THE PASCHAL MYSTERY:
The Core Of The Spiritual Life

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Any discussion of the spiritual life must always include the Paschal Mystery; it is its foundation, its center, its focus. The spiritual life is, therefore, the living out of the dying and the rising of Christ in our lives. When one reflects on this mystery of dying and rising, one discovers that this mystery is the law of life and growth; life and growth always involve dying and rising. This is clearly exemplified by the seed that falls to the ground. The seed must die—not in the sense that it loses its potential to sustain life—but it must "cease" to be a seed; it sprouts and from it springs forth new life. Thus, life is born and growth is possible when the bearer (e.g., the seed) does not hold on to life for itself. The bearer of life must heed the call to surrender in the interest of fuller life, of growth, of action. Similarly, Christians must let go of the past so that they can have newness, new vitality and new meaning.

There are so many things that humans hold on to: old wounds, painful memories, hurts of the past. And yet, within ourselves, we know that we must let these go; we need to surrender. In a manner of speaking, we must let these "die" so that new life will give us the freedom and spontaneity of the spirit. Without this surrender stagnation, perhaps even deterioration, will result. There are those whom we refer to as the "living dead." They are without life, without enthusiasm, without generosity, because they live in the past. They are imprisoned, bound by the chains of unforgiveness. They do not al-
low themselves to be crucified; they refuse to be humbled—to die. They cling desperately and hopelessly to their "selves" which they protect zealously as though their very lives depended on it.

**PARTICIPATION IN THE PASchal MYSTERY**

Jesus stated the law of death and life very clearly: anyone who tries to hold onto his life will lose it, but one who lets it go will gain it (Mk. 8:35, Mt. 10:39). This is the Easter mystery of Christ, and He demands the same from us. He Himself obeyed this law in His passage from death to the resurrection. Having fellowship with Christ means that we have to undergo the same passage, the same Passover. Therefore, it should not surprise us that pain, suffering and the loss of tight control over our lives are part of the experience of being lifted up by Christ into a life and love which are far beyond our reach and understanding.

**Obedience and Death**

As already pointed out, Jesus Himself had to surrender. Throughout His earthly life, He was not just obeying His Father's will; He was really carrying it out with love. This obedience of Jesus meant a progressive liberation from all that was less than the Father's plan. The center of Jesus' life was the Father; the profoundness of this truth was reflected in His speech when He said that He and the Father are one. Complete union with the Father could only mean that Jesus manifested that His words and actions were in harmony with the will of the Father. He never spoke of what He had not heard from the Father. Jesus was the perfect listener and, as such, the perfect Son because He did only what He first heard from His Father.

This obedience of Jesus was a "leap" into the hands of the Father. It would lead to the cross, to death—a surrender that would not be easy. There was much anguish and suffering in this dying to self and living for the Father alone. Gethsemane was to be this "death struggle" between all that was less than His vocation and His abandonment to the utter mystery of the Father's love. And, Jesus
dies in this abandonment, making an act of surrender: “Father into thy hands I commit my spirit” (Lk. 23:46). Saint Paul says that Christ was obedient unto death; however, this really means obedient unto life, unlimited life, love, freedom and the joy of the resurrection.

Spiritual Life as Living Out the Paschal Mystery

Since Jesus has given us the example, our own obedience must be a stripping and freeing from all that is less than the perfect love for which we are destined. Our obedience must also have the quality of death. If each day our lives are lived according to the Father’s will, then it will be a daily dying. Most of the time we are unaware of how much death is part of our lives. When we do not give into our selfish desires, we die. When we refuse to occupy center stage, we die. This is a daily practice for the final “yes” when we surrender completely and deliver our whole being to the Creator at the moment of death. When there is nothing left of us, then, and only then, can we say with Saint Paul: It is no longer I, but it is Christ who lives in me.

It is clear that growth in the spiritual life will entails both a death to self and an obedience God’s will. Essentially, this double surrender must be incarnated in the practical, daily aligning of our will with His. We become empty in order to be filled with the Father’s life. Christ’s Easter mystery is concerned with voluntary emptying of the fullness of deity that dwelt bodily in Him; He emptied Himself and became obedient even to death.

