

The Virtue of Mortification

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Introduction

No one would deny the fact that science and technology have blossomed almost out of proportion in the 21st century. Technology has grown at an immeasurable rate. The effects of technological advances have brought so much comfort, luxuries, pleasures, and have, for certain, made life worth living and long life desirable. The human person, no doubt, is the immediate target of these effects and therefore the direct beneficiary. Human beings get so fascinated by the “latest in town.” The thirst for the latest cars, watches, clothes, handsets, is unimaginable, as it is almost uncontrollable. This threatens what we know as “simple lifestyle.” Possession has become a means of self-identification and recognition in the larger society. Since the love of having increases by having, the result is an uncontrollable passion to acquire, possess and own.

If the current trend were all positive, there would be no need to speak of mortification. But St. Vincent de Paul, ahead of his time, recognized mortification as a powerful tool to sanctity. Mortification is one of those five virtues introduced by St. Vincent de Paul for the members of the Congregation of the Mission. These five virtues are values, which we, as members of the Congregation, pledge ourselves to cultivate and express in our manner and style of living.

St. Vincent on Mortification

St. Vincent’s teaching on mortification is contained in his correspondence. Borrowing from the Latin word *mortificare*, which means, to put someone to the test, St. Vincent taught that mortification is an act that entails denial of the exterior senses: sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing; and the interior senses: understanding, memory and will. For this reason, St. Vincent encouraged continence of seeing, hearing, tasting, speaking, and once again, inordinate desire to know all things (*scientia inflat*).

The conference given by Vincent on 2 May 1659, on mortification, is a reflection on chapter two, articles eight and nine of the Common Rules, on the Maxims of the Gospel. Vincent’s idea of mortification is based on Christ’s condition of discipleship. “If

anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily” (Lk 9:23). St. Paul, in similar spirit, adds: “If you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live” (Rom 8:13). Thus, St. Vincent concludes: “Each one, therefore, should be most conscientious in accepting the overruling of his personal wishes and opinion, and in disciplining the gratification of each of his senses” (CR II, 8). In article nine of the same chapter of the Common Rules, mortification entails also renouncing immoderate love for relatives and parents.

St. Vincent explains mortification on two levels: “There are two things to be done: The first is to deny yourself, that is, to leave the old Adam. The second is to bear your cross and that daily” (cf. Pierre Coste). As the means of this denial, Vincent continues: “There are four ways of denying oneself: judgement, the senses, the will and to renounce one’s relatives and parents” (ibid.). The judgement to be denied includes knowledge, intelligence and understanding. Practically, for instance, to deny ourselves is not for a confrere to refuse to say what he thinks; rather, Vincent says: “He should submit his will... true disciples of Jesus Christ, and true missionaries, ought to submit to God, to our rules, to holy obedience, to holy vocation, to the vow of stability and, out of courtesy, to all men” (ibid.).

In his developed teaching, Vincent says that mortification is about the scrutiny of passion to give reason its proper place in human living. This makes humans different from animals. The fulfilment of passion makes humans behave like animals, while reason, the higher faculty, directs one to God. St. Vincent de Paul emphasized that the practice of mortification is goal-oriented. It is a discipline aimed at detachment from things that disrupt one’s healthy relationship with God. To this end, Vincent said: “... Gentlemen, let us keep this example before our eyes, let us never lose sight of the mortification of our Lord, seeing that to follow him we are obligated to mortify ourselves after his example. Let us model our affections upon his, so that his footsteps may be the guide of ours in the way of perfection. The saints are saints because they walked in his footsteps, renounced themselves and mortified themselves in all things” (SV XII, 227).

A Contemporary Look at Mortification

Our introduction clarified that we live in an age where the challenge of the virtue of mortification is ever increasing. What this means is that the relevance of the virtue of mortification, to both pastoral agents and spiritual life in general, cannot be overemphasized.

Mortification stands as a watershed to counter the unbridled quest for material possessions with which we live. Underscoring this virtue will be of immense help to help check the quest for material goods and comfort. This does not mean, however, not having the frugal comfort which is a natural and inalienable right of individuals.

Obviously, we live in an age where Christian identity is being edged out by unrestrained secularism. It is little wonder then that Pope Benedict XVI insists on restoring the Christian identity as the goal of his papacy. Christ gave mortification as the condition for discipleship (cf. Mt 16:24). This means that mortification will go a long way to restoring the Christian identity in society. People of restraint are living witnesses to the Gospel teaching.

