

# Christian Mortification— Praying in Body and Soul

What is the true meaning of "mortification" in our Christian life. An article by Jutta Burggraf (PhD in Theology from the University of Navarre), who passed away in 2010.

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Some things are very difficult to understand, approachable only through faith and love. Why did

Christ die on a Cross? Was this horrible Passion necessary to free us from our inner darkness? Certainly not. God could have forgiven our sins in a thousand different ways, or simply not at all.

## **The Loving Madness of Christ**

Our Lord probably chose the most impressive way of all, the one that most clearly manifests the madness of his great love. He became a man—just like one of us except for sin—sharing in the joys and sorrows of our life to the end.

In spite of His eternal omnipotence, He allowed himself—freely!—to be humiliated, flagellated, spit on, ridiculed, crowned with thorns and nailed to a tree. Why? Perhaps to show us that He is capable of doing and giving *everything* for us, like a friend who dies to save another. And to convince us, once and for all, that we have an immense value: our

destiny is not indifferent to God. His superabundant generosity is a mystery of Love.

## **Christ Died so that We May Live**

Does this mean that we Christians have to live now in a severe and rigorous way, that we should not enjoy the good things in life? Quite the contrary! Christ died so that we may truly live. He suffered so that we may be happy. He has broken our chains so that we may announce His kingdom of freedom. The work of salvation should be reflected in our faces, looks, smiles and laughter, serenity and strength, understanding and friendship, our sincere and generous fraternity.

Those who feel and experience that they are accepted and deeply loved cannot but transmit love and joy to others. And they want to be ever closer to the Love of their life. We notice this in human love, sometimes

with a clarity that dazzles us. Think, for example, of the German women who voluntarily accompanied their Jewish husbands to the Nazi concentration camps, or the mother who would close her eyes for most of the day to perceive the world in the same way as her blind son.

## **Sharing Christ's Fate**

Something similar occurs to those who truly love Christ. Christians want to share in His destiny. Isn't it true that two people are more strongly united when they share great suffering together than when they celebrate a wonderful feast together? That is why Christians also want to be on the Cross and have no qualms about climbing Mount Calvary.

How do they do this? They try to courageously accept the many problems and sufferings in their daily life; they use them as the

material from which they make a cross, *their* cross, the one Christ carries with them. That is how God usually acts with His friends.

## **Corporal Mortification: an Ancient Christian Tradition**

Those who love Christ deeply are capable of going to great extremes and even risk being called crazy. They want to identify more and more fully with the Beloved, who allowed Himself—freely!—to be crucified. Hence, following an ancient tradition, they also freely seek out "corporal mortification," denying their body—for example by fasting or an austere pilgrimage.

What they love, of course, is not the Cross itself, but the Crucified One. They don't want their life to be easier than His. If people scourged and spat on Christ, they don't want to be honored. They don't want to live in comfort and luxury, but with Him

and like Him. This is the first and most important reason for corporal mortification.

## **Body and Soul: Sorting out the Passions and Educating the Senses**

There is a second reason, rooted in our human nature: we are body and soul. All our spiritual activities are deeply linked to our physical life. However, human nature is weakened by sin; we are disordered and tempted. It would be useless to refuse to face this reality and try to ignore it or repress it. Such an effort would lead only to the rigidity of an inhuman stoicism. But it would be equally wrong to give in to all our disordered desires. We all need to learn to accept ourselves as we are. When something in our heart is an obstacle to love, we need to acknowledge this with sincerity, and not simply try to hide or repress it.

A Christian wants to clean his or her "inner house" each day, so that God may dwell in it ever more fully. This is the other aspect of corporal mortification (which, by the way, is an unfortunate expression; it is not a matter of "killing" anything or anyone, as the Latin root of the word "mortification" implies," but of ordering the passions and educating the senses.) It is important that each person finds their own way of acting, seeking the best way to grow in love and overcome temptations.

While the inner struggle against disordered desires is certainly more important, we should not neglect the outer struggle that prepares us for it. Perhaps the correct meaning of corporal mortification was distorted and exaggerated in the past, and that is why mortification is rejected by broad sectors of society today. In reality, asceticism should always be

lived in an intelligent, prudent and timely way.

To put order into the inner chaos that we can harbor within, we need to act out of love for God, without fear or scruples or formalism, with great trust and freedom, and with a generous heart. It is a way of praying —praying in body and soul.

## **A More Personal Encounter with Christ, with Freedom and Trust**

Sincere struggle leads to a more personal encounter with Christ. The aim of our struggle is to grow in love for God, not our own perfection. We shouldn't act with the fear of never doing anything wrong. What is important is the courage to always get up again when we fall and start out anew. God is more pleased with us when we raise our wounded heart to Him than when we pretend to show Him all our ascetic achievements and moral perfection.

When our struggle is humble, our heart expands. Our Lord, who wants to dwell in us, lets us share not only in His Cross but also in His Resurrection. He gives us the light and strength to overcome our rigid narrow-mindedness, our blindness to the needs of others, and to see our own limitations and needs. In a word, we become capable of true love.

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