

Pain is the Path to Holiness

We are in the world only to please God. We must learn the nobility of suffering. It is the true test of love. Christ Suffered, the Blessed Virgin suffered, the Saints suffered; and no soul has ever become truly great and good and virtuous that has not been disciplined in the school of affliction. In short, without some suffering there can be no real greatness, no heroism, no carrying of that blessed and mysterious burden - **The Cross.**

Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. *Mat 16:24*

Corporal Mortification is one of those things that many people think has been neatly swept into the dustbin of Church history as just another unsavory relic of medieval Christendom. That is because mortification has to do with pain for the purposes of piety, a concept which is preposterous to our culture, conjuring up images of flagellants wandering around medieval Europe whipping their backs into a bloody pulp, Or of saints like St. Rose of Lima, who disfigured herself to ward off potential suitors, was known to drag a heavy cross around her garden and wear a crown of metal thorns.

But this isn't to say our culture is anti-pain. No orifice or bodily protuberance these days is safe from piercings of all sizes and shapes that are painful just to look at. Getting stuck with a needle at the doctor's office unnerves some people, but that hasn't stopped nearly a quarter of Americans from getting poked a thousand times over with a needle to get a tattoo. Even sadomasochism has been mainstreamed, thanks to books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Consider extreme diets, workout regimens, and plastic surgery and one begins to appreciate how much we are willing to endure pain—as long as it's self-serving.

So apparently we're not the pleasure-ravenous Gollums Freud made us out to be. Human nature, it seems, is not that pain-averse after all. Sometimes, we even seek it out. Perhaps, then, corporal mortification deserves a second look.

For the word of the cross, to them indeed that perish, is foolishness: but to them that are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God. 1 Cor. 1:18

Corporal mortification serves four purposes:

1. In the first place, mortification helps us to master our desires and subdue sinful passions.
2. It also serves as a penance for our sins.
3. And, as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, our suffering contributes to the redemption of others.
4. Finally, mortification is one way in which we imitate Christ in His Passion.

St. Paul spoke to at least two of these purposes in his epistles. In 1 Corinthians, he compares the Christian life to a race. Christians, he says, run to win an imperishable prize, the prize of eternal life. In order to train for this race of a lifetime, Paul says that he himself “chastises” his body, in order to bring it into subjection.

In Colossians 1, Paul indicates that suffering, in a mystical manner, can help others achieve sanctity as well: “I Paul ... now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the church.”

But don't go out and buy a whip just yet. When it comes to the cringe-inducing mortifications of the saints, most of those fall under the don't-try-this-at-home category. As Dominican theologian Jordan Aumann wrote, "here, as in all else, it is necessary to observe prudence and equilibrium, without going to extravagant or ridiculous extremes. Some of the mortifications practiced by the saints are more to be admired than imitated."

Safe to say, whips, cilices, and hair shirts are probably out for most of us—not to mention life-sized wooden crosses and metal crowns of thorns. So what does that leave? A lot, it turns out.

Mortification, simply put, is any denial of pleasure or painful activity that is sacrificial in nature. Some Opus Dei members, for instance, practice mortification through simple acts like taking occasional cold showers, skipping dessert, abstaining from condiments like sugar in coffee or butter on bread, and getting immediately out of bed in the morning. Even forcing oneself to be more punctual or complete a particularly arduous task could be considered mortification of the body.

And mortification extends beyond the merely physical. *In Conversations with God*, Francis Fernandez urges a threefold mortification.

1. We should mortify our imagination, Fernandez writes, by avoiding frivolous thinking during the day—daydreaming, worrying about our future or finances, fantasizing about a better job, home, a new car, or some other pleasure.
2. We can mortify our memory, he adds, by "avoiding useless recollections which make us waste time and which could lead us into more serious temptations."
3. We should even take the same approach to our intelligence by adopting humility and charity in dealing with others, according to Fernandez.

Just as important as voluntary mortification is passive mortification—

Cheerfully enduring the trials and suffering life throws your way for the sake of Christ in His Body. Next time your computer crashes and you lose a key document or your car breaks down and you have to run an important errand on foot—say, during a snowstorm—**Offer It Up To Christ.**

Suddenly, we begin to see how mortification is not just some extreme practice done by a few saints and overzealous devotees, but something integral to every Christian's daily battle to grow in sanctity. The bottom line is that it's the interior attitude of the heart that counts, not how many quarts of blood you produce or how high you register on the pain scale.

This point is emphasized above all else by Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*: "...in order to purge our vices, no doubt it is well to mortify the flesh, but above all it is necessary to purify the affections and renew the heart."

St. Augustine said, in *The City of God*, that "temporary punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by others after death, (Purgatory), by others both now and then; but all of them before that last and strictest judgment"

I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper. Luke 12:59

In this context, the examples of the saints are not irrelevant. They may not be models for imitation, but certainly they should inspire us. To defend his purity, St. Francis of Assisi rolled in the snow, St. Benedict threw himself into a thorn bush, St. Bernard plunged into an icy pond...**What have you done?"**

If you are going to suffer anyway, might as well **OFFER IT UP TO CHRIST** and save time from Purgatory.

Nothing unclean will enter the presence of God in heaven. Rev. 21:27