

UNIT 3B: PASTORAL AND ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

75: Asceticism

(full version)

1. The Purpose of Asceticism—To Create Alternative Persons and Communities

The Greek word *ascesis* has generally been linked to athletic training and associated with St Paul's claim to "have fought the good fight ... finished the course ... [and] kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).¹ However, both Greek philosophers and Christian theologians introduced a moral dimension to the training necessary to receive "the crown of righteousness" for the victor in the race (2 Timothy 4:8; cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24 "the prize"). In essence, Christian asceticism has two sides—"the negative one of self-denial and the positive one of the following of Christ."²

Rather than focus on "lone figures or histrionic practices," Professor Vincent Wimbush of Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University proposes that to understand asceticism the place to begin is:

by trying to account for the formation and development of individuals and communities that define themselves by embracing certain world-views and orientations deemed 'other-worldly'... Such work is constituted by practices and strategies that function both defensively and offensively: they help communities and individuals not only to take flight—physical, psychical, psycho-social, intellectual, spiritual flight—from 'the world', but also to fend off, critique, and reshape that world. In so far as such communities and individuals define themselves as other-worldly and employ strategies and practices for creating, shaping, and maintaining new identities, communities,

¹ See Father John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 34.

² F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), p. 113.

³ Wimbush, "Asceticism," in Adrian Hastings (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 45.

and world-views, they and their strategies and practices can be deemed ascetic.³

In other words, if we do not like certain ungodly practices and attitudes in our present world or in ourselves, we need to strive to define, create, shape and maintain new practices and attitudes. We need to build ourselves as alternative persons and create alternative communities committed to Christ. That is precisely the goal of this lecture on asceticism: to understand how we might go about this holy task.

Such a perspective is entirely in keeping with the dual focus of the Romanian Orthodox theologian, Father Dumitru Staniloae, that “we can’t be resurrected with Christ if we don’t first die with Him,” but we should also acknowledge the “positive purpose” of asceticism which is “the fortification of our [human] nature and its liberation from the worms of sin that gnaw at [our nature] and hasten its ruin.”⁴ Father Dumitru defines asceticism as “that part of spirituality that deals with the rules and efforts that bring [a person] to the first step of the ascent to perfection, to contemplation and union with God.”⁵ The question then arises: Over the centuries, how have specific Christians and Christian communities sought to be ascetic?⁶

2. The Historical Background: Seeking Formation in Christ

The struggle of a person or a community to be formed in Christ is perennial—that is, constant and continuing over time, with experiences of growth and experiences of dying. In *The Tutor*, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215) calls

⁴ *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological Seminary Press, 2002), p. 25.

⁵ Staniloae, pp. 23-24.

⁶ Wimbush concludes his article on “Asceticism” with the reflection that “Christian existence required some sort of expression of the ascetic, of critique and de-formation and re-formation of the world. For most of Christian history, the battle about asceticism has been not whether Christian piety should be associated with it, but about the type, intensity of expression, and meaning of the ascetic that is appropriate or required” (Hastings [Ed.], *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*), p. 46.

Jacob an ascetic, because of the patriarch's struggle with God in the form of an angel.⁷ A close reading of Genesis 32:24-32 suggests why Clement proposed such an interpretation. In the midst of an evenly-balanced wrestling contest, neither God nor Jacob could prevail; and it was God who asked for the contest to end as dawn broke. However, Jacob refused to end the contest, even though he had already been injured in the thigh:

[Jacob said] 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' So [God] said to him, 'What is your name?' And [Jacob] said, 'Jacob' [meaning 'he deceives'] [God] said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel [meaning 'he struggles with God']; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.

What is striking here is that Jacob continues to wrestle even though he has been hurt, and that by asking for a blessing Jacob recognises that it is God with whom he is struggling. **The combination of persistence in the struggle and asking for God's blessing empowers Jacob to receive a new identity**, grounded in the reality that by receiving God's blessing Jacob becomes God's servant, rather than a person seeking achievement in his own strength.⁸ We each engage in the same struggle with God.

Clement's interpretation of Jacob as an ascetic is a sign of how **the goal of Christian spirituality is mystical union with God.**⁹ Such union begins in this life, but is only completed after we die.¹⁰ The key issue in striving for such union is formation in Christ as St Paul cries out in Galatians 4:19: "My children ... I am again in labour until Christ is formed in you." This process of formation seeks to empower any

⁷ See Staniloae, p. 23, n. 5.