Jesus invites us to travel this very same journey; there is no other. We have been promised to be filled with God’s fullness, but only if we are willing to lose our lives. All living obedience is a leap out of our securities. The emptiness that results can frighten us and tempt us to turn back from this journey. Yet, we must believe that death and resurrection interpenetrate. The glory and the cross are one. This Easter mystery is the only spiritual life. Our journey to union with God is a process of becoming more and more united with Him in His Paschal Mystery.
PRAYER, LIFE AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

Anyone who prays knows the connection between prayer and living out the Paschal Mystery, the connection between prayer and obedience. There is a connection between the “yes” we speak of in prayer and the “yes” expressed in the affairs of our daily lives. We pray because we love, because we want to grow in friendship with God, because we want God totally. Thus, if prayer is to be genuine and a true search for God, it must conform our will with God’s will in our daily lives.

It often happens that when we speak of difficulties in our prayer, the problem is not in the lack of techniques, not the lack of time or information, not the absence of a suitable environment. Rather, the real issue is a lack of a true understanding of prayer.

Prayer is not just an exercise of concentration, nor simply the time we set aside to speak to God. Prayer, to be true prayer, must always be connected with daily life. What we live should be what we pray about; what we pray about must be what we try to live. Genuine prayer is never divorced from life. Hence, we are able to pray fruitfully only in so far as we try to live holy lives. The authenticity of our prayer arises from the sincerity of the kind of lives we strive to live. If something is deficient in our prayer, surely there is something equally wrong with our lives. Conversely, if there is something wrong with our lives, we will find it difficult to pray because nothing will move us, nothing will motivate us.

Contemplative Prayer

Our usual understanding of prayer is that of petition. But prayer can also be one of praise, thanksgiving, contrition or adoration. Still, there is something common to all forms of prayer. Prayer no matter what kind or how we go about it, must be contemplative. Even our celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours must somehow be an experience of contemplative prayer.
By contemplative prayer is meant a prayer of listening, prayer whereby we go beyond words, a prayer of just being present with the Lord. Contemplative prayer means that we try to be one with Jesus and the Father—not just during the specified period of meditation, but a union continually lived out in our lives, day by day. Contemplative life is living the life of Jesus and the Father. Prayer times or moments of prayer activity are peak moments of listening so as to discern what to live in our lives. These are times to verify whether our lives are in conformity with that of Jesus and the Father. Seen in these terms, prayer always involves our life. They are really one!

The following are illustrative questions showing how prayer can never be divorced from life. They indicate that a life that is a serious effort to be Christ-like can be the mainspring of a fruitful and meaningful prayer.

1) How can we pray the “Our Father” and say “thy will be done” if we still control our lives and refuse to let go and surrender to the Father? In prayer, we say “thy will be done,” but in life we often say “my will be done.”

2) Surrendering to the Lord means allowing oneself to be led into the fellowship of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. How can this suffering be possible if we run away from the cross, from difficulties and sufferings? If we want an easy life, our prayer will be empty.

3) How can we pray for forgiveness from the Lord if we are filled with hostility and anger for another?

4) How can we give praise to the Lord when we are negative, unappreciative of things we have, or insensitive to His presence in people and things?

5) How can we say Jesus is our model and that we want to be one with Jesus in prayer when we have no discipline to concentrate our minds and thoughts, no determination to create some space for the Father as Jesus did during His lifetime?
6) How can we adore Jesus our Lord and God when there are so many other gods and idols in our lives, like money, ambition, and fame?

We could add more questions and prepare a very long list. However, the point to be made is that an examination of our prayer will always involve an examination of our lives. At the final moment of Jesus’ life, He cried to the Father: “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.” This was not the first time Jesus voiced this prayer. It was his daily prayer and it summarizes the character of His earthly existence. All throughout His life He lived and prayed “into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Jesus never lived on his own; He lived only by the will of the Father.

Expansion of Life: An Effect of Prayer

Prayer is a process of refining our perceptions to the single focal point: Jesus Christ. Christ is our way, our goal and our guide. He is this to us if we are wholly one with Him; made whole at last with Jesus, we pass with Him to the Father. Prayer means learning to concentrate, to focus our attention entirely upon and within Christ. This concentration, this narrowing down of our attention, leads us to infinite expansion. It is through Jesus that we pass from everything that is dead, from everything that is restricted, mortal, finite, into the infinite expansion of God, an infinite expansion of life.

