

with external practices that we turn aside from the interior graces God wishes to impart to us. We might also end up by wrongfully 'putting God to the test' if, by our excessive mortifications, we then need to beg for healing miracles to restore our bodily health and mental sanity. Prudence is called for on all scores. 'It is better', Baker observes, quoting Henry Suso, 'to do a little beneath the mean, than over much to exceed it'. And to one who misfires he says, 'Your indiscretion hath lost your labour and your reward. Your service should have been reasonable and you should so have run that you might obtain'.

Thus we are back to where we started, with the injunction by St. Paul to present our bodies to God in an act of worship and as an offering of service. The reminder again is that it is to be a well-reasoned and balanced self-gift, something within our powers and that we can be sure has the blessing of God. By way of conclusion and encouragement we will quote Baker again, this time from his book 'Holy Wisdom' (Sect 3 Chap.6):

Corporal austerities do not by the excess of them, but by the fitness and proportion to the soul's present disposition (lead to perfection); so that some infirm but sincere persons do advance themselves more by ordinary and trifling mortifications than others that consume their strength and spirits with intolerable fastings etc. . . . a reasonable and discreet measure of austerities, not above our power (will yield) the same perfection of observance where the external abilities are unequal.

There is hope, then, even for us.



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Augustine Baker 3

I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your REASONABLE SERVICE'.
(Cf. Romans 12:1 AV)

Christianity is a realist faith, as much of the flesh as of the spirit. After all God himself took a body just like ours. Yet our faith is also one of paradox. Sacred though the world of nature is it is nevertheless passing away and our bodies face the inevitability of the grave. We look therefore for something else, a transfigured creation, risen bodies. Our attitude to the physical is thus in some ways ambivalent since we are urged for instance by St. John in his first epistle *not* to love the world and the things of the world (1 John 2:15). In fact, since our expulsion from Eden we have had to struggle with the environment, battling with the thorns and thistles and bringing forth fruit by the sweat of the brow or the pangs of childbirth.

Surely salvation in Christ should ease our lot? Yet Jesus talks about bearing his yoke and taking up our cross, daily, and throughout the New Testament there are intimations of warfare and struggle in one way or another. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians (9:24-27) speaks of pommelling his body and subduing it, like an athlete in training. We are to aim at winning the race. In our competitive age this is a great weariness if we have to bring it all into religion too. All the same we cannot turn our backs on asceticism

and choose a soft option. Somehow we have to weave our way, with God's help, in a middle course between a mindless and indulgent self-mothering, harmful to ourselves, to others and to our environment, and, by contrast, a harsh and severe self-discipline, which is ultimately anti-God and even more detrimental to the general well-being than its opposite.

If we are serious in our Christian commitment we shall want nothing less than the total fulfilment of God's sovereign will for his creation. We shall accept his invitation to become fellow-workers with Christ, cost what it may. This is the supreme act of worship and service and is what St Paul is concerned with when he says to the Church in Rome: '*present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God*'. If we are to be all for God in this way, then every aspect of our being, body soul and spirit has to be spruced up. That is what asceticism is about.

Christian tradition is consistent in the stress it lays on these things. Father Augustine Baker (17th century Benedictine monk) has some particularly helpful things to say here, in keeping with his general emphasis on the need for discretion and the avoidance of extremes in our spiritual quest for union of will with the divine will. We will look to him, then, to give us some pointers in our own present day search for the right balance in self-discipline.

Baker knew as well as any that the human spirit, in its initial groping towards God who is beckoning it, is confronted by a host of obstacles without and within. These are succinctly described as '*the world, the flesh and the devil*'. (Cf. 1 John 2:16). Our baptismal commitment enlists us in the conflict, and if we are serious in our spiritual quest we will persevere to our life's end. Baker seeks to help us to map out our strategy. Firstly, we are likely to meet an inordinate fear in ourselves that by exercising bodily discipline of any sort we shall injure our health or even shorten our lives. It is strange how we can allow ourselves all sorts of little indulgences or put great strain on ourselves to pursue a hobby or sport we enjoy, for instance, but the mere idea of 'giving something up for God' puts us in a panic. Baker shows us the fallacy of this and insists that '*Corporal matters are to be made to serve the spirit and not the spirit drawn to serve the body*' but at the same time remarking that we must use common sense: '*the doing is to be according to the advice of St. Paul,*

they be holy, (which) helpeth much.

