

Pastoral Reflection: 5th Sunday of Lent (John 12,20-33)

Mortification

I wonder why life is described by wise people in paradoxical terms. She who gives receives. He who thinks he knows does not know. Silence speaks louder than words. Our Lord Jesus Himself puts forward this paradox, "Whoever loves his life loses it" (Jn. 12:25). He uses the image of the grain of wheat that produces much fruit when it dies (v. 24). Authentic living is through dying.

Dying occurs in many ways. Dying is saying goodbye to what is familiar. It is leaving behind what one has become used to. As one philosopher said, we start dying from the moment we were born. Leaving the dark familiar womb and going out into the light is a form of dying. Learning to walk is dying to our infancy stage. Growth and dying also happen in the intellectual level. Knowledge is a process by which we die to notions we formerly held, in order to embrace new ideas.

In the spiritual level, growth happens when we die to our preoccupation with self and turn our attention to other people. A spiritual adolescent is one who is self-occupied. On the other hand, a spiritually mature person is one who is other-centered. We grow spiritually when our horizon of concern widens and we are no longer caught up with just our own self. The spiritually mature person thinks less about self-fulfillment, rather, he becomes self-transcendent. He is concerned with and works for the growth of the community in peace, unity, justice, and love.

In older spiritual writings, much was often said about mortification. We rarely hear the word spoken or written about today. Mortification is from the Latin word "mors" which means death. Mortifications are little acts of dying to self. These are acts of self-denial. The practice of fasting and abstinence during Lent is a practice of mortification. The same goes for prayer and acts of charity. Mortification is not an old concept. It is essential to Christian life. It follows from what Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn. 12:24).

Another word that is akin to mortification is asceticism. The word brings to mind a person whose needs are few and who practices simplicity in his life. An ascetic has disciplined himself to the point that he is no longer blown about by the winds of trends, fashions, new-fangled ideas or things. The ascetic knows what really matters and then focuses his attention and energies on the weightier things of the Kingdom.

Lent is a special time for mortification and asceticism. We can begin such practices by focusing on the windows of the soul. These are our five senses. When we discipline our senses, we practice asceticism. In our consumer age, for example, going through a mall and buying only what we need takes a lot of discipline. Our eyes, our mouth, our skins, our ears, our noses long for the myriad things that call their attention. We are tempted to buy the dvd movie, the food, the lotion, the vcd album, and the perfume that beckon us to buy, even when we do not really need them. To deny ourselves those things which we do not really need is a modern form of mortification.