini* (February 17, 1966), chapter II.

32. See Paul Johnson, *Pope John XXIII* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), pp. 11-12 (section “Rules of Life”).

33. See Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1973), n.78, pp. 179-180.

34. See the biography of St. Josemaria in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* Vol.I—The Early Years (New York: Scepter Press, 2001) pp. 338-340 .

35. *From The Way* (New York: Scepter Press, New York, 1982), n.658. The first printing of *The Way* in English was in 1954. In keeping with their Founder’s spirit, members of Opus Dei try to live a sober and mortified lifestyle. This is done primarily though seeking small sacrifices in the course of the day, particularly related to charity, living the human virtues, and working well. Each tries to mortify the flesh by small sacrifices that curb the appetites such as for food, drink, and comfort. Besides the corporal mortifications prescribed by the Church for fasting in Lent, some of the members—not the married ones—can freely use the cilice or discipline, or do other penances, under proper guidance and spiritual direction.

36. Hilda C. Graef, *The Scholar and the Cross* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1955), p.208.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

38. E. Le Joly, *We do it for Jesus* (Mother Theresa and her Missionaries of Charity) (Delhi, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.106.

39. Quoted by Father Raniero Cantalamessa, *2nd Advent Meditation for Pope John Paul II and members of the Roman Curia*, note 14 from www.zenit.org (Dec.28th, 2003).

40. He told his mother after his vision: “Then the Virgin Mary appeared to me holding in her hands two crowns, one white and another red. She looked at me with love and she asked me if I would like to have them. The white meant that I would remain pure and the red that I would be a martyr.” He answered her that he wanted them both. (cf. Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* [New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000], p. 200).

41. *Ibid.*, page 210.