We need courage as we come to Christ. We need the courage to persevere, not to be afraid of this “narrowness,” not to be afraid of the demand being made upon us. And, this demand is one that is absolute; it is the demand of faith. Prayer enables us to be entirely open; it allows us to respond to this demand of Jesus’ love. We learn in prayer that the courage and capacity to persevere are freely ours in Jesus Himself. Thus, there is no basis for fear, for postponement, for holding back.

In addition, Jesus tells us that if we are open to Him, then an infinite expansion of life—eternal life—will be ours. This means we
will no longer be living as if we were exhausting some limited supply of life; on the contrary, we become infinitely filled with life when we are one with the source of our being. Living our lives fully as human beings becomes living out the eternal newness of our origin; it means living fully from our center, living from our spirit as it springs forth from the creative hand of God. This is the mystery; this is what we are invited to share and to proclaim to the world.

Prayer is constant exposure to God. If we must be God-like, Christ-like, we must succumb to the life-giving death and break down the defenses by which we hold on to our selfish lives. The Letter to the Hebrews (10:31) says: “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” There is no middle way, no center path. We choose death so as to assent to the overflowing life of God. We make our own the words of Saint Paul writing to the Philippians: “All I care is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection, and to share His sufferings, in growing conformity with His death, if only I may finally arrive at the resurrection from the dead” (3:10-11).

**Importance of Asceticism**

Seldom is asceticism discussed in our times; yet, it forms an integral part of the spiritual life. Asceticism defines the cross which we carry with our Lord. There is no exemption. As already noted, it is the law of life and growth. The original meaning of the word asceticism simply denoted an exercise or training—and its present relevance lies in the fact that the spiritual life does not grow and develop in a vacuum. Certain conditions and a particular pattern of behavior are necessary if asceticism is to evolve and intensify. When we say asceticism, we really mean doing violence to ourselves, sometimes even a deprivation of things we need. Otherwise stated, we mean mortification and self-sacrifice.

The body should be a part of the spiritual adventure to which we are called. In this life the spirit does not exist apart from or outside our bodies. We need our bodies to express our lives; this requirement for the body applies equally to the most profound and spiritual
aspects of that life. A genuine interior life can grow only through the body; this is why we associate asceticism with fasting and abstinence or other bodily exercises of penitence.

It should be noted that asceticism has two dimensions—the material and the spiritual. What we do with our bodies affects us interiorly. Asceticism can help the inner spirit in its steadfastness and fidelity. What asceticism underscores is that spirituality must always be incarnational. To say that we practice mortification and undergo self-sacrifice should mean that we are physically practicing and living it in our lives. This is because spirituality, to be true and really personal, must always be incarnated. If one's spirituality be otherwise, it will be an illusion! Our spirituality must be manifested in the manner we live, eat, speak, drink, work, recreate, dress—in all aspects of our behavior.

We have an overriding tendency to rationalize and justify our easy and comfortable lives. We claim that even when we do not live simply and poorly, we still have the "spirit" of such a life. It is easy to declare that we can live the lives of rich people because we still live our poverty "in spirit." The phrase "in spirit" merely disguises a lie; it is gross dishonesty about our lifestyle. Under such circumstances, our lives which are supposed to follow the example of Christ, become a web of beautiful words drowned in middle-class comfort. When this happens, the only conclusion is that we do not live the lives to which we are called.

Humans are embodied spirits—a unity of body and soul—both of which are still marked by sin. Baptism made us radically holy, but it has not removed all the consequences of sin. Thus, sin remains in our bodies—which are one with our souls—and results in a kind of inclination towards evil. Thus, grace must confront sin in the body. In true Christian life, the body is gradually taken over by grace. Grace puts sin to death in the body; grace mortifies the body to make it capable of being transfigured. Thus, all asceticism leads to this transfiguration. Therefore, asceticism is like death, the death which we know is indispensable to possess new life in Jesus Christ.
Asceticism and the Paschal Mystery

In the discussion of asceticism, the consideration of Christ’s death and resurrection is unavoidable for asceticism is simply our sharing in the Paschal Mystery. It aims to intensify this sharing in the Paschal Mystery. It aims to bring this sharing to its fullness even before our death. Each step towards asceticism takes us deeper into this mystery. Through asceticism the body is gradually transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

In order to bring about our salvation, Jesus took a body to Himself. He became incarnate to confront the forces of sin and to triumph over them in His life and His death. It is in the flesh, says St. Paul, that Jesus triumphed over sin (Eph. 2:14). In following Jesus’ example, we must also put sin to death in our bodies so that the power of Christ’s life given to us at Baptism will triumph.

