

ABSTINENCE

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TO SPEAK OF ABSTINENCE in the present context of global awareness of population density and economic inequality invites a plethora of responses. From the privileged minority who hold most of the world's wealth there is a response of impatience and incomprehension, tinged with scorn for a value perceived as archaic. From the world's poor, its actual majority, there is recognition of all-too-familiar deprivation, and suspicion that this is yet another value of the oppressor, intended somehow to worsen the material poverty in which they live. When the subject is encountered along gender lines, it raises a critical modern concern about the prevalence of eating disorders. Only when it is raised in the genuinely pluralistic audience which is our society today does it have some chance of revealing its profound spiritual nature and the central place it occupies in all religious traditions.

Yet even in this rarefied atmosphere, any discussion will inevitably be fraught with questions of means, merit and balance. This is surely because, at least in the cataphatic traditions, abstinence is conveyed by a negative use of language which has always demanded that it be contextualized in the broader framework of a tradition's entire spirituality. It has been perennially true in Christian historical experience that the virtue of abstinence has a way of assuming dominance and becoming an obsession. It was the task of the great founders of monasticism to build a house for the pilgrim souls that had charity as its goal, the Spirit as guide, Jesus as model, and all other practices subordinated to love of God and love of neighbour. Before that era, seekers had gone out into the desert and practised negation of the body as the primary means of subduing the unruly passions of the flesh to God. In the desert's vast emptiness they modelled for the later tradition the *agon* of the search for God.

From the point at which we now stand, a great deal of critical scrutiny has been done on the growth and development of Christian spirituality. It is helpful to remember that revision and reform have accompanied this evolution from quite early times. The essential vision which a founder conveys and models is frequently lost to some degree in the translation from master to disciple, and from first disciples to the next generation. Thus Benedict in the sixth century could already

perceive the disparity between the original vision and its historical embodiment. It is the genius of his achievement to set forth in modest and straightforward terms what life should look like in the pursuit of holiness and the imitation of Christ. The parameters have been remarkably resilient and so continue to stand as the essence of the monastic ideal. In the context of our discussion of abstinence and its greater context of asceticism in general, Benedict's Rule contributes some valuable guidelines for contemporary interpretation. In answer to the eternal question 'What can I do to attain eternal life?', the Rule suggests that faith must be expressed in praise of God, in continual prayer, and in love of one's neighbour (specifically the brothers, but more broadly, the human community as we encounter it).

The wisdom of the Rule can be found in its deep understanding of the many obstacles to these responses, and therefore of the necessity of ascetic discipline. In that framework, abstinence has a major role, since it becomes the exercise which enables growth in union with God. Let us say it more plainly: here the battle between the false self and the true self that is likened in Scripture to the image of God will be played out. And it will be relentless, demanding not less than everything. This was the legacy of the desert-dwellers, who had learned what emerges when one is willing to open self to God. Benedict reinforces their teaching, yet tempers it by insisting that the greater asceticism is the interior one, to which the exterior is only a means. And since his monks will not live in the desert, but in the relative luxury of a monastery, he urges the principle of simplicity as a touchstone for all that they do.

The model of the Christian life which became crystallized in the monastic ideal may seem far removed from our present experience. Yet there is every indication that those who seek to find spiritual guidance continue to turn to the monastic centres today. From Taizé in France to New Camoldoli at Big Sur in California, the monastic core serves as beacon to Christians of every kind who are longing for God. What is both surprising and revealing is that the teaching on asceticism has not been a deterrent. Instead, it is grasped for what it is – a necessary and vital part of the spiritual life. As we reflect on abstinence, then, we will revisit the ancient teaching through its modern exponents, and see how dialogue with the modern world has expanded the concept and the ways it is practised.