Our age will look at values and life, from a shifted horizon, from that of Vincent in the 17th century; yet this virtue is still (and more so) an important tool to check our pleasure tendencies. If we do or get all that we desire, then there might be a chaotic, “unprioritized-value society,” and a breakdown of moral order. St. Paul puts it succinctly, “I am allowed to do everything, but not everything is good for me. I am allowed to do anything but I am not going to let anything make me its slave” (1 Cor 6:12). The virtue of mortification is the solution to this human dilemma. Mortification says to us that not every passion will be expressed.

Our age has great regard and appreciation for the beauty of nature, and life in particular. Thus, there is the challenge of a new way of living a mortified life without idolizing these natural beauties. Some uphold the divine gift of sex as the “god of our age.” But, Vincent’s teaching on mortification, which is deeply rooted in the Gospel, requires the divine gift for a divine purpose (cf. Rom 11:29). Sexuality is God’s blessing, realised as such in mortification.

Further still, Vincentian pastoral agents need this virtue of mortification in order to be relevant. Our age needs witnesses and will listen to preachers if they are witnesses as well. Mortification says to me: be free from the comfort of the home, in order to experience the “discomfort” of the mission. It says to me: be free from the sweet-scented and highly connected wealthy people, in order to experience the often repulsive body odour of the poor, the sick, the prisoners and the patients of HIV/AIDS. Mortification frees me to renounce immediate gratification for the sake of more important goals, rather than to seek solely what pleases me in the here and now. It says to me: be free to let go of your taste and desire from the natural tendency of having it all your way. Consequently, a Vincentian living a mortified life at any level speaks all that Christian living entails and *ipso facto* re-establishes his/her relevance in our day. The world no longer looks for theorists and speakers. The world intensely looks for witnesses.

As virtue always stands in the middle, contemporary mortification helps Christians, who might misunderstand the virtue and resort to strict asceticism on the one hand, or seek to instil the Vincentian spirit of charity on “the haves” on the other hand. Mortification has charity as its goal (Lk 21:1-4), and indeed makes pastoral agents light for the mission. As our age continues to witness an ever-widening and yawning gap between “the haves” and “the have-nots,” mortification will help restore some form of equity and social justice especially in the third world countries.

According to Robert Maloney, mortification is always for the sake of something or someone else. We give up good things not because we think they are bad. We acknowledge that they are good even as we give them up, because we want something better. This is made explicit in the choices we make daily. Mortification is all about making choices and the goal for our choices. In the Vincentian context, choices are made in solidarity with and for the poor. A confrere who decides to fly economy class instead of first class, when he can afford it, for instance, does so in solidarity with the poor.

In all, mortification comes into play much in the daily choices that we make. Better and luxuriant alternatives are forgone in response to the inner promptings to grow in this virtue.

Conclusion

The position of Vincent that true disciples of Jesus and true missionaries ought to live by submission to God, our rules, holy obedience, holy vocation, stability, and courtesy to all people, remains ever true. Mortification will be a veritable instrument that makes obedience, though dialogical, reflect God’s will as concretised in the superior’s action and option. When the rules are obeyed, a harmonious community built on fraternal love results. Mortification will help pastoral agents and missionaries remain firm and undaunted in the face of difficulties (cf. Jn 16:33).

Vincent’s teaching and insistence on the necessity of mortification makes him a man of all ages. The teaching has an increased relevance in an age like ours where pleasure is enthroned beyond the limits that Christianity admits. Authentic spirituality is that which is rooted, lived and centered on the person of Jesus. The need to embrace the virtue of mortification lies in the fact that Jesus made it a condition for discipleship. Our age needs this virtue now.

Pastoral agents need mortification in parish ministry for there is an ever-growing need to build a true participatory Christian community. Prison chaplains have to withstand the ungrateful nature of the oppressed prisoners, and the unhygienic nature of the environment in some third world countries. Formators will instil this

virtue on those formed only when they live it out themselves. The missionaries working in very difficult countries need mortification to keep up with the challenges. Those in schools, hospitals, and other apostolates need this virtue. Not even those fighting to restore social justice are left out. Thus, what we need is to be another Vincent and Christ in witnessing to this virtue. This is the clearest and universal language of our time today.