



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## SACRIFICE AND DENIAL

In Christian life, as in all human life, we do not always get everything we want. We may passionately desire to be married when we are not. (We may even crave being single when we are married!) We may have sexual desires which cannot be licitly fulfilled -- and these can seem overpowering at times. We may crave emotional or material security -- we may be tired of living just barely ahead of disaster. We may not have found much success in our career when we have put ourselves into it and desired some recognition and results. Failure (however it may be defined) is always hard to deal with.

Sometimes our desire is for something sinful. Then we know as Christians that we cannot satisfy it. Other times, it is for something that is not available to us in our situation in life -- we may want to buy a vacation home but need the money to support an aged parent, or we may have no time for ourselves under the pressures of caring for children. Or it may be that we crave something which God in His wisdom has not given us; we covet what we do not have. Such situations are inevitable. The question is how we deal with them.

One way of dealing with our frustrated desires is by denial: using our will power to deny that we really want what we want. We refuse to let ourselves have what we want, as we should (especially when it is sinful). We apply denial not only to the object of our desire but to the desires themselves. We may try to bridle the desire by our own efforts, to keep it in check. Depending on our will power and the strength of the desire we may even succeed to some degree.

Denial operates in other ways as well. We may try to talk ourselves out of the desire. "I didn't really want that anyway." Or "I would rather have something else and I cannot have them both." We rationalize our denial of the desire.

Or we may simply lie to ourselves: "I don't want that. No good Christian could want that. Thus I do not." This is real denial! But it is not very useful. The desire will not be removed by denying that it is there. We will just refuse to see it. Other people will be able to see it, for it will still come out. But when it does, we will neither see it nor be able to correct it. When, for example, we desire greater wealth and then deny this desire as unfitting for a Christian, we will make ourselves unable to see when we are being greedy. But others will see it in us, when we sound bitter about another's money or resentful of a cousin's inheritance. Or again, we may crave job advancement, and recognize that as pride and therefore deny it. When we start backbiting our fellow workers, we will not recognize what we are doing, since we have blinded ourselves to the desire. We will think our criticisms just and reasonable, and not the result of pride.

Denial is doomed to failure. We admit that our desire is an obstacle to our wholeness. But then we try to achieve wholeness by tearing out the part of ourselves that includes the desire. It is like finding a flaw in a piece of cloth and tearing it out in order to make the cloth whole. Instead we just get a bigger hole.

While self-denial feels virtuous (it is painful to deny ourselves what we want), as an approach to Christian virtue it has two basic flaws. One is that we cannot expect to live out the truth if we are lying to ourselves. We worship One who is Truth. We cannot worship Him with a lie, however well-intentioned. Our Christian life must be based on truth, including the whole truth about ourselves. We learn this over and over, when we try to pretend that we are not really very sinful, and then are brought face to face with our failures. We cannot value His redemption if we have not first recognized the true extent of our need for it. In short, we must always accept the truth about ourselves, as well as about God, as the foundation for our Christian life.

The other basic flaw with denial is that our will is rarely strong enough to bear the weight which denial places upon it. Denial depends entirely on the self: it is something we do by ourselves. God is not needed at all. We may ask God for help, but the very nature of denial is that it makes us depend more on ourselves than on Him. Success or failure depends on whether my will is strong enough, whether I can keep the desire in check, whether I can be vigilant enough. Invariably we find that we are unequal to the task. At some point our vigilance flags, the temptation sneaks up on us and we fall. Even if we avoid a direct failure, all the effort we put into avoiding this one temptation distracts us from our other temptations. While we avoid the one we fall into others. And the attention that goes into the vigilance keeps us from ever attending with all our mind on God. In other words, it hinders our prayer rather than helping it.

Denial then is not the answer. Sacrifice, which we learn from the example of our Lord, is. Sacrifice begins with the acceptance of the desire while recognizing that we cannot fulfill it. We admit to ourselves that we do in fact want what we want, and that as Christians we cannot have it. We must be honest with ourselves. The beginning of sacrifice is the recognition that there is something to sacrifice. Were there no desire -- if we didn't want something we could not have -- there would be nothing worthy of sacrifice.