From this cheerfulness of disposition we gain a great deal: '*promptness in all our workings, strength to surmount difficulties, and joy of heart and understanding . . . sweetness in all things, even in the cross itself*'. In this we seek to imitate Jesus and will be strengthened to overcome the temptations of the evil one to despondency and despair. Our main aim in everything must be the seeking of God's will, come what may. Speaking of the individual soul Baker says:

. . . the highest act is a perfect contentment that riseth from a full and entire conformity with the divine will, causing a most prompt disposition to submit oneself in all and by all to that which God will work in her, by her and with her, according to his divine pleasure.

Quite obviously we can discipline ourselves for far lesser motives than this, for mere expediency, to impress others, even, perversely, to gratify ourselves. But sooner or later we shall be found out, by ourselves and by others. As Baker expresses it concerning such a person: '*he still reserveth his own will, and will be sure to put it in execution when opportunity shall be offered it. And in the meantime his will is held in by force (actually) against his will*'. This is **not** true mortification which Baker defines as '*resignation to God, and humility and abatement of self-will*'. Not that this can be achieved overnight. We have to go at God's pace not our own, and it is usually better to let **him** set the agenda instead of trying in our pride to create outlandish ascetical feats of our own.

It is the person who is most faithful in prayer who is most likely to keep on the right track:

The best mortifications are exercised by prayer; yea it is prayer that gives life and virtue to all other mortifications that are exercised out of (ie outside of) prayer. For it giveth light and discretion, to know wherein and how far (one) is to mortify himself and wherein he is not . . . it giveth strength and grace to undergo the mortification . . . and it causeth true profit and advancement to the soul by the mortification.

It is possible, all the same, as Baker tells us, for us to be so preoccupied

different is often self-gratifying. As for ourselves no doubt we find enough in daily living that is harsh and grating, for we live in a stressful and demanding age. Do we need to take on more? Paradoxically the answer is yes. We have to take on more by doing with less, by going against the grain of the materialistic culture that surrounds us. We need all the discernment and wisdom that Baker counsels in order to find our way.

Self-mortification becomes essential in our spiritual journey, Baker stresses, when we are faced with temptation. It is then that what may have seemed like optional extras become obligatory undertakings, to check our greed, selfishness, unrestrained sexuality etc. The extra comforts, food, drink, TV and media intake and so on may need some disciplining. God will give grace for any necessary discipline, Baker tells us, if we seek his help.

Sometimes God asks even more (as for instance when he calls to the monastic life, the priesthood, a dedicated life in the service of a sick relative). The self-sacrifices involved are asked of us by God, and we are enabled. But always, where there is scope for choice, we should be gentle with self and not take on more than is needful, lest, as Baker says, ‘we should fail under the burden and so perhaps leave off the whole of our spiritual course’. Self-discipline in fact must be injurious neither to ourselves or to others:

I must see that it be not hurtful to me . . . that there be no sin or imperfection in it as in regard of myself. I must see that it be not scandalous, that it be not an occasion of sin or imperfection to any other, and that it do not harm or prejudice him in soul, body, fame or goods.

We must not starve our family or friends because *we* have decided to fast! In fact a wise asceticism is usually hidden from the public eye and gives rise to an increase in simplicity and affability in our relations with others. Our religion is not all doom and gloom:

The soul ought to take away or cut off the thoughts of crosses or pains when it is not time to suffer, converting and changing all into cheerfulness of conformity with God, (and) thinking of pleasant and delightful things, so

who willeth that our service be reasonable’. (From the Treatise: Discretion)

The greatest spiritual athletes, Baker reminds us, tend to live long, unless cut off by martyrdom. Bodily self-control makes for healthy living, an idea not foreign today though the motivation is usually a long way from religious, as our saunas and adverts for slimming techniques indicate. **Our** motivation is not longevity but the freeing of the spirit, to reach out in genuine love to our neighbour and ultimately to God.

If we set out on a well thought out pattern of asceticism we can in fact have confidence that God will be watchful in our regard, provided we don’t take matters into our own hands and run to extremes. God created our bodies, as well as the rest of our make-up, so if we can get into step with the way *he* wants us to use and care for our physical nature we shall come to no enduring harm. He knows our bodies inside out, the state of our health, the moment of our death itself being according to his appointment. God, Father Baker observes, is particularly solicitous towards a soul that is sincerely devoted to him:

. . . knowing well the time that in his eternity is determined for the departure of the soul out of the body, and knowing the most inward of the body (as he doth of the soul) and in what case of strength, ability or decay, and how long it will hold out; God, seeing and knowing all these things in a man, doth accordingly bestow his graces on him . . . that the soul ere it part out of this life be prepared for mystic union . . . (Ibid.).

