

"Let every Christian be committed to tireless peace-making and strenuous defense of the dignity of the human person..." Pope Benedict XVI

March 27, 2008

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I SCOURGE THE BODY ELECTRIC

We consider it normal to punish ourselves to attain physical perfection. So why is it considered odd to mortify our bodies for the sake of spiritual perfection?

By Brian Pessaro

The light on my alarm clock says 5:30 a.m. I rub my eyes with disbelief that I'm up at such a godforsaken hour. I stand in front of my dresser for what seems like eternity as I struggle against my desire to crawl back under the covers. In the end, I conquer... sort of.

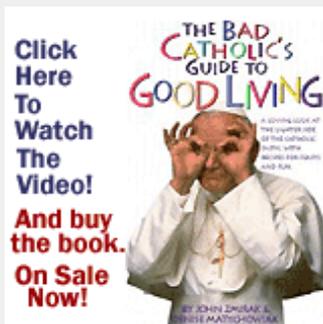
In the darkness of our bedroom from beneath the comforter comes the voice of my half-asleep wife, "Don't even think about resetting your alarm. Go run." I groan and head to the bathroom to get changed. I pull on my sweatpants and sweatshirt and don my scarf, gloves, and wool cap. It's about 35 degrees on this cold December morning.

Apparently, Tallahassee never got the memo that it's in Florida. Downstairs in the living room, I stretch my aching muscles. When I was younger, they would ache after my workout. Now they ache before I begin, as if they're anticipating the punishment I'm about to inflict on them.

The first mile of my run is always the slowest, but by the second I'm warming up and finding my groove. On the third mile I pass by the lake and shiver at the thought of being in water that cold. By the fourth mile I've increased my stride, and my kneecaps feel like they're about to explode. I see the final part of my route up ahead, a long hill. I feel tempted to walk, but I resist the urge and sprint with the last bit of energy I have. At the top, I slow to a trot and then to a walk and catch my breath. Despite the frosty weather, my back is drenched in sweat. As I climb the steps to my front porch, I give myself a pat on the back for



I make the sign of the cross and whisper a prayer. 'Lord Jesus Christ, I offer up to you this cold shower in penance for my sins.'



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working through the pain.

I'm sure many people, even non-joggers, could relate to what I've just described. When it comes to physical exercise, there is nothing particularly shocking about the old adage of no pain, no gain. What I do next though probably would shock a lot of people, or at a minimum, strike them as odd.

Back upstairs in the bathroom, I stand naked outside the shower door. Before entering, I make the sign of the cross and whisper a prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, I offer up to you this cold shower in penance for my sins. I also offer it up as a prayer for..." I state the name of the person and intention for which I am praying, and then I open the door and step into the shower.

Because I'm still hot with sweat, the initial burst of water is a shock, but I get used to it. The water isn't so much cold as it is cool. I have it at about 70 percent cold. After I finish washing, I put my hand on the handle bar that controls the temperature. I take a deep breath and crank it the rest of the way to 100 percent cold. There's about a two second gap where the last of the warmer water clears out of the pipes, and then it hits me. I gasp as the water stings my flesh like a hundred ice cold needles. This final part of my ritual doesn't last long. I say four prayers, an Our Father, a Hail Mary, a Glory Be, and finally the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel.

Tempting though it is to rush through the words and be done with it, I force myself to say them at a normal pace. "St. Michael the Archangel defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray. And do thou O prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls." At the end of the prayer, I turn off the water and dry off to get ready for work.

Corporal mortification received a lot of press recently thanks to *The Da Vinci Code*. In the weeks leading up to the film's release, there was a cornucopia of news stories about Opus Dei, and in almost every one of them, the topic would eventually turn to corporal mortification. Inevitably the story would include a picture or a demonstration of the cilice, a spiked metal chain worn by the celibate members of Opus Dei around their upper thigh for two hours a day, and/or the "discipline," a cordlike whip used once a week against the back or buttocks while reciting a brief prayer. It became so commonplace that I started referring to that part of the report as the money shot.

Putting aside that *The Da Vinci Code's* portrayal of corporal mortification was as inaccurate as it was lurid, the fact that this practice shocks people says something about our priorities. In our society, it's considered perfectly normal to mortify our bodies so long as the reason is secular and the goal is physical. No one bats an eye at cosmetic plastic surgery, Botox, tattoos, and body piercing. Even physical fitness taken to extremes is looked upon as almost *de rigeur*. I'm all for staying in shape, but when I see joggers here in Florida sweating in 95 degree heat during their run at lunch hour, I have to wonder: Are you *trying* to have a stroke?

None of these examples are controversial. Titillating perhaps, but not controversial. But if you perform corporal mortification for religious reasons, to achieve some

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spiritual good, you're an oddball. To borrow an analogy from Boston College professor Peter Kreeft and give it a twist, if I were to announce at a cocktail party that I just got my tongue pierced, I would be surrounded by an eager crowd of spectators. But if I were to announce that each morning before work I take a cold shower as a religious ritual, I would soon be talking to myself.

So why do I practice corporal mortification? First, I do it to identify with the sufferings of Christ. By his Passion, Jesus Christ redeemed the world for all eternity. But because he opened himself to all human suffering, including mine, I can share in his redemptive work. That is why I can say with St. Paul that "...in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (*Col. 1:24*).

