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The Asceticism of the Church and Individual Virtue

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1. Asceticism, an ecclesial path

The material body partakes in the perfection of man, in his sanctification. Perfection and sanctification signify man's restoration to the fulness of his existential possibilities, to what he is called to be—the image and glory of God. This “end” for human life involves man's being as a whole, both what we call body and what we call soul; it relates to the totality of the human person.

This is a fundamental truth of Orthodox anthropology, which both interprets the meaning of Christian asceticism and draws a fundamental distinction between this and the legal understanding of individual virtue. Asceticism is not an individual work of merit, an act of constancy in observing some objective code of behavior, or obedience to commandments laid down by some impersonal law or conventional authority. Nor does bodily asceticism confine itself to “suppression” of the body, turning this into an end in itself so that the disdained matter becomes obedient to the superior “spirit.”

Christian asceticism is above all an ecclesial and not an individual matter. It is the changing of our nature's individual mode of existence into a personal communion and relationship, a dynamic entry into the community of the life of the body Of the Church. The aim of asceticism is to transfigure our impersonal natural desires and needs into manifestations of the

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free personal will which brings into being the true life of love. Thus the instinctive need for food, the greed for the individual's independent self-preservation, is transfigured if, the context of the Church's fasting: submission to the common practice of the Church becomes paramount, turning it into an act of relationship and communion. The Christian does not fast in order to subjugate matter to the spirit, nor because he accepts a division of foods into “clean” and “unclean.” He fasts because in this way he ceases to make the intake of food an autonomous act; he turns it into obedience to the common will and

common practice of the Church, and subjugates his individual preferences to the Church rules of fasting which determine his choice of food. And obedience freely given always presupposes love: it is always an act of communion.

Nevertheless, the Church's fasting rules do not express a fortuitous or arbitrary division of foods, but summarize a long experience of human nature on the part of the saints who laid down these canons. This experience knows well the rebelliousness of our nature, and understands how to distinguish what use of foods invigorates the autonomous impulse for self-preservation and what weakens it. In this sense, we can accept the connection between fasting and the subjugation of matter to the demands of the spirit, as an image or a figure of interpretation. All that need be made clear is that asceticism in the Church is not in conflict with matter itself, but with the rebellion of material individuality, the rebellious drive for self-subsistence. Asceticism checks the rebellion of our material nature and does not allow nature to become an end in itself— a second purpose within creation, different from that unique end which is the personal hypostasis of life, our participation in the life of trinitarian communion.

One could mention other forms of asceticism in the Church, analogous to the example of fasting: sexual continence, participation of the body in prayer (the prostrations hallowed by the monastic tradition), humbling acts of service, acts of submission and rejection of the individual will, acts of altruism and charity, submission to the liturgical *Typikon* and participation in the mysteries (sacraments). All these are practical forms of resistance to the egocentric individuality identified

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with the flesh, aspects of man's dynamic struggle to overcome the impersonal elements in his biological nature: his struggle to be fulfilled, through relationship with God and with his fellow men, in his personal distinctiveness which can only be realized through love. And these are not forms of individual resistance or an individual struggle, but of submission by the individual to the universal experience and life of the Church. Individual effort is transformed into a common effort; the struggle becomes an act of communion, taking its place in the life of the whole body of the Church.

Since this is its content, asceticism is not deprivation and a niggardly attitude towards life, nor enmity towards the body and scorn for matter, as Manicheans and puritans have presented it over the ages. Within the tradition of the Church, asceticism is *philokalia*, love for the beauty of that "uncompleted perfection" which is personal fulfilment, the restoration of God's darkened image in man to its original beauty.

2. Rejection of dualism

As it is understood and experienced in the Orthodox East, asceticism presupposes the rejection of Platonic or any other dualism, with its *a priori* scorn for matter and the body, and the value it places on the soul, the spirit of man. The distinction between soul and body is not an ontological distinction, like that between nature and person or between nature and energies; it does not relate to man's *being*, to his *mode* of existence. This is why death, the dissolution of the body, does not put an end to man's existence; it does not destroy his natural hypostasis. Man's existence (soul) is a specific created nature even after death— however much separation from the body (“in which we received our being”¹) constitutes for our nature the greatest possible trial and existential alienation, the painful consequence of man's fall.

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The soul and the body represent distinct natural energies, energies of the one human nature. It is this one nature, and not only the body, which became existentially autonomous and “beast-like”² at the fall of man.³ And the asceticism of the Church relates to this “beast-like” nature: not to the body alone, nor to the spirit alone, but to the common reality of the nature manifested and expressed by both. For this reason the ethos at which the Church's asceticism aims is ontological in content, looking to the “hypostasization” of nature into personal distinctiveness and freedom.

