

ALIVE, ALIVE, O

By W. Lawson, S.J.

Would you have started reading this pamphlet if it had been called Mortification?

Fright

The word has an unpleasant sound. It does not appear nowadays in popular medicine, but there used to be phrases like mortification has set in,' which described a serious condition in a wound where the tissues were breaking down and would not heal. Today, people talk of being 'mortified' when they are affronted, shamed, tricked, or hurt. All the associations of the word mortification are distasteful and frightening. When the word is used of spiritual life it is no more attractive. There is a feeling that the virtue and the practice to which it refers are necessary to goodness and therefore have to be tried, but that they are painful and must always be painful. We read of some saints whose practice of mortification is terrifying. Learning of their extremes of penance, we are surer than ever that canonized sanctity is not for us. We have at once a friendly feeling towards saints who seem to have arrived at sanctity without fierce mortification, and who give us hope that we may rise to imitation of their goodness. But we know that mortification must have some place in our lives; and the thought nags at us.

Scripture

We are not reassured when we consult the Scriptures. They are uncompromising.

'Every one that doth not renounce all that he possesseth cannot be My disciple' (Luke 14.33).

There is renunciation, the abandonment of the good things of this life. It can't be anything but painful.

'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily' (Luke 9.23).

The cross is a burden. To carry it every day is a weariness. And to deny oneself, instead of asserting oneself, is to limit life and the joys of life.

'Mortify your members' (Col. 3.5).

'If by the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live' (Rom. 8.13).

The word 'mortify' comes from the Latin word 'mors' which means 'death'. So we are enjoined to kill part of ourselves. Death is to be by crucifixion:

'They that are Christ's have crucified their flesh, with the vices and concupiscences' (Gal. 5.24).

And burial follows upon death:

'You are dead: and your life is hid with Christ in God' (Col. 3.3).

'We are buried together with Him by baptism into death' (Rom. 6.4).

The idea that is taught by those passages of Scripture, some of them in our Lord's own words, is that Christian life means death of some kind—death which we are to inflict on ourselves by doing violence to our members, and which is to result in a hidden life that is equivalent to burial.

Understanding

In part, we accept the words at their face value, just as we accept the words of one of the prayers said after Mass: 'mourning and weeping in this vale of tears'. After saying that prayer honestly and with understanding, Catholics go out of church, meet their friends as they come from Mass, and laugh and talk and are happy together—all the happier, in fact, for having been to Mass and said the prayer about 'mourning and weeping'. In the same way, Catholics read or hear the Scripture about self-denial, mortification, crucifixion, death, and burial, and yet continue to be cheerful and to enjoy life. There is no dishonesty in what may seem to be a contradiction. But the seeming contradiction does need to be explained.

Negatives

Before we look into the subject of mortification, it will be helpful to notice how we talk and think rather about negatives than positives, and about the dark side rather than about the bright side. For many, 'salvation' means, primarily, avoiding Hell; with the attainment of Heaven coming as an afterthought. There is always a sermon on Hell in a mission; but sermons on Heaven are rare. Similarly, charity is narrowed to mean not speaking unkindly about people. In thought and good resolution it does not include, as it should, a whole world of kind, gentle, and helpful regard for others, which shows itself in words and actions. Temperance is made to mean abstinence from strong drink, but not the balanced, athletic power of a trained mind and will. The meaning of prudence is restricted to waiting, pausing, refraining from action, playing safe, and looking before leaping: it does not include, what is often a part of it, leaping quickly high and wide, running a risk, seizing opportunities, and taking time by the forelock. In just that way we fail to give to the idea and practice of mortification its positive side, which is by far the more valuable. No wonder we dislike mortification.

Your Greatest Act of Mortification

What would you say was the greatest act of mortification in your whole life? Think it out for a while, before looking at the answer. Your greatest act of mortification...?

It makes the question harder, to tell you that this mortification is the same for all Christians, that most Christians are not aware of the act until years after it happened, and that many of them, though they now know about the act, do not think about it as a mortification. The greatest act of mortification in your life was your baptism. That surprises you. And the reason why you are surprised is that you are not accustomed to think of the positive side of mortification, which is vivification.

