

Introduction to Ascetical Theology

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1. Introduction

Ascetics, as a branch of theology, may be briefly defined as the scientific exposition of Christian asceticism. Asceticism (*askesis, askein*), taken in its literal significance, means a polishing, a smoothing or refining. The Greeks used the word to describe the exercises of the athletes, through which the powers dormant in the body were developed and strengthened to full potential.

Now the life of the Christian is, in the words of Christ, a struggle for the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 11:12). St. Paul, uses the picture of the Greek pentathlon (1 Cor. 9:24) to graphically illustrate the spiritual battle to be waged in order to enter God's kingdom. A Life of discipleship based upon a Christian moral ethic is implied. Towards this end the Christian believers adhere to rigorous ethical practices. Their aim is Christian perfection leading union with God.

Human nature having been weakened by original sin and ever inclining toward what is evil, this end cannot be reached except at the price of overcoming, with God's grace, many and serious obstacles. The moral struggle involves several stages. The first is removing the obstacles of sin, that is the evil concupiscences, which effects of original sin serve to try and test man (Trid., Sess. V, De peccato originali). Paul refers to this first stage as the putting off of 'the old man' (Eph. 4:22). The stage is to 'put on the new man' according to the image of God (Eph. 4:24). The new man is Christ. A disciple must configure himself or herself to Christ, who alone is the Way, which is the Truth and the Life (Jn. 14:6). The second stage require the gift of divine grace. Its foundation is laid in baptism, whereby we are adopted as sons of God through the imparting of sanctifying grace. The sanctifying grace received at baptism must be cultivated through the practice of theological virtues of faith, hope and love; the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and actual grace. Ascetics is the systematic treatise of the striving after Christian perfection. It may be defined as the scientific guide to the acquisition of Christian perfection, which consists in expressing within ourselves, with the help of Divine grace, the image of Christ, by practicing the Christian virtues, and applying the means given for overcoming the obstacles of sin.

2. Nature of Christian Perfection

For St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure, emphatically maintained that the ideal of asceticism which was upheld by them was the ideal of the Catholic past, of the Fathers, of Christ Himself, and that bodily asceticism has not an absolute, but only a relative, value. For St. Thomas it is a 'means to an end,' to be used with discretion. For St. Bonaventure practices such as asceticism 'prepare, foster, and preserve perfection' (*ad perfectionem præparans et ipsam promovens et conservans*; "Apolog. pauperum", V, c. viii). In proof of his thesis, St. Bonaventure shows that to put an absolute value on physical asceticism would lead to Manichæism. Christ, the ideal of Christian perfection, was less austere in fasting than John the Baptist. Catholics affirm the importance of ascetic practices for the acquisition of Christian perfection, because they remove obstacles and for the liberation of man's moral forces. For Catholics, asceticism has a positive character.

The essence of Christian perfection is love. St. Thomas (*Opusc. de perfectione christ.*, c. ii) calls that perfect which is conformable to its end (*quod attingit ad finem ejus*). Now, the end of man is God, and what unites him, even on earth, most closely with God is love (1 Cor. 6:17; 1 Jn. 4:16). All the other virtues are subservient to love or are its natural prerequisites, as faith and hope.

Love is 'the bond of perfection' (Col. 3:14) and the fulfillment of the law (Rom.13:8). Writing to the Corinthians, the Apostolic Father Clement of Rome says (1 Cor. 49:1): 'It was love that made all the elect perfect; without love nothing is acceptable to God' (*en te agape ateleiothesan pantes oi eklektoi tou theou dica agapes ouden euareston estin to theo*; Funk, "Patr. apost.", p. 163). St. Ignatius of Antioch refers to faith as the light and love as the way, love being the end and aim of faith ("Ad Ephes.", ix, xiv; "Ad Philad.", ix; "Ad Smyrn.", vi). According to the "Didache", love of God and of one's neighbour is the beginning of the "way of life" (c. i). The 'Pastor' of Hermas argues that 'a life for God' (*zoe to theo*) is the sum-total of human existence. To these Apostolic Fathers may be added St. Ambrose (*De fuga sæculi*, c. iv, 17; c. vi, 35-36) and St. Augustine, who regards perfect justice as tantamount to perfect love.

However, though perfection is essentially love, it is not true that any degree of love is sufficient to constitute moral perfection. The ethical perfection of the Christian consists in the perfection of love, which requires such a disposition 'that we can act with speed and ease even though many obstacles obstruct our path' (Mutz, "Christl. Ascetik", 2nd ed., Paderborn, 1909). The passions have been subdued in order to acquire such a spiritual disposition of the soul. Unfortunately, owing to the weakness of human nature and the presence of the evil concupiscence (*fomes peccati*: Trid., Sess. VI, can. xxiii), a perfection that would exclude every defect cannot be attained in this life without a special privilege (cf. Prov. 20:9; Ecc. 7:21; Jam. 3:2). For St. Bernard: 'An unflagging zeal for advancing and a continual struggle for perfection is itself perfection' (*Indefessus proficiendi studium et iugis conatus ad perfectionem, perfectio reputatur*; "Ep. ccliv ad Abbatem Guarinum").

Since perfection consists in love, it is not the privilege of one particular state, but may be, and has as a fact been, attained in every state of life – priests, religious, laity. St. Thomas has pointed out that perfect men are to be found outside the religious orders and imperfect men within them (Summa theol., II-II, Q. clxxxiv, a. 4).

