



How asceticism is a path to holiness

Some of you might look at this title and have second thoughts about reading the rest of this letter. However, we ask you to take a few minutes to read and reflect, particularly as we begin the season of Lent.

Asceticism, again! Perhaps it may sound like words from another time, or words that have less relevance to our current reality. It may sound old-fashioned, or it may be a topic that has already been discussed many times. But there is a wisdom that you may not have considered, particularly in our lives as married couples.

In principle, asceticism seems to be a word associated with something negative. It may demand effort, renunciation, or sacrifice. Nowadays, anything related to these terms is dismissed. How often do we hear about the benefits of learning methods that are effortless, fun, with all kinds of facilities! Our society seems to invite us to look more frequently for the opposite of what asceticism stands for.

However, asceticism is a much richer concept than we may have thought about in the past. It is linked with concepts that are currently highly valued, such as care for our body, self-control, and self-improvement. This richer concept has its origin in the very etymology of the word. “Asceticism” comes from the ancient Greek word “askèsis”, which is linked to gymnasiums and sports training.

The word has sometimes been confused with negative aspects of training that only take account of suffering and deprivation. But this does not value the satisfaction we get from rewarded effort, the achievement of accomplishments that we can integrate into our everyday lives, and the benefits of health and well-being.

This understanding of asceticism linked only to the aspects of renunciation and sacrifice, has often been transferred to the Christian sense of it. Unfortunately, this has totally confused the essence of the matter. It is as if penance alone is pleasing to God. It is as if we are only able to reach God through our own efforts and through deprivation.

We would like to propose a different way of approaching asceticism. Firstly, in relation to our conjugal love, and secondly, in our relationship with God and our neighbour.

To do this, we need to look closely at the ideas in a text by Father Caffarel, written in one of the editorials of the Letters to the Teams of Our Lady in May-June 1972.¹ In a special way, he links asceticism and love. At its core, this text considers that asceticism is not just an arbitrary demand on us, but rather one of the fundamental demands of love. As two sides of the same coin, love and asceticism are presented as two sides of the same reality.

¹ P. Henri Caffarel, “Encore l’ascèse”, Lettre des Equipes Notre-Dame, mai-juin 1972

Father Caffarel draws our attention to the struggle between our love for our spouse and our tendency toward selfishness. In a well-known Teams of Our Lady methodology, the Rule of Life, we have to look at the things that prevent us from growing in love for God, our spouse, family or people, in order to try to correct them. Ft Caffarel proposes we should examine our own heart, through a very concrete exercise. This helps us to move away from the idea of asceticism as something abstract and alien to our life.

He urges us to look at our heart today, in the here and now, and to notice the countless things that slow down or hinder our love. Perhaps, in our conversations, we feel the need to never give in to others; thinking we are always right. Perhaps, I am tempted into silence, to deprive my partner of my words, my gaze, my attention. Perhaps, I continuously focus on myself, so that my interests, my worries are more important than the concerns of others. Perhaps, it is all about me, me, me..., never listening or interested in what the other person says or who they really are. We could go on with so many things.

For Father Caffarel, human love implies a demand for asceticism. There is a need for a loyal, intelligent and methodical effort to control the selfishness that hinders our love and makes it difficult for us to access a great love. How much more will it be necessary in our love for God!

And here comes the second part of this proposal: In the same way we have examined the difficulty we may have in loving our spouse, we can also think about how we can overcome our selfishness in relation to our love for God. Perhaps, we often have no time for God, or we only devote the crumbs of what we have left over. Perhaps we only relate to God in a formal way, by complying with what the Church theoretically asks of us, without transforming our hearts, without going out to meet others, without becoming better Christians in our daily lives.

As we begin our journey into Lent, it is timely that we reflect on our relationship with God and others. Rather than seeing our acts of prayer, penance and almsgiving as arbitrary demands, may we understand them as acts of love that call us beyond ourselves and our own reality. It does require effort and perseverance. Perhaps we need to think about ways of making more time to listen and reflect on what God is asking us. It may require a change in our priorities, or to be more supportive to those around us, and to those in most need. The focus should be on how we can grow in our love, and follow in Jesus footsteps. It is an opportunity to transform our hearts and lives. This is the way of life we commit to as Christians, not just during Lent, but as part of our journey through life.

Consider, for example, the preparations we made for the birth of a child. At that time, we understood perfectly that after the child was born our lives would not be the same! We remember the sleepless nights, the financial challenges, and the worry about the health and welfare of our child. However, this was not a burden, but an act of love. The challenges and sacrifices we made each day, taught us important lessons about becoming better parents. No parent is perfect when their child is born. They grow to become better parents through effort and hard work, and this is undertaken with joy. In the same way we all have a lot to learn on our journey to holiness. Every day, we make mistakes, we learn from these mistakes, and we try again.

When you attend your next Teams meeting, look closely at the other members of your Team. They are a gift from God because they inspire and encourage us to keep trying, and to learn from their example.

On this path of holiness, we cannot confuse efforts that may be empty of meaning and believe that by such effort, penance or sacrifice we are pleasing God. True asceticism leads us to an impulse of love, which helps us to shed our selfishness and the ties to our permanently unsatisfied self. It urges us to go to meet Jesus, our spouse, and those who may need us most, seeking that greater love to which we are called.

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