⁸ A note for Gen 32.24 in the New American Bible is insightful: "Jacob had struggled all his life to prevail, first with Esau, then with Laban. Now, as he was about to reenter Canaan, he was shown that it was with God that he must 'wrestle'. It was God who held his destiny in His hands." Cf. Gen 32.28 note.

⁹ Cf. Staniloae, p. 23. Although there is a strong link between asceticism and mysticism in Judaism, there is also a firm Jewish affirmation of life in the world and a rejection of original sin and human corruption. Jewish attitudes to asceticism at the time of Jesus are considered briefly in the next section of this lecture. See also the article, "Asceticism" in *Jewish Encyclopedia* which seeks to balance Jewish optimism with "certain ascetic tendencies" at:

www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1888&letter=A&search=asceticism.

¹⁰ See Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1974), pp. 43-44.

Christian to “put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Ephesians 4:24). Such formation in Christ requires a person to be both active and passive—active in being sufficiently ascetic to seek God, but also passive in accepting God’s grace, as we each recognise that “God takes the initiative. We have only to follow. It [Our being formed in Christ] belongs to Him alone.”¹¹

Thus the history of asceticism is primarily a story of how specific persons and communities have sought God over the ages. History is a story: “Hi! Story.” For example, as Wimbush comments in a single sentence that covers five centuries:

In terms of intensity, types of practice, and motivations, the simple renunciatory practices of the primitive Christian communities of first-century Syria were different from Basil’s and Benedict’s more institutionalised, systematized, and moderate monastic asceticisms (4th century and onwards), and from the daring asceticisms of the Syrian Stylites (5th century and onwards).¹²

Of course, particular persons and communities have expressed their asceticism in different ways. St Maximus the Confessor (c.580-662) is right to note that **asceticism is primarily “the slaying of death” in each of us**. As we experience the death of the old person and an “extension of baptism by will,” we are united with Christ, both in His crucifixion and His resurrection, both in His sufferings and His glory.¹³

3. Asceticism in the Gospels: Christ’s Personal Approach to Asceticism on Earth

The ascetic framework in which Jesus began his public ministry was firmly set out by St John the Baptist calling the Jewish people to repentance (Matthew 3:2). Some Pharisees and Sadducees came to John for baptism, but it is not clear whether he accepted them, calling both groups “a brood of vipers” (Matthew 3:7). In fact, as both Josephus and Philo relate, it was a third Jewish sect, the Essenes,

¹¹ Staniloae, p. 24.

¹² Wimbush in Hastings, p. 46.

¹³ Cf. Staniloae, pp. 24-26.

who had a firm commitment to the ascetic life as a means of sanctifying their minds and purifying their bodies.¹⁴ Jesus did not identify Himself with any of these three Judaic sects, but he was clearly aware of them; and they were becoming aware of Him.

After being baptised by the deeply ascetic person of St John the Forerunner, Jesus immediately “was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). In *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, the Jewish Christian theologian, Alfred Edersheim (1825-1875), has reflected on the importance of the Old Testament message of struggling to overcome temptation: **Jesus was acting in the pattern of the Patriarchs and Moses in being “tried and proved”** implementing the words of the Midrash (the Jewish commentary on The Torah) that: “The Holy One, blessed be His Name, does not elevate a man to dignity till He has first tried and searched him; and if he stands in temptation, then He raises him to dignity.”¹⁵

By placing the stress on Jesus overcoming temptation, rather than on fasting as an end in itself, Edersheim draws together the human and Messianic aspects of Jesus’ action:

... whatever Jesus overcame, we can overcome. Each victory which He has gained secures its fruits for us who are his disciples ... and as each temptation marks a human assault (on humanity), so it also marks a human victory (of humanity). But He is also the Messiah; and alike the assault and the victory were of the Messiah....¹⁶

¹⁴ See Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber sit* 75-80 and Josephus, *War* ii. 119f, 122, 137-42, 152f., 162-6, in C. K. Barrett (Ed.), *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, Rev. Ed. (London: 1987, SPCK), pp. 157-162.

¹⁵ Vol. 1, New York: Herrick, 1886; p. 292. Edersheim also comments that Christ’s temptation by the devil “cannot have been derived from Jewish legend.” However, Edersheim acknowledges the relevance of the 40 day fasts of Moses on Mount Sinai and Elijah in the desert as linked to “**the three stages of the history of the Covenant**” in which “**Moses was its giver, Elijah its restorer, the Messiah its renewer and perfecter... Moses fasted in the middle, Elijah at the end, Jesus at the beginning of His ministry**” (pp. 292-294).

