Missionary Penance

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Spiritual Thought for the Month

Missionary Penance

by KILIAN MCDONNELL, O.S.B.

“A RELIGIOUS MAN thinks of nothing but himself,” wrote the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In the lives of devout Christians the good pagan often notices a righteous unconcern, a majestic insensitivity, about the welfare of others. This is unfortunately one of the perils of perfection as Nietzsche’s observation is often verified. The effect of God often show a dislike of being disturbed; they manifest a great wariness when it comes to the needs, spiritual and physical, of others.

Perhaps the core of the problem is to be found in the definition of perfection. It goes without saying that perfection is a highly personal affair. Sanctity is my own personal business to which I must give myself with heroic consanguinity. But sanctity is more than personal effort and personal concern.

When I speak of my striving for sanctity, I am not speaking of an effort which is self-sufficient, autonomous, unrelated to other persons who are also destined for God and striving to attain Him. Sanctity is not even, in spite of the expressions found in some spiritual books, the isolation of the soul in God. In the radical sense, isolation of the soul in God is what sanctity is not.

Though the idea of sanctity is highly personal (I-Thou), it is also highly social (we-Thou). Sanctity concerns my relationship to others as well as my relationship to God. If we omit the social, communal aspect, if we think of sanctity in isolation in God from the pain and wants of others, we canonize selfishness posing as undivided love.

We arrive at a balanced definition of sanctity when we define it in terms of the Church (we are not here concerned with the very real sanctity of many Protestants). Sanctity is the love and life of God by which the Body of Christ—the Church—lives. The Mystical Body of Christ has many members. The growth in love is the concern of each member and of the whole Body. The eye cannot see the hand. “I have no need of you.” For the eye there is no health, no growth, indeed no life apart from the whole body. There is no sanctity for the member apart from the body. The isolated Catholic has no sanctity apart from the Body of Christ, the Church; nor is there sanctity apart from the concern for the sanctity and welfare of the whole body.

That sanctity is to be achieved through the life of the Church, in union with and concern for all the members of the body of Christ, is the teaching of both Scripture and tradition. St. Paul wrote: “You are the body of Christ, member for member . . . . There was to be no want of unity in the body; all the different parts of it were to make each other’s welfare their common care.”

About the year 86, Pope St. Clement wrote in a similar vein: “Let the whole of our body (the whole Church) be maintained in Christ Jesus . . . . Let the strong care for the weak and the weak the strong; let the rich support the poor and the poor render thanks to God for giving them means for supplying their needs.”

Lent is usually thought of in terms of increased personal devotion, penance, mortification, fasting, and frequent attendance at Mass. Each man is supposed to put away ease of life and to make up for the neglegences of other times.

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