The ideal, to which the Christian should conform and towards which he should strive with all his powers both natural and supernatural, is Jesus Christ. His justice should be our justice. Our whole life should be so penetrated by Christ that we become Christians in the full sense of the word ("until Christ be formed in you"; Galatians 4:19). For Christ is the supreme model and pattern of Christian life (cf. Jn. 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:21). Imitation of Christ is implied by Jn. 8: 12, where Christ is called 'the light of the world' (cf. also Rom. 8:29; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:8; Heb. 1:3). St. Augustine says: 'Finis ergo noster perfectio nostra esse debet; perfectio nostra Christus' (P. L., XXXVI, 628; cf. also "In Psalm.", 26, 2, in P. L., XXXVI, 662).

Christ's divinity guarantees the purity of the model. This picture of Christ, unmarred by addition or omission, is to be found only in the Catholic Church and, owing to her indefectibility, will always continue there in its ideal state. Hence, the Church alone guarantees that the ideal of the Christian life will always remain pure and unadulterated, and will not be identified with one particular state or with a subordinate virtue (cf. Zahn, l. c., p. 124).

3. Means for Realizing the Christian Ideal

Prayer, labour, suffering, virtue, self denial are the essential means for realizing the Christian ideal of imitating Christ.

(1) **Prayer** is a means of attaining perfection because it is means of sanctification. Asceticism proves the necessity of prayer (cf. 2 Cor. 3:5). Asceticism also justifies vocal prayer and teaches the art of meditating according to the various methods of St. Peter of Alcantara, of St. Ignatius, and other saints, especially the "tres modi orandi" of St. Ignatius. Asceticism values the examination of conscience. It is indispensable for the process of purification. Examination of conscience focuses 'the searchlight of the interior vision' on every single action. Asceticism distinguishes types of examination of conscience: one general (*examen generale*), the other special (*examen particulare*). In the general examination we recall all the faults of one day; in the particular, on the contrary, we focus our attention on one single defect and mark its frequency, or on one virtue to augment the number of its acts.

Asceticism values prayer before the Blessed Sacrament (*visitatio sanctissimi*). It is meant to nourish and strengthen the theological (divine) virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Asceticism encourages the veneration of the saints, whose virtuous lives should spur us on to imitation. The imitation consists in the removal or the lessening of the contrast

existing between our own lives and the lives of the saints. Christian asceticism does not overlook the Blessed Mother of God. She is the Mirror of Justice (*speculum justitiae*).

(2) **Self-Denial** is another means of attaining perfection (cf. Mt. 16:24-25). Self-denial and self-control must extend to all these faculties and senses of man. Asceticism reduces self-denial to exterior and interior mortification: exterior mortification is the mortification of sensuality and the senses; interior mortification consists in the purification of the faculties of the soul (memory, imagination, intellect, will) and the mastering of the passions. Mortification aims at controlling sensual passions by granting the human will ascendance over it.

(3) **Labour** is a requirement for striving after perfection. Untiring labour runs counter to our corrupt nature, which loves ease and comfort. Such labour, is well-ordered, persistent, and purposeful. It implies self-denial. The Catholic Church has always considered human labour, both manual and mental, as an ascetical of attaining perfection. (cf. Cassian, "De instit. coenob.", X, 24; St. Benedict, Rule, xlvi, li; Basil, "Reg. fusi tract." c. xxxvii, 1-3; "Reg. brevius tract.", c. lxxii; Origen, "Contra Celsum", I, 28). St. Basil says that piety and avoidance of labour are irreconcilable in the Christian ideal of life (cf. Mausbach, "Die Ethik des hl. Augustinus", 1909, p. 264).

(4) **Suffering** is also a constituent of the Christian ideal of perfection. It is the light of faith, which teaches us that suffering configures us unto Christ (1 Pet. 2:21). Suffering is the channel of grace which heals (*sanat*), preserves (*conservat*), and tests (*probat*). Asceticism teaches us how to turn sufferings into channels of heavenly grace.

(5) **Virtues** are supernatural powers (*virtutes infusae*) or habits that Christians received on account of being justified by the death and resurrection of Jesus. These acquired virtues are joined to the natural faculties or the acquired virtues (*virtutes acquisitae*), and constituting with them, one principle of action.

4. Application of the Means in the Three Degrees of Christian Perfection

Imitation of Christ is the duty of all who seek perfection. Asceticism distinguishes between three stages or ways of Christian perfection: the purgative way, the illuminative way, the unitive way. In the purgative way, when the appetites and inordinate passions still possess considerable strength, mortification and self-denial are to be practiced more extensively. In the illuminative way, when the mists of passion have been lifted to a great extent, meditation and the practice of virtues in imitation of Christ are to be insisted on. During the last stage, the unitive way, the soul must be confirmed and perfected in conformity with God's will (cf. Gal. 2:20).

E. Relation of Ascetics to Moral Theology and Mysticism

Asceticism, moral theology and mysticism are disciplines which are concerned with Christian life. Ascetical theology, has for its subject-matter the striving after Christian perfection; it shows how Christian perfection may be attained by earnestly exercising and schooling the human will, in the art avoiding the allurements of sin. Moral theology, is the doctrine of the duties, of Christian life. Mysticism treats essentially of 'union with God' through mystic prayer.

Mystical life is the higher degree of ascetical life. Mystical life being a special grace granted to the Christian without any immediate merit on his part.