

Self-mortification must be moderate, monitored, say experts

VATICAN CITY - Reacting to a report that Pope John Paul II practiced self-mortification, including flagellation, experts in spirituality said ascetical practices are part of the Christian tradition, but should be used in moderation and under the guidance of a mature spiritual director.

“Union with the redeeming suffering of Christ comes through accepting the trials and suffering of life or, like in the case of Pope John Paul II, with the voluntary choice of physical suffering,” said Cardinal Georges Cottier, theologian of the papal household under the late pope.

“Spiritual masters insist this practice must always be prudent and never without a spiritual guide,” because “pathological abuses are always possible,” the cardinal said Feb. 4 in a written response to questions from Catholic News Service.

Cardinal Cottier said the practice of self-mortification did not conflict with what Pope John Paul wrote and preached about the beauty and sacredness of the human body and the obligation of Christians to care for their bodies.

“The human body must be respected, but our nature is wounded by sin, which creates disorder and struggle,” he said. “It is from this perspective that the Christian tradition has cultivated the correct sense of penitence: fasting, discipline, asceticism.”

In addition, Cardinal Cottier said, while “suffering itself is an evil and a scandal that must be alleviated,” Christians can also try to deal with suffering the way Christ did, by transforming his suffering and death into “the total gift of himself for our salvation.”

Pope John Paul, like St. Paul in the New Testament and other saints throughout the centuries, are examples of uniting oneself “to Christ with self-sacrifice and by participating in his sufferings,” the cardinal said.

Jesuit Father Mihaly Szentmartoni, director of the Spirituality Institute at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, said ascetical practices from fasting to moderate flagellation are centuries-old methods of self-discipline and exercising one's freedom.

Father Szentmartoni said in written responses to questions about Pope John Paul's use of self-mortification, reported in a book by Monsignor Slawomir Oder, postulator of the late pope's sainthood cause, that throughout Christian history saints have chosen asceticism as a method for unleashing and perfecting their personal freedom.

They wanted "to be free from the bonds of the body, of sleep, of food, of undesired thoughts," he said, adding that the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are "institutionalized expressions of this desire to be free."

"Flagellation and other disciplines for inflicting pain on the flesh - chains, pebbles in one's shoes, etc. - are used to demonstrate that the person is the master even of pain," he said, just as fasting shows that "man is not the slave of basic needs like hunger or thirst, but that he can eat when and what he believes is sufficient."

At the same time, Father Szentmartoni said, "corporal penitence can become pathological in two ways: if it becomes an aim in itself" to demonstrate that the person can always take more pain, or "in cases where it is self-punishment for some real or imagined sin."

"Self-mortification means inflicting pain, suffering in order to gain control over pain," but it is always experienced as painful, the Jesuit said. "Masochism starts when a person feels pleasure in pain."

Especially when considering the use of ascetical practices, "spiritual direction is essential for spiritual growth," he said.

As with any form of growth or maturity, self-discipline is a gradual process. With teen-agers, who "have an innate need for high ideals and for exercising their will," he said, it is important to start by offering them models and heroes, particularly biographies and writings about the saints.

Then, he said, they should be encouraged to give up some of their free time and to leave their comfort zones by engaging in direct service to the poor.

“Give them a challenge for volunteer work and they will show that they can do it,” he said.

Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins, retired prefect of the Congregation for Saints’ Causes, spoke Jan. 26 at the presentation of Monsignor Oder’s book about Pope John Paul.

Asked about the late pope’s self-mortification, he said, “It does seem like something from another age, but it is not. It is an instrument of perfection, not just in religious life, but in human life.”

Whenever a person wants to achieve excellence, sacrifice is necessary, the cardinal said. Whether striving for holiness or for excellence at work or on the sports field, he said, “it requires denying oneself, making extraordinary efforts.”

“It is not acting against oneself, but striving to perfect oneself,” he said.