The negative commands of our learning are always experienced initially as unpleasant and unwelcome. We learn, however gradually, that they are for our good, and at some point arrive at the awareness of the paradox in all of them. They say 'No', but the outcome, if they are

obeyed, is generally positive. So it is with the spiritual life. It was Paul, and then Augustine, who described our present experience as fraught with concupiscence. Perhaps no one has more vividly narrated the struggle to control desire than Augustine. His conclusion was that we cannot conquer sin – only God's grace can accomplish that. But we are partners with God in our salvation, and thus the practice of abstinence is the essential preparation that we must do. In describing his own struggle, Augustine perhaps contributed greatly to the dualistic view of the world in which we play out our destinies. He was not the creator of this image – rather, he simply lived at a historical moment when such an analysis seemed most accurate. While much Christian theology has critiqued this view of the world as over against God, at the end of the twentieth century we have many reasons to curb our optimism. But Augustine's portrayal of the interior life has found verification in the world of depth psychology.

Thus, in writing *Sacramentum mundi*, Karl Rahner can speak from his considerable learning and the Jesuit tradition to describe the painful struggle which is the spiritual life. When he enumerates the obstacles that a spiritual person faces, he includes a most traditional list; disintegration of inner forces and effort, concupiscence, 'the world', etc.¹ More telling is his fine analysis of the reason for asceticism and abstinence: they are necessary if we are to achieve the true goal of the spiritual life, conversion. This is interpreted in its scriptural meaning as a turning toward God and neighbour, and a rejection of selfishness.² The moral virtues have as their purpose the proper ordering of our will and our appetites. Only then can we be free to love God above all, and our neighbour as our self. This does not imply a rejection of the essential goodness and delight in the created world; rather, in thoroughly affirming it, we practise abstinence so that we may use it wisely and refrain from use that enslaves us. It is this fine balance between grateful appreciation and willing restraint that reflects the virtue of abstinence.

Thus when abstinence is counselled in the spiritual tradition, it presumes the understanding of the hearer to perceive the whole framework of which the negative counsels of Christian praxis are only a part. It is cause for concern in the present day that there is no such view in the general community of faith. The contemporary debate about the meaning of fasting participates in the dilemma caused by the lapse in passing on the tradition. Perceptive commentators remark that it has become very difficult even to suggest a role for fasting since it was made optional by the reforms of Vatican Council II. The intent of the

Council in removing the majority of fasting rules was to encourage a practice undertaken in freedom, rather than through obligation. However, pastoral teaching did not pick up the charge in adequate measure, and the result has been generations of young Christians who have never learned to appreciate the value of fasting and spiritual discipline. It might be added that the entire concept of asceticism fell victim to the dual forces of the Church's lessening of rigidly imposed discipline and the societal enchantment with unrestricted freedom. The latter has reached a point where an internal critique has begun to deal with the chaos engendered in such a perspective. Fasting, however, remains out of focus in the contemporary Church, and it is indeed a worthy inquiry to examine how this essential element of the spiritual life can be restored to its proper place.

In that effort, the enlarging encounter with the world's religions is extremely pertinent. It is a fact of late twentieth-century experience that the taste for religion has not gone away, despite the confident boasts of modernity. Yet that phenomenon is both interesting and confusing, for we see that the young often turn to the eastern religions and in the sheer difference of form discover spiritual values that are, to them, new and intriguing. It is a cause of irony that these very values are present in their own traditions, but have become 'lost' through lack of practice or failure of teaching. This is especially true of meditation and contemplation, and we see the distinctly modern phenomenon of western Christians enthralled with Zen Buddhism and Hindu *asanas*. Clearly, this is simultaneously cause for optimism in the dialogue of religions, but also a stinging rebuke to Christianity's failure to retrieve the vast richness of its own historical tradition. The reason for the turn East (as Harvey Cox has termed it) is the inability to discover valid and compelling practices in our own tradition.

This is not a negative phenomenon, I would hasten to make clear. Where we now stand in the encounter with the world's religions gives us unparalleled opportunities to understand from new perspectives the intrinsic structures of the spiritual journey. Mapping out these points of shared reference is the task of those highly trained in spiritual practice, who can travel into another tradition and return – Thomas Merton, David Steindl-Rast, Swami Chiadananda, and Sr Ishpriya are examples of such. But what of the rest of the Christian community? How can we learn the values of an ancient traditional practice such as abstinence so that it can become vital, life-giving and meaningful? It would seem appropriate to return to our own sources – Scripture and tradition – and bring them into the broader framework of the religions. Our first and

most important source is, of course, Scripture. What we find there is a curiously slim foundation for fasting, but surely a broadly prescriptive path for abstinence. Indeed, it could be argued that Jesus did indeed establish the foundation and the rationale for abstinence throughout his ministry.