All ascetical effort must be rooted in Jesus Christ. Asceticism should follow His example and imitate His life. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that His body was given to Him in view of obedience (Heb. 10:5-9). Jesus lived as a celibate. He did not have a place to lay His head (Lk. 9:58). He undertook long fasting (Lk. 4:2). Christ often retired into a desert place to spend the whole night in prayer (Lk. 6:12).

From the scriptures we see that Jesus gave us an example to follow; therefore, our ascetic practices can and should be the same as those practiced by Jesus Christ. Our commitment to marriage, priesthood, or religious life constitutes our following of Christ and His asceticism. In particular, for religious the vows of obedience, poverty and celibacy already constitute an ascetical life. These are the ways in which we deny ourselves and participate in the death of Christ. By obedience, we give up our wills. Through poverty we give up possessions and live simply and frugally. In a life of celibacy we forego marriage and somehow create an effective void within ourselves that the Lord fills.

An Asceticism of Weakness

The aim of all ascetic efforts is to make ourselves nothing, fol-
ollowing the example given by Jesus Christ. A dying to self is necessary because our selfishness is the obstacle to God’s life and the action of the Spirit within us. It is only in self-abasement and humility that the power and grace of Jesus Christ will rule over us.

These days it is fashionable to speak of self-fulfillment, not of self-annihilation. People talk of the individual’s need to realize oneself, to fulfill all his or her potentials. These references are not meant to imply that there is not place for fulfillment in our lives. However, risking the umbrage of humanists and psychologists, “fulfillment,” when not properly understood, can be an obstacle in the development of the spiritual life. Fulfillment should not mean that there is no place for the cross, for suffering and deprivation. It should never lead to selfishness or narcissism. In the spiritual life the only meaning that fulfillment can have is to be completely identified with the Lord. Fulfillment should mean more openness and receptivity to the person of the Lord.

Asceticism, precisely because it always involves the cross, is never easy. We will always be repelled by it. We always have the temptation to take on another life style, an easier way. And, in the midst of these temptations, we realize just how weak we are and that we are incapable of any good on our own. Our ascetic efforts by themselves will not bring about conversion in our lives; we need God’s grace. The power of God intervenes in order to bring about conversion in our lives; we need God’s grace. The power of God intervenes in order to bring our efforts to the perfection which we are unable to attain by ourselves. We must be borne along the journey, supported not by our own strength but by God’s grace.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has been about the reality of the spiritual life. Spirituality is union with God and this union is accomplished only by our participation in the Easter mysteries of the Lord. Yet, all that has been discussed can be summarized in one word: obedience. The life of Jesus Christ can also be summarized in that one word: obedience.
Our obedience to the Father will always mean living the life that His Son has lived. And it is in living this obedience that we die to ourselves and immerse ourselves in the mystery of Christ.

Obedience is not a matter of carrying out orders, nor of merely doing what the superior commands. It is much more. It means committing oneself to the state of being a servant as Christ was—thus making a total offering of oneself. Far from claiming His right to be equal with the Father, Jesus took the form of a slave and came to do the will of His Father. Christ had no will except that of the Father; we may find it difficult to understand this communion between Father and Son. Certainly, it is neither a relationship between master and slave, nor one between exploiter and exploited. The Father's will is neither capricious nor domination; rather, it is the design of redemption and the very heart of mercy. It is, indeed, tenderness itself. Far from crushing or destroying the self, the obedience of Jesus is truly communion with the Father. Jesus Christ gave Himself up totally because the greatest joy and utmost freedom possible is to be united with the One who is our heart's desire. Our hearts are, indeed, restless—until they find themselves in the Lord.