3. Rejection of individuality

Asceticism is the struggle of the person against rebellious nature, against the nature which seeks to achieve on its own what it could bring about only in personal unity and communion with God. The rebellion of our nature attempts to supplant the possibilities for true life which are divine grace, a gift of personal communion and relationship. Every

¹ “There is one thing in creation [the soul] which has its being in Something else, and not in itself; and it is wonderful how it can exist Outside that in which it received its being”: John of Sinai, *Ladder*, Step 26, PG 88, 1036B.

² See Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 90, 397C.

³ If we reject the ontological distinction between nature and energies, we do not merely leave the reality of matter and the body without an ontological explanation, but we are necessarily led to a schematic Aristotelian *hylomorphism*, to a concept of the soul as the *entelechy* of the body, as happened in the Roman Catholic Church (cf. the Council of Vienne, 1311-1312). And an inevitable consequence of Aristotelian hylomorphism is scorn for matter and an external, schematic understanding of ethical life— ultimately, the juridical moralism of the Roman Catholic Church, and the pietism and puritanism of the Protestants.

absolute, autonomous natural desire goes back to that first revolt of autonomy: “In the day ye eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ye shall be as gods” (Gen 3:5). Through asceticism the Christian reverses the movement towards rebellion and self-deification; he resists the tendency in his nature to become existentially absolute, and dynamically puts his personal will into action so as to restore his nature to communion with the grace of life.

This restoration and this resistance, however, presuppose a struggle within man against his very self, against what his nature has become since the fall— in other words, an effort

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which is logically contradictory. For it is undoubtedly a logical contradiction if man resists the needs and demands of his nature, the very nature which is his individuality, his own self. The tragic separation between nature and person, between necessity and freedom, is revealed in every stage of ascetic life; it is the empirical self-knowledge of man since the fall, a self-knowledge which goes back to the very truth of existence, beyond any logical form elaborated by the intellect. The individual nature is what man *is*, yet at the same time it is not man *in himself*. Individual flesh is his nature, yet at the same time something foreign to his *natural* destiny: “this flesh that is mine and yet not mine, this dear enemy,” as St John of the Ladder writes.⁴ My flesh is mine and yet not mine; it is my human nature, yet also a relentless impulse toward what is contrary to nature, the elevation of nature into an end in itself— an elevation which severs my nature from my personal hypostasis of life and makes it disintegrate into death.

4. Unattainable by nature, yet attainable by grace

The content of Christian asceticism is not control of the mind so as to ensure “moderation” in our needs and desires, nor progressive habituation of the natural will to the observance of some law. It is the struggle for personal freedom from the necessity to which our nature is subject— man’s struggle with his very nature, with the death which is “mingled” with human nature. And individual self-control, as the canons of conventional morality would have it, cannot be more than a very limited aspect of this struggle, since the tendency towards what is contrary to nature holds sway primarily in the hidden depths of the human being, in the subconscious and unconscious. The rebellion of nature has to be *put to death* to let nature live out its destiny “according to nature.” And this rebellion is rooted in the biological hypostasis of individuality itself: in the natural will,

⁴ *Ladder*, Step 15, PG 88, 885D.

in unconscious desire, in instinct, in the sexual drive and in the blind need for self-preservation. Thus we have a second logical antinomy, a second scandal

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for the criteria of effectiveness which govern legalistic morality: man struggles to mortify the rebellion of his nature, and yet there is no question of achieving this mortification by human effort alone. "To defeat one's own nature is an impossibility," as St John of the Ladder assures us from his experience in asceticism.⁵ Keeping to the antithetical parallelism between Christian asceticism and individual virtue, we might see in this saying of St John's the bankruptcy of all legal morality and all idealistic humanism. Any systematic pursuit of "improvement" in man through his own individual will and effort, of taming his nature through his own powers, is condemned by nature itself. Man on his own cannot cease to be what he "naturally" is. His attempt to overcome nature through his individual powers makes him a prisoner of the same rebellious autonomy of individuality which brings about the corruption of nature. This is also why every anthropocentric, autonomous morality ends up as a fruitless insistence on an utterly inadequate human self-sufficiency, an expression of man's fall. By contrast, Christian asceticism rejects the deterministic dialectic of effort and result; it presupposes that we hope for nothing from human powers. It expresses and effects the participation of man's freedom in suppressing the rebellion of his nature, but that work itself is grace, a gift from God. Thus human ascetic endeavor does not even aspire to crushing the rebellion of man's nature. It simply seeks to affirm the personal response of man's love to the work of his salvation by Christ, and to accord with divine love and the divine economy, albeit to the infinitesimal extent permitted by the weakness of his nature.

