

On Extreme Penances

The subject of extreme penances came up in adult education recently. It was a subject which required some time to struggle with and comprehend. The question revolved around the phenomenon of saint's doing extreme penances, and skepticism about how one could reconcile that behavior with the fact that the body is a temple of the Holy Ghost. I thought the rest of the parish might benefit from some explanation of this.

It's good at this point to define our terms. I'll use the definitions of a moral theologian from Germany, Fr. Joseph Prummer, O.P. His work is a standard text in the seminaries of the FSSP. Each part of these definitions is important.

1. Self-mortification: Rightly ordered action of the will to master the demands of the body through physical discipline.

2. Self-mutilation: Deliberate damage done to one's body out of a disordered desire to injure oneself.

Self-mortification is obviously necessary and useful in the Christian life. When the flesh dominates all one's actions, such that its cravings (for food, drink, sex, etc.) move one away from duty and God's grace, then real mortification is called for. But the mortification must be rightly ordered. When is it not rightly ordered?

It becomes disordered and even sinful above all through the motives of pride. St. Thomas takes as a principle of this, the rebuke of the Pharisees by our Lord, who disfigure their faces in order to appear to men as fasting (Mt. 6.16). So the problem is especially in the will, or the intention, and mere harm to the skin would not necessarily be the exercise of pride.

When a woman has her ears pierced, that is not self-mutilation, because it is not an action which comes from a desire to hurt herself but is instead from a desire to decorate herself. We could digress a bit here, and talk about degrees of this sort of thing, since there has been a fascination with barbarism in our culture in the matter of self-decoration for some time. Piercing and tattoos go to extremes, despite the warnings which must (by law) be given to the one receiving these that the procedures can become addictive, and that such addiction can result in the subject covering his entire body with ink and sundry punctures. In the case of addiction (an overused word, but I'll use it here to indicate a loss of free will to some degree), one is obviously speaking about more of a psychological problem than a moral one.

Not to digress too much, but we know that the root of all obstacles to union with God and life in heaven is pride. An excellent way to combat this is through conforming oneself to a social subtype – provided it is a good one. Thus, the priest who wears his clerical garb, keeps his hair short, is clean shaven and wears no jewelry, avoids the pride involved with vanity. And while it is difficult to identify exactly where the line is (since taste and style shift around), still, embracing the outlandish is not only a manifestation of pride, it is also a way to impose a burden on others. So if I were to sport loud, flowered shirts, I might be tickled pink with myself and congratulating myself on my non-conformity, but I sure wouldn't be taking any steps towards heaven, because of the

burden which I would place on parishioners.

Back to the main subject, if the problem with penances is in the will more than the flesh, then we know that true mortification is practiced only when the intention is for the divine honor, or atonement for sins, or the imitation of Christ. If the intention is to harm oneself out of self-hatred, then there is no mortification but mutilation. But other things must be considered.

We know that if the mortification interferes with one's state in life, then it is not rightly ordered. This is why St. Benedict forbade those studying for the priesthood to fast, or why the Church automatically dispenses someone who is sick or a woman who is pregnant from either fasting or abstinence. Theological study is so difficult (or should be), and pregnancy is so difficult that fasting would interfere with their ends. In the same way, denying oneself sleep can be laudable (there's many a saint who did it), but if you're a professional driver, then it would interfere with the proper end of the job.

Finally, if the intention is good, and there is no interference with one's duty or state of life, then there is another test which must be applied, which is to see the effect of the penance on the 12 fruits of the Holy Ghost (listed by St. Paul in Gal.5.22-23), which are: charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity (kindness), goodness, longanimity (generosity), mildness, faithfulness, modesty, continency (self-control) and chastity. So if one is doing a penance, and it only increases his impatience, then the penance is disordered...and so on for any of the fruits.

On one hand, St. Catherine of Siena used the "slave chain," which caused her skin to bleed. But this was no worse than a lad skinning his knee from sliding into home in a baseball game. And her spiritual director (none other than St. Raymond of Penafort) was sure that she was growing in the fruits of the Holy Ghost, with all her penances. On the other hand, St. Ignatius of Loyola was ordered to stop his fasting, since it was interfering with his state in life. So sometimes the penances of saints *were* too extreme, and they had to be corrected.

Many of these kinds of theological distinctions are hard for the faithful to make. But our Lord gave us something that any peasant could grasp, viz., that we could know a tree by its fruits. And the fruits which we need to consider above all are the 12 fruits of the Holy Ghost.