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# The Beauty of the Saints and Christian Mortification

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05/09/2015

## What is Christian Mortification?

Mortification is a controversial topic today, and to understand it correctly we need to start with two premises. The first, which is essential, is that the body plays a central and

irreplaceable role in Christian life. Christianity is not merely a philosophy or a spiritual worldview: Christians are composed of body and soul. Without the body there is no Christian and no Christianity.

The second premise is that mortification has a positive motive beyond itself. If not, it is masochism, not Christian mortification.

Christianity does not seek pain for pain's sake. We understand the mortification of the body best in the image of the saints, in John Paul II's smile of Mother Teresa's peace.

With these two premises in mind, we see that there are two fundamental reasons for Christian mortifications: self-control and self-improvement.

## **Self-Control and Service**

The body manifests the person: through it, he expresses his feelings, his freedom, and his love. The person

is his body, but not only his body. His inner world is not made merely of tissues and liquids, but of thoughts, loves, and feelings. That is why the Greeks said that man is in a sense all things, a microcosm, a world.

In the human being, in addition to the biological level, there are psychological and spiritual levels. Although the person is a unity, we all feel the pull of diverse forces, tensions that lead us to different objectives; we experience the need to integrate and control ourselves.

For example, I may feel like smoking (a physical impulse), but I know (here the intelligence comes into play) that it is unhealthy or that it is prohibited and I could be fined, so I decide what to do and carry out my decision (the action of the will). To control and direct all the forces and tensions in my life, so they are integrated harmoniously around my

personal identity, I need to educate my intelligence and strengthen my will: I need to mortify myself.

Mortification is the way to achieve self-control or mastery over the body, and it can be described as the voluntary denial of an appetite (I feel like smoking, but I don't), or the voluntary affirmation of something I don't feel attracted to (I don't like this food, but it's what has been prepared, so I eat it). Mortification of the body, corporal mortification, is a free act forged by a decision of the will informed by the intelligence, counteracting the appetites or inclinations of the body in some concrete way.

Why do we need to control our bodies — or, more accurately, why do we *seek* to control our bodies? There are many possible reasons, including something as simple as politeness, trying not to disturb others' peaceful

social relations by my behaviour. The fundamental reason, however, is to develop our capacity to serve, to be able to give more.

This is easily illustratable. In the world today, we tend to mortify our bodies mainly in relation to our professional work. Those who work outside endure the cold and the heat, those who work in customer service keep smiling even when they are tired at the end of the day, and all of us struggle to get up early in the morning, or to focus on difficult or stressful project.

We all mortify our bodies to fulfill other duties, especially for our families and friends. Nearly every day we have to mortify ourselves to take care of others. We are not alone in the world, and our relationships with others often lead us to put their things ahead of our own, mortifying our personal inclinations.

Perhaps the most severe corporal mortification in the modern world is that demanded of athletes, who are always pushing their bodies' limits. They need to mortify their bodies to the point of exhaustion in training; they follow a rigorous diet; and they keep to a demanding schedule that prevents them from engaging in many other activities. All of this is voluntary, but it takes a lot of mortification.

We sometimes justify what professional athletes suffer by explaining that they are the best in their fields and represent the excellence of humanity: these elites are chosen for glory and can therefore be asked for an incredible amount of effort and mortification while the rest of us watch on TV. But according to the Christian faith, we have all been chosen for glory and God looks at each of us as a favourite son.

This is our bridge to the subject at hand: Christian corporal mortification is a type of exercise or training to control the body in order to serve God and others better. Our society understands mortification for work, personal relationships, and sport, but sometimes fails to appreciate mortification for spiritual reasons. Christians renounce some physical goods in order to better appreciate spiritual goods.

The ideal of loving God above all things and others as oneself does not come about by itself and requires personal involvement, struggle, and serious effort. We need to mortify our bodies in order to give the best of ourselves. This is not only because we have disordered tendencies that lead to ruin and must be controlled, although this is true: the desire for satisfaction and enjoyment, disordered by sin, leads to impulses that would take us away from inner peace and

communion with God, if we acted on them. (For instance, a disordered appetite for food or drink, envy, criticism and intolerance, laziness, etc.) But we also need mortification because the excellence of the Christian ideal entails the practice of virtue, and that is not possible without imposing some unpleasant things on ourselves, taking away our own comfort and rest in order to serve the others.

In order to advance in the Christian life, as in work, personal relationships, and sport, we need to mortify ourselves. Christian mortification, however, has the greatest possible motivation: love for God and other people.

## **Self-Improvement and Creativity**

But let's move on to the second point. The other fundamental reason for corporal mortification is self-improvement, beauty. This beauty is



not some superfluous adornment, but really essential, transcendental beauty. The body expresses the person, and so the body's beauty is always something individual, proper to each person, fleeing from uniformity and standardized criteria.

Physical beauty requires mortification. At the most basic level, a healthy body requires a healthy lifestyle, which means self-denial. Many people undergo invasive surgeries, painful piercings, and uncomfortable clothing to beautify their bodies.

For Christians, because the body manifests the person, the beauty of the body comes through in the smile, in service (often heroic), in the way we share poverty with the poor and illness with the sick, etc. The beauty of the person is manifested in visible ways (in, for instance, the corporal works of mercy). The body is

animated by the spirit, the soul, and so beauty is also spiritual. There is a spiritual beauty in some people who are chronically ill, for example, that supersedes simply physical attractiveness.

Christian corporal mortification has always been understood in this framework of the spiritual beauty of the body. It is directly related to the Passion of Jesus Christ: it is about adorning the body like the Crucified Lord. The traditional use of corporal mortifications of the cilice or disciplines is linked to this desire to unite the body spiritually with Christ's wounds and sufferings, sharing Jesus' pains in our own bodies.

To understand this, we need to understand Christ's sacrifice. His Passion, and Christian mortification, are not mere punishment. Christ suffers brutal violence from the

soldiers and the people: He is captured, insulted, scourged, crowned with thorns, made to carry the Cross, and crucified. But the reality is deeper; Christ transforms the brutal violence of humanity throughout history into the total love of God and man. Christ does not simply suffer the violence of someone condemned to death. He who is master of His life, offers it for the love of humanity, the sinners, the marginalized, the poor. This is why the Crucified One is beautiful: He expresses through His mortified body the crown of selfless and total love for God and others.

Christ suffers because He wants to, and He wants to because through His suffering He unites Himself to each person who suffers, accompanying, sustaining, and giving them hope. The Christian cannot be asked to renounce the cross ("the sign of the

Christian is the holy cross"), nor to renounce the crucifix.

The suffering of the Christian, and within it, bodily mortification, is the manifestation of a deeper reality. It is a sign of his solidarity and closeness to the suffering of all men and women throughout history and in his own life. It is not a punishment of the body, as if it were bad or despicable, but quite the opposite. It makes the person more beautiful, since it expresses in his flesh the love of solidarity and union with Christ and with suffering, needy, marginalized, and forgotten humanity.

Over the centuries, traditional practices of corporal mortification have proven themselves effective paths to this kind of beauty. They are means for today as much as they were in the past, following the example of Christ and of the saints before us. It is not easy to dedicate

one's life to God and others, before and above personal desires, but it is always worthwhile.

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