5. Neglect of asceticism, an alienation of the truth

Here we begin a necessarily critical parenthesis, calling to mind the distortions produced in Christian piety, especially in what we call the western societies, by the neglect of asceticism. and more particularly of the physical character of asceticism. Fasting, which is the most immediate and general act of

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asceticism in the Church, is now all but abolished in the West, even on the official level. The center of gravity in Christian piety is shifted further if not exclusively onto what is called "individual moral consistency," onto rationally justifiable areas of behavior, and an

⁵ *Ladder*, Step 15, PG 88, 881A.

obedience to the commands of social utility which is logically self-evident and objectively necessary.

Increasingly, Christian life seems to be nothing more than a particular way of behaving, a code of good conduct. Christianity is increasingly alienated, becoming a social attribute adapted to meet the least worthy of human demands— conformity, sterile conservatism, pusillanimity and timidity; it is adapted to the trivial moralizing which seeks to adorn cowardice and individual security with the funerary decoration of social decorum. The people who really thirst for life, who stand daily on the brink of every kind of death, who struggle desperately to distinguish some light in the seated mystery of human existence— these are the people to whom the Gospel of salvation is primarily and most especially addressed, and inevitably they all remain far removed from the rationalistically organized social conventionalism of established Christianity.

Today, in this atmosphere, the very word and idea of asceticism is probably incomprehensible to a very large number of Christian people. Anyone talking about fasting and chastity and voluntary restriction of our individual desires is sure to meet with condescension or mockery. This does not, of course, prevent people from having their “metaphysical convictions” and believing in a “supreme being” or in the “sweet Jesus” who had a wonderful ethical teaching. The question is, however, what is the use of “metaphysical convictions” when they do not go any way towards providing a *real* answer— as opposed to one that is idealistic and abstract— to the problem of death, the scandal of the dissolution of the body in the earth.

This real answer is to be found only in the knowledge granted by asceticism, in the effort to resist death in our own bodies, and by the dynamic triumph over the deadening of man. And not just in any kind of asceticism, but in that which consists in conformity to the example of Christ, who willingly

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accepted death so as to destroy death— “trampling down death by death.” Every voluntary mortification of the egocentricity which is “contrary to nature” is a dynamic destruction of death and a triumph for the life of the person. The culmination comes when man shows complete trust by handing over his body, the last bastion of death, into the hands of God, into the embrace of the “earth of the Lord” and into the fulness of the communion of saints.

6. “Bodily knowledge”

The message which is really able to touch man, and perhaps especially modern man in his revolt against the hollowness of conventional moral standards, is none other than the

challenge and the call to direct, bodily participation in the truth of the life which destroys death, the truth of personal freedom from the constraint of nature.

In the Church, bodily asceticism has always been the supreme road to *theological knowledge*. It is not possible for man to come to know the truth of life, the truth of God and the truth of his own existence purely through intellectual categories, purely through the conventional concepts which can be expressed in language, relative as they are. When man follows the way of relative analogies and conventional expressions, all he can gain is a relative and conventional knowledge. The universal truth of God's revelation, the truth about the fulness and fulfilment of life, is a universal knowledge gained through personal experience—in the biblical sense of knowledge, which identifies it with sexual relations and intercourse. And as the true sexual relationship and intercourse is a complete participation in body and in soul, and an offering of oneself, so also the *eros* of God, the true relationship and "intercourse" or communion with Him, the *knowledge* of His person, presupposes bodily participation by man, the bodily asceticism of self-offering.

St Isaac the Syrian writes: "If you want your heart to become a place for the mysteries of the new world, first become rich in corporeal works: in fasting, vigils, service,

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asceticism, patience, the destruction of troublesome thoughts and the rest."⁶ And here we have the reason for his exhortation: "For violent activity generates an infinite warmth which kindles in the heart . . . This action and vigilance refine the mind in their heat, and give it vision."⁷ The vision of God's countenance, the perceptible experience of the light of His countenance, is the purpose and "end" of asceticism, the dynamic and therefore always uncompleted perfection of knowledge and love: "You cannot love God unless you see Him: and the vision of God comes from knowing Him."⁸

The personal or "erotic" reality of asceticism gives Christian piety the character of a direct, perceptible experience of the incorruption of life, distinguishing it radically and essentially from the conventional nature of the "achievement" of individual virtue. In a way that is perceptible and experiential, the Christian in his daily life repudiates the autonomy of natural survival; he rejects it as an end in itself in order to receive from God's love the gift of life, life as personal and loving communion with Him. Thus bodily asceticism defines in a tangible and concrete manner the eucharistic character of the

⁶ *Mystic Treatises*, Letter 4, p. 383.

⁷ *Mystic Treatises*, Logos 9, p. 41.

⁸ Isaac the Syrian, *Mystic Treatises*, Logos 16, p. 58.

Church's ethos, the way in which the eucharist, the holy communion, is extended into everyday life.

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