Scripture Again

Go back to the passages of Scripture which we have already examined, and see that far stronger than the idea of death is the idea of life. No matter what words are used to recommend mortification, what is urged is the gaining of life. The purpose of mortification is vivification. (The Creed calls the Holy Ghost *spiritus vivificans*, the Spirit who makes alive.) The virtue, like all virtues, is mainly positive.

Vivification

Mortification is not an end in itself—a practice to be adopted just for its own sake, and without regard to what it does for the soul. It is a means only: it is intended to produce life, and it is good only in so far as it does produce life.

We ought, therefore, to be clear about the two meanings of mortification. There is the narrow and negative meaning, the one that is usually thought of when the word is used; and there is the wide and positive meaning, which is clearer when the word vivification is used for it. Mortification in the narrow sense is for the purpose of producing the blessing called vivification.

It follows that negative mortification must always be measured. It is not good in any and every amount, as though it were good in its own right. It is good only for the effect it has of making the soul more alive: and it is to be adopted only as it gives or increases life. It would be wrong and misleading to suppose that the greater the 'mortification' (or sacrifice, or suffering, or pain) the greater the virtue or merit, so that the greatest saint is the one who suffers most. To think in that way would be to fall into a common and mistaken idea that pain in itself is good, and that pleasure in itself is evil. We would reject that error in its grosser forms—when it says, for example, that if we are enjoying something it is probably wrong: and we may be free from the uneasy suspicion (which is Puritan) of enjoyment in general. But there are many Catholics who have a mistaken notion of the value of hardship, and who suppose that there is always more merit in a good action that is hard than in a good action that is easy. Children (and others) are prompted to make 'sacrifices': and, if they find them very hard, they are encouraged to make them because 'the harder they are, the more merit they will win'. Behind such a statement there is the truth that there can be more love of God in action for Him which is hard than in

action for Him which is easy. But the statement, and others in the same sense, leads to a false valuation: pain is considered good in itself: penances are adopted, and sacrifices are made, according to the hardship they cause: and goodness is judged rather by difficulty in achieving it than by the love of God which makes it. Such teaching would make nonsense of the doctrine that ease in the practice of virtue is a special gift of God, and that the more we love God the more joy and happiness there is in doing His will. The virtue of fortitude enables us to undertake a good life and to persevere in it: but there is need, in its practice, of patience and endurance. But when the virtue of fortitude is completed by the fortitude which is one of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost there is a special ease in undertaking and persevering; and the hardship of patience and endurance is much diminished or is removed altogether. And that ease and pleasure in the practice of virtue are made possible by an extra help from the Holy Ghost, and they give the soul power for a greater love of God.

It is 'vivification' which is good in itself. 'Mortification' is good only because, and in so far as, it produces life.

Life

Our Lord says that He is come that we may have life, and may have it more abundantly. In the passages of Scripture already quoted, death is preached for the sake of life. 'Renunciation' means the abandonment of what-ever hinders us from being disciples of our Lord. We do not think of renunciation or of sacrifice when we pay money for a ticket home. What is in our minds is the joy of being amongst our own people—the positive, not the negative. So we do not think of loss when we give something to be our Lord's friends. 'Self-denial' is a denial of ourselves only in order that Christ may live in us: and that is self-assertion of the best kind, because it makes our character and our personality, giving us a richness and permanence of individuality which can be acquired in no other way. 'Mortify your members', says St Paul: but the inducement he holds out is: 'You shall live', enlivening others as well as yourself. 'Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John 12.24-25). He preaches the Cross, and death and burial, but only because they are the necessary prelude to life and resurrection.

'For we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that, as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life.'

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin may be destroyed, to the end that we may serve sin no longer.

So do you also reckon that you are dead to sin, but alive unto God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Rom. 6.4, 6, 11).

What is to be killed—'mortified'—is your merely natural self: whatever in you does not share the super-natural life which our Lord gained for us by His life and death, and which is available for us in the Church. We are to have the life which our Lord came to give us: we want to have it fully—'abundantly', as our Lord says. Love of God is to fill our minds and hearts, and is to show itself in a great goodness of living—unselfishness, kindness, loyalty, courage, gentleness, joy, patience, and all the other ways in which we love God and love people and ennoble and enrich our souls. The work of rising to heights of goodness can be called 'mortification': but it is 'vivification'; it is the satisfying, attractive work of filling your soul with the grace of God, and of using that supernatural life in full health and liveliness of spirit.