The first evidence, however, tells us that Jesus did not openly fast and told his disciples that they should not fast. Why? The answer is very significant: he told them that while he, the bridegroom, was with them, they were not to fast, but that there would be ample time to do so after he had left them. This oblique reference to his death was stubbornly resisted during his lifetime, but his disciples remembered his teaching faithfully, and so early in the tradition fasted as a sign of mourning, but more vividly, as a sign of hope and patient waiting for the Lord's return. That stance of expectation lived in freedom from enslavement to sin and death was a hallmark of the early Christians, as Acts and other sources testify, and it became more – actually, the attitude and stance toward reality of the developing tradition. It is this complex background that has often required a retrieval of Jesus' whole teaching, with its stress on the essential goodness of creation, the blessing of the harvest of the fields and the debt of praise and gratitude that we owe to God our Creator. For we live with an awareness of two worlds: a world of vast beauty and rich goodness which is our present home, but which we are convinced by many signs is not lasting; and a world that is to come as God draws his creation to himself and transforms all of it into what he has created it to be. The tradition has concluded that such a reality truly requires us to acknowledge the beauty and goodness of creation, and yet to signify that it can never fully nurture us. The primary way we do this is by abstinence, so that we willingly fast, practise chastity, subject our needs to those of others, choose simplicity over satiety of belongings, and service over mastery of others. The realization that we can never be fulfilled except by God is one pole of this discipline, but it would not make sense unless we were taught that the real imperative behind ascetical practices is love.

There is a basic human example that sheds light on what might seem a dauntingly difficult practice: a parent's love for a child is, at its essential best, a perfect example of the placing of the good of another above our own. So also is the mature love of a husband and wife. These are, for most people, the training ground in which they become adept at the practice called abstinence. In reality, the circumstances of ordinary lives parallel very closely the structures established in the monastic tradition to generate virtue and asceticism in the service of love. Undertaken with generosity of heart, the effects are the same.

We abstain from food, then, as an act of faith in God's promises, a response of gratitude for his generous gifts of creation, and to remember that our hunger should include, indeed, mainly focus on, the kingdom of God and all its needs. These are the same as when Jesus brought this message to his disciples' attention; they will remain the same throughout the historical process. As he elaborated on its more subtle meanings, Jesus focused on the demands of justice, in a clear echoing of the Jewish tradition into which he was born. 'What does God ask of us?' that tradition frequently queried. The answer was always, first and foremost, justice under all its aspects. It is this profound moral imperative that has always galvanized the heart of Christian practice.

In the monastic orders, fasting was mandated to enable two fundamental works to be undertaken. The first, of course, was divine praise, and we are here reminded of the links between asceticism and prayer. The monastic tradition has always affirmed that fasting is the door to prayer, for it clarifies the senses and purifies the body so that it can more easily attend to the Word of God. In the Gospels, we are told that Jesus did fast in private, and for the purpose of prayer. Let us reflect that he spent nights in prayer and that his last night was spent in the vividly remembered scene in Gethsemane. His example teaches us much about fasting – that its necessary companion is solitude, that it is oriented to communion with God and achieves this by removing the distraction of bodily needs, and that it is a practice sought to strengthen the soul. His disciples took this lesson deeply to heart and did likewise. The rest of Jesus' ministry demonstrates his major concern for the poor, for all those left out of the covenant's blessing. He urged Israel once again to remember the second half of the Great Commandment: we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. Then he showed us the extent and depth of that love by embracing death that we might live. It is this example that fills out the picture, teaching that self-abnegation is for the purpose of seeing the needs of others more clearly, and freeing in us the capacity to respond.

For we are made for freedom, that glorious gift of the children of God, but not for a sterile freedom that exists only for itself. Rather, in defining this freedom, the tradition precisely notes that from which we are freed – sin, selfishness and death – and announces that for which we are freed – fullness of life, enjoyed in love of God and of neighbour. The understanding of fasting is therefore transformed, and we can see that what seems to be a negative practice is in reality a work of liberation and affirmation. What is at stake is the training of the will,

and that will is intended to seek only the good. It is the task of abstinence to educate the will so that it becomes discerning, flexible and free in its response to God.

