CHAPTE R NINE

ASCETICISM AND THE PLACE OF THE BODY IN MODERN MONASTIC PRAYER

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“The position of our body is an expression of our relation to God,” accor ding to a Carmelite Website article about attention to the body during prayer.¹ Although asceticism in the history of monasticism aimed originally to mortify and deny the body in order to liberate the spirit, body and prayer seem nowadays to find a new and different alliance in monastic spirituality. We all know stories of ascetics who fasted over many days or inflicted wounds on their bodies. These ancient monks of the desert practiced severe dieting and mortification in order to reach perfection in their religious life, and this went hand in hand with a philosophical negation of the body, which was considered inferior to the soul. Since such practices no longer have a place in monastic life, how can monks today reach the goal that was aim of ancient asceticism?

Asceticism had been a tool used in achieving perfection in religious life, especially in regard to pure contemplation. So the question is, what is the place of asceticism in modern monastic prayer? Does asceticism improve contemplation and the other disciplines of prayer? The question of asceticism cannot ignore the role of the body, for body and soul are intrinsically connected. We must therefore define the place of the body in modern monastic prayer to understand its connection with ascetical practices. Drawing on field studies conducted in European Catholic monasteries, this chapter seeks to describe the new role of ascetic practices for monastic contemplation. After reviewing the connection between asceticism and prayer in the history of monasticism, I will explore the new place of the body in monastic prayer. Then I will investigate the question of the connection between ascetical practice and prayer in modern monasticism.

Rather than considering the entire theory of asceticism in monastic life, I will focus on the specific role of asceticism as it relates to contemplation. The latter discipline is a permanent and challenging exercise that presupposes a God-centered life—that is, one that involves receiving, serving and communicating with God alone (Jonveaux 2011a). This activity as a permanent state is not naturally given to human beings. That is why professionals of contemplation have developed exercises to help both body and spirit successfully acquire such a God-centered life.

**Athletes of God: Contemplation as Performance**

Early monasticism considered contemplation an arduous endeavor that required training and exercise in order to carry it out. “Chrysostom points out that monks should imitate athletes, who ‘exercise themselves every day in the palestra under a master and by rule’” (Harpham. 1987: 28). Monks of the desert were true athletes of God, seeking to improve their religious capacities in order to stay in perfect contemplation as long as possible. Simeon the Stylite, for example, chose to live on a column to flee civilization. He refused all types of food, except some vegetables, and stood for long stretches of time while praying. Before ascending the highest column, Simeon underwent various stages. After having left the monastery, he spent some time in a well, then at the top of a mountain and finally—because he did not find the tranquility he was looking for—he built a column that was extended over time. He trained by enduring lesser suffering in order to bear greater suffering.

This type of contemplation was a real performance, even a struggle against the demons that came to disturb this angelic state. “The monk was not simply a man at prayer and not simply someone who through ascetic performances constructed a virtuous self as an alternative to the deadening conventions of society. At the heart of his identity was struggle, resistance, and combat with the forces of evil that surrounded the ancient person” (Brakke 2006: 240). Perhaps it would be more fitting to say that this struggle is a part of contemplation. Anthony, as depicted in Athanasius’s *Vita Antonii*, shows us that demons and prayer are often close: the demon comes when Anthony, whom the legend later portrayed as the first monk, is in contemplation, hence prayer is a tool to fight the demon: “The Enemy would suggest filthy thoughts, but the other would dissipate them by his prayers; he would try to incite him to lust, but Antony,