We can therefore trust that God’s sanctifying Spirit is at work in us, if our love of him and of his will is sincere. As our days, so will our strength be.

God, Baker assures us, is as much in control of our prayer life as of anything else – while the body is strong he enables a more demanding sort of prayer, but when it is weakened he requires less. Moreover, contrary perhaps to expectation, truly God-given prayer can often reinvigorate the body, as Baker somewhat quaintly puts it:

Some spiritual writers . . . do say, how that God oft-times by the means of passive contemplations wrought in the soul, doth so far therewith refresh the body that it

is very much comforted and bettered in corporal life and strength that before was very feeble and decayed.

However, for the most part, we have a large say ourselves about the effect our prayer-life has on us from the physical point of view. We have to learn to be properly disciplined and mortified, not striving to wind ourselves up and create artificial results. Such are the vagaries of our psychological make-up which Baker was aware of even in his day, and he cites St. Bonaventure in support of this. Even if God himself sends certain consolations and ‘experiences’ which we can scarcely resist, it is right all the same to hold ourselves back to some extent in disciplined restraint:

If the divine grace do of itself, without our laborious seeking for it, offer itself, and being unsought for doth thrust itself into us, . . . in such a case let the soul neither wholly reject such a grace, nor yet wholly plunge herself into it, especially if that she feel herself to be very much weakened by it; but let her temper herself . . . and hold herself in a certain liberty of spirit, according to that saying of Proverbs, ‘Thou hast found honey; eat of it what may be sufficient for thee’. (Proverbs 25:16). . . . It seemeth to be best to take those divine consolations moderately, if the body be but weak, rather than indiscreetly for a short time to take and enjoy so much delight in them that he afterwards cleanly fly from them, and through the debility of his body cleanly lose them.

Moderation in all things, as we would put it. Baker in fact likens our Lord to a gracious king who invites his servant to a feast, laying countless dishes before him, not so that he should taste of everything in excess and fall ill but so that he may have the joy of choosing for himself:

Even so is our Lord wont to prepare and lay before his choice and beloved friends a banquet (of prayer) filled with unspeakable consolations, whereof they are humbly to take according to the measure of their corporal strength, and the remainder prudently to forbear, and yielding thanks unto him, shall by the said offered

abundance conceive our Lord’s love towards them.

Baker also advises those giving themselves up to a life of prayer not to curtail their food, drink or sleep unduly. Such ideas might seem far-fetched these days to most of us. It is usually much more worldly things than prayer that keep us up late at night, and business or pleasure are more often the only reasons behind the merely snatched bite to eat before rushing off. All the same fasting *is* being looked at again quite seriously in many Christian quarters and all-night vigils are not as rare as once upon a time. Baker is simply suggesting prudence again. It is better to go gently and be able to keep things up than to have one or two dramatic spurts that mark the end of both ourselves and our aspirations. In all our devotions and ascetic practices, then, we are to ‘walk by the King’s high way of love’ realistically, avoiding all exaggeration. To think of ourselves as ‘martyrs of love’, so that in our excesses we even manage to shorten our earthly lives, is hardly what God is asking of us. ‘The tree’, Baker quips, ‘is in no sort to be pulled up by the roots, so long as there is any hope of having any further fruit from it, or that it may be brought to yield more fruit’. All the same, if God takes over, and himself gives us the gift of infused prayer, all is then in his hands, ourselves included.

For lesser mortals like the rest of us, however, there remains the need to assess ourselves in daily living, to check self-indulgence in the matters of eating, drinking, pleasure-seeking of all kinds etc. Our current western culture is blatantly hedonistic, materialistic, individualist, as we know well – instant pleasure and personal satisfaction, never mind the next boy, or girl. But that will not do for the Christian. Baker’s context was vastly different. He was writing for nuns already living a strongly disciplined and ordered life and his concern was to stop them trying to take on even more for the wrong sort of reasons. All the same his counsel is sound for us as well.

He notes that there are two kinds of mortification, what is unavoidable and what we purposely take on for ourselves. The latter is sometimes, but not always, wise. For nuns, under a vow of obedience, the prospect of doing something extra from personal choice *could* be a subtle temptation to a kind of cussed self-expressiveness, an inverted form of breaking free, which in the long run engenders a sense of prideful superiority. Being