The next step is to offer the desire to God. This is where sacrifice differs from denial. In both cases we deny ourselves what we want and cannot (or ought not) have. With sacrifice, instead of denying the desire we let it go, we give it over into God's hands. We ask Him to deal with it, admitting that we are ourselves unable to deal with it. Left to ourselves we will become preoccupied, unable to give ourselves to God in prayer, or (for that matter) to pay close attention to much of anything. Our offering to God is a matter of laying our problem before Him in the trust that He will help us out of our predicament. It acknowledges that we cannot deal with our desires ourselves, and asks His help. We let go of our claim to self-sufficiency when we offer our problem to God.

Having made the offering, we can then find in God the fulness of life without the desire. Sometimes the desire is so strong that we cannot see how a happy, fulfilled life is possible unless the desire is satisfied. Loneliness can be so strong that it seems unless God gives us a friend to share our life, nothing else will ever be pleasant. But in placing ourselves in His hands by offering the desire, we accept on faith that He will give us the life that is best for us. If life without a friend is indeed impossible, then a friend will come our way. But perhaps there is another way for us, a way which involves living with the desire (and sacrificing it) for a time. God in His infinite wisdom knows what is best for us. Part of being a Christian is to learn to trust Him. When we sacrifice a desire by offering it to Him, we practice this trust. It makes trust immediate and concrete for us.

Such sacrifice also means that our need becomes an occasion of drawing close to God. We have cast our need on Him, and so whenever we feel the need we will come to Him. He has offered to bear our burdens -- "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you." As we let Him do it, we learn a new closeness with Him. Formerly, when the desire pressed hard upon us, we were alone, to deal with it as best we could. But now we are not alone. He has taken the problem upon Himself, as His own problem. By faith we know that He will deal with it since He is dependable. So when the problem is bad, we go to our Lord, who has accepted responsibility for it. He may of course have something for us to do about it -- we are undoubtedly part of the solution, as we are of the problem. But we are not alone in trying to deal with it.

These instances of sacrifice are what Saint Paul calls the crucifixion of the old man within us. Every time we submit our problems to God, every time we sacrifice our desires by offering them to God for His healing, we live in grace, not for ourselves but for Him. The basis of our strength is God's power over our problems, not our own will power. He has power to resolve them even if we do not. As we admit our weakness in submitting the problems to Him, we allow His power to work in us: His power is made perfect in our weakness. Even the Apostle Paul had his weakness, his "thorn in the flesh", which though he asked three times for it to be healed, God still left in him. (II Corinthians 12) Thus Paul learned that God's power is what matters, not our own. Paul shows us what happens in our lives as well: God uses our infirmities to manifest His power. Our weakness drives us to Him, that we may stand in His power when we are too weak to stand by ourselves.

Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Jesus bids us deny ourselves the object of our desire and to sacrifice the desire itself. To take up our cross and follow Him is to practice sacrifice, and it is based on our willingness to do what we must do and allow God to take the desires which we must give up. To the desires we must apply the cross. Otherwise we exalt ourselves at the expense of drawing closer to God, using self as the basis for our actions (even in denying ourselves). Rather we should be turning ourselves over to God. In giving ourselves to whatever particular sacrifices God asks of us, we live not to self but to God.

However fruitful sacrifice is in the Christian life, it is not usually easy or pleasant. We resist admitting that we are not self-sufficient. We don't like to give up or let go of our strongest desires. All sacrifice involves some death -- the death of the desire if nothing else. And death is not pleasant either! But we should console ourselves with the essentials of our faith: death is not the end, but rather leads to resurrection. The death which we die with the crucifixion of the old man leads to the fulness of life in the new man. It may be hard to see what lies beyond when we are face to face with the death. But by faith we know. Our Lord has told us, and has shown us by going before us Himself. The rewards (Saint Paul tells us) are incomparably greater than the sufferings we have in the world around us.

Saint Peter tells us (I Peter 4; cf. Hebrews 12) that the sufferings of this life -- the sacrifices -- are the sign that we are true Christians and not just pretending to be. For our sacrifices show us that we are sharing the Cross of Christ, into which we are baptized. That is the one Sacrifice which opens to us the blessings of heaven. Our share in His sacrifice is surety of our place with Him in this life and the next.