You are Mortified

Mortification, for you, is not a manner of life that you may, in the vague future, adopt if you can screw up your courage to embrace hardship. It is already the state of life in which you habitually live. You are mortified. The 'old Adam' was killed and buried in your baptism, and you rose out of that sacrament into the new life of grace. Now, as you love God and worship Him and try to serve Him, you are constantly strengthening and developing your life. The great mortifications which you perform (and perform gladly, with joy and thankfulness) are your partaking of the sacraments, the chief means of supernatural life, your offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass, your prayers, when you raise your mind and heart to God, the goodness that you show in love of your family and your friends, your respect for them, your care and thoughtfulness for them, and all the other use that you make of grace in your daily life.

Once the main truth is established—that mortification in its full sense means vivification, the life of grace—we can

think, to better purpose, of mortification in the narrow sense—penance of all kinds.

Penance

Like sanctifying grace, which is the essential mortification that makes us alive and keeps us living, this lesser mortification has life for its object. When we possess supernatural life, there can still be traces of death in us; just as, though we are physically alive, we can have undeveloped or stiff muscles; just as a living tree can have a dead branch, or fruit that is shrivelled and sour. The purpose of penance is to remove stiffness and decay, to make life run through our whole being, so that we are not only alive, which is the essential, but lively, which is getting on towards perfection.

Love of God

The motives for this working towards full life are many, and they all come back to the root of all goodness, which is love of God. We sometimes choose hardship rather than ease, to show love of God, doing or suffering for Him at some cost to ourselves. That is love as we understand it well from our human happiness. What matters to us in sacrifices for those whom we love—family and friends especially—is not the price to ourselves but the joy which we give them and in which we then share. When we offer our sweet-ration, we don't say, as our friends in turn take a chocolate: 'O Lord! There goes another one!' It is a sacrifice to give up sweets: but the sacrifice is thought of not as pain but rather as ease to the loving heart. Loving your friends, you must be giving to them—your sweets, your thoughtfulness, your courtesy, your work. You take pains for them: and a most pleasant way it is of living.

Well, doing penance before God is just that: giving Him what we have and what we are, out of love. (Indeed, when our love of friends is part of our love of God, as it should be to have real worth, then we already do penance before God in unselfish devotion to friends.) You see how positive mortification is, even when it means penance. Before we examine the doctrine of mortification, we fear that it means: 'Think of your dearest possession, and then give it up'. But when we discover that it has its roots in love, we know that it means: 'Think of God, whom you love, and of the friends you share with Him, and search your possessions for a present that will please Him and them'.

Work for the Church

There are special reasons, at times, for our gifts to God out of love, as there are special reasons for sacrifices in our human relationships. A mother gives time and energy to making home clean and warm and welcoming for the children when they come in from the day's work. A father does his work to provide a Catholic education for his family. So we, joined to our Lord in love, help Him with His work by our gift of energy, joy, and suffering.

He is concerned for the goodness of the world. We also, being in His company, have a share in His concern, and we take the part He gives us in the work of spreading goodness. In the Mystical Body of Christ, of which we are made members by grace, we give goodness to others by being good ourselves. We pass on to the Church the goodness we receive from our Lord. For the most part, our work is the pleasant activity of virtue—loving God and loving people, serving God and serving people. Sometimes we are allowed to share in the sufferings of our Lord, and our pain and penance then become a gift of love which we make to Him and to the Church, especially that part of it which we know and love best. It is, as a rule, penance which we accept, without choosing to have it. But on occasion we can choose to give when we are free not to give. Such penance makes yet another likeness between our Lord and His Mystical Body, the Church. St Paul says of himself:

'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for His body, which is the Church' (Col. 1.24).

We also, members of the Body, fill up part of what is still to be suffered by the Church. Our suffering, sacrifice, pain, work, and all our penance, give us a greater share in the Sacrifice of our Lord, on Calvary and in the daily Mass. We offer them out of love for our Lord and love for human beings.

Training

A further reason for penance is a commonsense and necessary training of the soul. Our possession of natural life and the faculties that go with it does not at once give us all the ease in living and in using our faculties that we need or would like to have. We may have aptitude for languages or sums or administration: but we need to learn grammar and tables and order. We may have the makings of an athlete: but the athlete has to learn to walk and to run. And in our learning we sometimes have to overcome weariness, laziness, boredom, and reluctance to exert ourselves.

