

**13. October 2020**

**“Asceticism”  
Part 1**

For progress on the path of following Christ, meaningful asceticism is very helpful, because it is impossible to overlook the fact that we are in a struggle throughout our lives, which we should carry out well with the grace of God. This struggle takes place on several levels. Today I would like to talk about a kind of basic framework for this struggle, which is asceticism.

This word may give some people a queasy feeling, as if we were talking about fasting, night vigils and similar spiritual exercises. But these feelings do not correspond to the deep meaning and thus also the spiritual beauty of asceticism. Like everything that God has planned for our salvation, asceticism is part of this plan of salvation. In order to avoid misunderstandings from the very beginning, I speak of a meaningful asceticism, not of exaggerated measures that are not fruitful for our path and, if not properly classified, can even harm us. Asceticism as a struggle or effort, exercised in the right way, is a very worthy act, because it should help us to regain dominance over ourselves.

**Why is asceticism necessary?**

Linked to the fall of mankind, in that the creature rebelled against its Creator, a deep-seated disorder has arisen in our own being. God in his wisdom had arranged everything wonderfully for man. Under God's guidance, our spirit was to determine the direction of the will, and to make use of our natural powers to do so. However, due to sin, our "inner cosmos" got into disorder. The drives (passions) rebel against the spirit and the weakened will is often overcome. St. Paul laments that although he knows what is right, a different law is at work in him (*cf. Rom 7:23*).

It is therefore a matter of - always in cooperation with the grace of God - becoming master in one's own house again and making oneself available to the will of God with joy and more easily. In doing so, it must always be realised that we are "fallen people". An asceticism will not be necessary in eternity, because then we will be forever fixed in our decision for Christ and will no longer be exposed to temptation on all levels! What a wonderful future! But now we still need the fight!

Let us first turn to fundamental asceticism:

It is the fight with our sensual inclinations. We must learn to curtail them, to give them an order in which these vital forces develop positively and do not become destructive. To do this, we must be aware that if we simply leave ourselves to the natural drives, these drives usually always go beyond the healthy level. The tension of the soul is weakened by this, because now the "transgression" has to be processed. One has been distracted, one has to catch up again, the "broken pieces" have to be collected.

### **Tension of the soul:**

Let us realise that our soul has its home in God. It wants nothing more than to be with God. There she will be completely purified in eternity and live in the everlasting contemplation of God. But she also longs for fellowship with God already on earth. She would like best of all for her "spiritual wings" to grow, so that she can easily soar up to the Lord. But man still lives with the burden of original sin.

God has mercy on the condition of the poor soul, far from its homeland. He sends his Son so that man can be redeemed, straighten up with his help and come closer and closer to the original beauty with which God has called him to life out of love. Through the encounter with its Saviour and God's grace, the soul can now fight against those tendencies that prevent it from orienting itself towards the Lord. The more and the more finely it pays attention to this, the easier it is - in the sense of our contemplation today - not to be taken in by its natural needs and inclinations.

Her resilience, on the other hand, is strengthened by everything that has to do with God, by prayer, the Word of God, the sacraments, the careful inner journey, etc. However, the soul is weakened when the natural needs become unreasonably and excessively effective. The soul then sticks to the ground, so to speak, bound up in the sensual sphere.

In order that the soul in its powers of understanding, memory and will can more easily accept the instructions of God, it is therefore necessary to practise asceticism, in order to put the fallen nature wisely under control. Our spirit should therefore be the rider who steers the horses, so that the horses do not run away with us.

This requires constant effort, because the sensual inclinations are like small, still uneducated children who must be put in their place, but without breaking them!

To illustrate it with a daily example:

One has eaten and drunk too much far beyond the reasonable level! Everyone knows the consequences: Laziness of the body, the soul becomes dull, the spirit tired.

The vigilance of asceticism avoids this, so that our soul forces are not absorbed, but remain more easily directed towards God. So it is easy to understand how a correctly applied asceticism can help us on our way with the Lord!