A contemporary example might help to demonstrate the power of abstinence in the work of the Christian life. Mother Teresa's recognizable figure is well known for her tremendous work of charity among the poorest of the poor. Yet we need to ask how it is possible for her to have achieved so much. The answer is revealed in her own biography, but also in the community of followers who strive to imitate her. She has taught them the secret of boundless energy and good will in the service of God, and the answers are both ancient and ever new. She is firm in teaching that radical simplicity of life is essential. This includes voluntary detachment from worldly goods, fasting, limitation of sleep and physical comforts, and other voluntary sacrifice. But more importantly, Mother Teresa stresses that all of this exists only to assist the main goal, which is loving service of the sick poor. In a prayer she shared with Prince Michael of Greece, she explained the key of such service.

The fruit of silence is prayer.

The fruit of prayer is faith.

The fruit of faith is love.

The fruit of love is service.

The fruit of service is peace.³

What makes her example so attractive is that she is simply affirming gospel values, and living them to an unusually full degree. It is highly significant that she is drawing so many, not only to become involved followers, but to unite their Christian praxis with hers as Lay Missionaries of Charity. Clearly, her message has fallen upon fertile ground.

We fast, then, so that we might better live the life of charity. Implicit in abstinence from food is, as we have seen, a joyful affirmation of its goodness, as part of the value of God's gift of creation. This totally removes fasting from abuse of the body through eating disorders. In fact, in tracing the roots of these tragic illnesses, it can be seen that they arise in a polar understanding of life's value. They frequently are based in low self-esteem as a form of self-hatred, and in a despair about the possibility of finding love in a friendless and critical world. How very different is the impulse to fast in a spiritual way! It is separated more critically by the fact that this virtue is grounded in love, in the awareness of being cherished by God, and in praise of the goodness of creation.

Fasting's great assistance in the spiritual life is a teaching that greatly needs to be reiterated. For it is incomprehensible without faith and prayer, and meaningless without awareness that it must be grounded in love and directed toward love. When it is understood in this context, the rigorous treatment of our will in the practice of abstinence as a whole achieves intelligibility. The good news of the gospel has always been at odds with the values of materialistic culture. Jesus recognized that it would be so, and the tradition's experience has verified its master's insight. What, we might ask, is the root of its opposition? There is abundant evidence that the basic problem is the self, concerned with itself to the point where it is in danger of solipsism, and determined to find satisfaction for its needs before and above all others. Every religious tradition, and, indeed, most ancient philosophies, recognized this primal urge and sought ways to control it. They have all agreed that such a self is naïve, unsocialized and childish. It becomes necessary to train the self in virtue (as Aristotle and Plato believed) to form a civilized person. The religions have seen this untaught self as the enemy to spiritual growth, and have sought to establish a solid education so that the self might understand its true reality and achieve wisdom. Thus, the virtue of abstinence became the handmaid of asceticism, i.e., of that discipline which had as its goal the refining of the soul so that it might recognize and love the things of God.

We are asked to abstain, in some cases to a greater degree, so that we might learn the great power and value of our physical appetites (for food, sex, power etc.), but also how to subordinate them to the greater calls of our nature. Fasting before communion (now so mitigated it is barely apparent) was intended to nourish in us a hunger for the Bread of Life, which is the food of our future. That Bread and our daily bread are linked in Jesus' teaching and are part of a symbiosis that embraces the needs of our neighbour. We who eat at the Lord's table are called to be especially aware of those whose hungers, physical and spiritual, impact upon our awareness every day in local communities and the global reality brought into our homes through the media. The Christian *must* respond, for we know that we are called daily to life and that God's love supports us. We fast, we abstain, in acknowledgment of that life, and so as to hear more clearly and respond to those whose hungers remind us how far we still are from the kingdom of God.

NOTES

¹ Karl Rahner, *Sacramentum mundi* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p 110.

² *Ibid.*, p 111.

³ Prince Michael, 'All the lives we touch' in *Parade* (11 August 1996), p 5.