St Paul explains that motive for penance: 'The flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh. For these are contrary one to another: so that you do not the things that you would' (Gal. 5.17).

'I am delighted with the law of God, according to the inward man: but I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind and captivating me in the law of sin that is in my members' (Rom. 7.22-23).

'I chastise my body and bring it into subjection' (1 Cor. 9.27).

We could all profitably follow his example.

Practice

Lent and Advent are times indicated by the Church for penance more deliberately adopted. Both then and in the rest of our lives there is ample opportunity for using penance to show love, to help others, and to train oneself.

Is your penance to be regular? And, if it is, what form should it take? Will you give up sweets, snuff, or cinema?

Will you pain yourself by having tea without milk, or by having tea with milk, or by spoiling some other pleasure?

I suggest a form of penance which will make you do mortification regularly, and which will bring much goodness and happiness into your own life and the lives of others. It is a matter, not of looking round for some extra mortification, but of doing properly what you are already bound to do.

The Daily Round

In everyday life you are never short of opportunities for unselfishness. They come, not as special occasions, but as the continuous obligation of being good. Take those opportunities, and you will have a life filled with mortification and penance of the cheerful and effective sort, springing from love, and nourishing love. There is a saint, John Berchmans, S.J., with the gentleness and simplicity of character which are specially attractive, who said that life in community is the greatest mortification. He meant that living up to the ideal of family life (and other community life) requires constant sacrifice of yourself out of love for your own. You see, once more, that mortification is positive and pleasant. What a life of self-restraint, sacrifice, and hard work of mind and body, to ensure that you never hurt anyone, and that people are always warmer in heart and happier for your existence! But what a jolly life! It is never boring, never chill and dead with selfishness ; but full of interest and affection. Be mortified if you want to enjoy life.

Mortification Begins at Home .. .

Begin, and continue, penance where charity begins and grows. Penance of that sort, and the love that makes it real, will extend outwards from your home into every part of your life.

You can measure how much self-sacrifice and unselfishness you will need, even if you do nothing more than your fair share of work at home. Take your turn at washing-up, and do your regular part of the other housework: save others trouble and annoyance by leaving the bathroom clean and not like an untidy swamp: have a kettle on, ready for a latecomer—you can work out the details for yourself. You see how you will need to think of others, to have care for them, to be interested in their work and play and to let them be interested in yours. All the time you will be loving your family in thought and word and deed, at the cost to yourself of continual thoughtfulness and sacrifice. It is penance: and you (and the family) will enjoy it.

... and Extends in all Directions

With all that practice at home, you will be in good form wherever you may be. You will be courteous in queues, cheerful and helpful at work, kind to the shy, patient with the forward, able to preserve a sense of humour (of proportion, that is) even with the selfish. Instead of afflicting someone with your moans during moods of depression, you will force yourself to look for one more miserable than yourself (if such there be: anyway, the search will be interesting) with whom you can share your slight advantage of good spirits. You will not be for ever peering at your own life and seeking your own interest, in self-centred narrowness; but you will have the wide view, the broad mind, and the good heart of unselfishness. When such growth is the result of cutting back your selfish shoots, then pruning is pleasant—not, perhaps, when the *secateurs* are snipping, but certainly as soon as the operation is over, and you grow in goodness for yourself, and for others who look to you for goodness and have a right to see it.

Whatever form your regard for others takes, it costs you the effort and pain of self-restraint and self-denial. Imposing restrictions on yourself, you make freedom for others: taking small account of yourself, you make much of others. It is a daily penance. It comes into your life at home and outside, in work and in play. It makes you cheerful and uncomplaining in sickness and other hardships; ready with pity for others but never for your-self. It makes you just and kind in your judgement and speech; tactful; sensitive to the feelings of others; alert to know their needs and quick to supply them. Mortification? So it is. But it is also the fun of Christian living.

Look Alive

At sight of our Lord, St John the Baptist said: 'He must increase: but I must decrease' (John 3.30).

It is your formula for mortification. That is self-denial: to assert Christianity in you, to assert the life of Christ in yourself. That is mortification: to live, brightening and warming your world, with the life of Christ.

Look alive!