The second reason is to cultivate virtue. Most of us who grew up Catholic are familiar with the phrase "Offer it up." As a child I was taught that in some mysterious way my suffering could be offered up to God as a prayer, and he would use it to help someone else. What I didn't realize was that he would also use my suffering to transform me.

This reality became clearer to me when I became a father. Recently, my daughter broke one of my neighbor's lawn ornaments. Although she's only 3-1/2, there was punishment, or if you like, penance—she lost her book and story privileges for a week. When I tucked her in the first night, she wailed because story time is her favorite activity. But the next night, she looked at me and said, "No books or story tonight Daddy. I'll listen next time." In her own innocent way, she accepted her suffering and offered it back to me as a gift, and that gift transformed her into a more virtuous person.

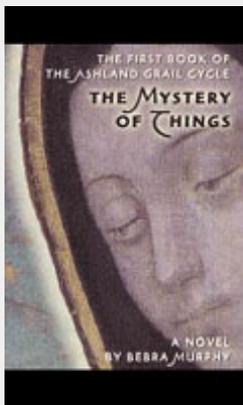
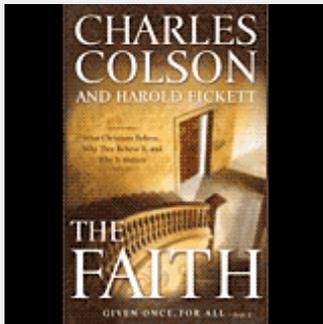
If I, as my children's earthly father, use penance to build up goodness in them, how much more will our heavenly Father use penance to shape us into the sons and daughters he wants us to be for all eternity? That's what many people don't understand about corporal mortification. When I offer up my suffering from a cold shower, it's out of love not fear. It's not an attempt to punish myself in order to dodge God's wrath. It's my way of asking him to transform me into the son he wants me to be.

The third reason why I practice corporal mortification is to be liberated from evil. Yes my body is sacred, but it's also a rebel waging a civil war against my soul. Either I learn how to keep my passions and appetites under control, or they will control me. Too often when temptation comes, I find myself echoing the words of St. Paul: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (*Rom. 7:15*) These conflicts permeate all aspects of my daily life from the serious to the petty.

My body has gotten used to cold showers. It's the interior mortifications that I struggle with the most.

For example, my boss's secretary keeps a tin of chocolates on her desk for the staff. On several occasions, I've begun my day with the intent that I would fast from sweets for a particular prayer intention. But by three o'clock, I'm distracted to the point of becoming a chocoholic version of Gollum and Smeagol from *Lord of the Rings*—"Must have the precious!" Unlike the One Ring though, there's nothing evil about that piece of chocolate. It won't do me any good to go on a perilous journey to Pennsylvania and cast the One Chocolate into the fires of Mt. Hershey from whence it came.

That illustrates the fourth reason why I practice corporal mortification—to build



perseverance. If I can't resist something as inconsequential as a piece of chocolate, how am I going to be able to resist real temptation when it comes my way? These little acts of self denial build spiritual endurance in the same way my morning runs build physical endurance.

Finally, I practice corporal mortification to remind myself that this world isn't heaven. I live a very comfortable suburban life. Other than the occasional illness, pain and suffering are not part of my daily experience. Almost anything I want is at my fingertips—something as simple as a glass of filtered water with ice cubes or something as complex as music downloads from Napster. These are good things, but the danger of having all these creature comforts is that I'll start to get too attached to this world and its false idols—money, power and lust. I'll fall into the trap of thinking this is my permanent home, when it's not. Corporal mortification rouses my senses and reminds me that in regard to this "earthly city," to use St. Augustine's term, I am but a sojourner in a strange land.

As morbidly fascinating as things like cilices, disciplines, and cold showers might be to the uninitiated, the truth is that exterior mortification is a piece of cake compared to interior mortification. To be completely honest, my body has gotten used to cold showers. It's the interior mortifications that I struggle with the most. Like my need to cultivate the virtue of patience and kill my selfish preoccupation with "my time", as if there really were such a thing. What makes this type of mortification so difficult is that when the occasions to practice it arise, they usually involve situations over which I have no control. Cold showers may be uncomfortable, but at least I'm the one controlling the temperature. What's more, they usually arise at moments when I'm at my weakest, like when I'm hitting every single red light on my way home from work after I've already had a rough day. Or getting a phone call from someone just as I'm sitting down to finally read that book I've been dying to get to. Or having to rock my son at 3 a.m. because he's gasping and wheezing with croup, and there's nothing I can do to console him.

So do me a favor if you happen to read or watch *The Da Vinci Code*. When you get to the scene where Silas is flagellating himself to a bloody pulp at his "luxurious brownstone residence on the Rue La Bruyère," after committing the mortal sin of murder and planning to go out and do it again, think of this real life scene instead. Think of a husband and father denying himself the pleasure of an extra hour's sleep in order to exercise and stay healthy for his wife and children. Think of this same man denying himself the pleasure of a warm shower in order to grow in the virtue of self-discipline. The cold water bouncing off his head and shoulders remind him that sin causes pain, and he reflects on the pain he has caused others through his own lack of self-discipline. He carries that thought with him the rest of the day so that later that evening when his family needs him and he is tempted to be selfish with "his time", he'll remember the icy pain from that morning shower, and he will put their needs ahead of his own. When you can picture that, only then will you begin to understand corporal mortification.

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BRIAN PESSARO writes from Tallahassee where he lives with his wife and two children.

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Think of a husband and father denying himself the pleasure of an extra hour's sleep for the sake of his wife and children.