¹⁶ p. 294.

For Edersheim, and for us, all three temptations in the desert are resolved “into the one question of absolute submission to the Will of God, which is the sum and substance of all obedience.”¹⁷

In both the temptation in the desert at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus on earth and in the crucifixion at the end of Jesus’ ministry on earth the focus is on Jesus’ determination to do the will of His Father, not his own will (Matthew 26:39).¹⁸ Jesus accepted the Cross, but He did not seek it. We are placed in the same position—that we must learn to be sufficiently ascetic to take up the cross of Christ and to follow him (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27). However, in our struggle, the goal is not to be ascetic for its own sake, but rather to follow Jesus in engaging in the struggle to be obedient to God’s will, as He and we perceive it.¹⁹

4. Asceticism in the Early Church: St Luke’s Perspective in the Book of Acts

The word *askeō*, used in Acts 24.16 is often translated as “to exercise” or “to strive,” but its literal meaning is “to practice myself.”²⁰ In *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Cross and Livingstone begin their entry on “asceticism” by suggesting that this is the only occasion in the New Testament in which the word is used.²¹ But what does it mean “to practice one’s self” in the context of ascetic striving? In the King James translation, St Timothy urges his readers to “exercise

¹⁷ p. 302. Edersheim urges that for Christ and for us “temptation and victory” are “the condition of spiritual greatness. It could not have been otherwise in a world hostile to God, nor yet in man, whose conscious choice determines his position. No crown of victory without previous contest, and that proportionately to its brightness; no moral ideal without personal attainment and probation.” p. 292.

¹⁸ Cf. Edersheim, p. 307.

¹⁹ Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky reflects that “the authentic fulfilment” from following Christ “is impossible without some degree of self-renunciation [and] self-sacrifice: it demands *struggle*.” Strikingly, the “Russian word *podvig* most commonly means ‘struggle,’ but sometimes must be translated more specifically as ‘asceticism’ or ‘ascetic exploit.’” *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), pp. 328 and 328n.

²⁰ *New American Study Bible*, note on Acts 24:16.

²¹ p. 113. *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), with its 311,000 references to Biblical words confirms that Cross and Livingstone are correct, although there are other words that can be translated “to strive,” especially in the context of athletic competition in 2 Timothy 2:5bap.

thysself unto godliness,” or as the NIV translation has it, to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7). Let us look more closely at Acts 24:16 where St Paul defends himself before the Roman Governor Felix with the words: “And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men” (KJ) or as NIV translation has it, “I do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.” Whatever the translation, it is clear that *askeō* (“to exercise/to strive”) has both a physical and a moral meaning, but it is not immediately clear precisely how much asceticism is to be associated with this physical and moral striving.

In an outstanding commentary, *Acts*, the Orthodox scholar Jaroslav Pelikan notes that both St Paul before Festus and his Jewish wife Drusilla (Acts 24:25) as well as St Peter before Cornelius (Acts 10:30) are trying to work out the degree of ascetic self-denial that is appropriate to followers of Christ.²² When Paul came to Ephesus he found that disciples there had not received the Holy Spirit, but had been baptised “into John’s baptism” (Acts 19:2). **This is the key to working out how “to discipline or exercise yourself unto godliness”: you do it as the Holy Spirit guides you to fulfil your earlier baptism in Christ.**

Pelikan describes St John the Baptist as “the supreme embodiment of the ascetic ideal within the New Testament,” yet the baptism given by this remarkable ascetic prophet did not bestow the Holy Spirit.”²³ Pelikan places his key discussion of “ascetic discipline and self-denial” as an interpretation of Acts 24:25, when St Paul is telling Festus and Drusilla about “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.” Pelikan’s calm one-sentence summary says a great deal:

This self-denial extends to all of human life, including the treatment of wealth and possessions, and it includes all seven of what came eventually to be

²² Pelikan, *Acts* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 131.

²³ Pelikan, p. 210.

identified as the seven deadly sins. [i.e. pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony and sloth].²⁴

Thus “to practice a life of ascetic discipline and self-control”²⁵ involves how we live the whole of our lives, not just how much suffering we endure.

5. Asceticism in the Early Church: St Paul’s Perspective in His Letters

Numerous earlier references in this lecture indicate the importance which St Paul attached to asceticism. As with St Luke in the Books of Acts, Paul stresses the importance of baptism: “All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). The implication of this baptism for the life of the believer is stark:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)

That single verse with its emphasis that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” is perhaps St Paul’s definitive advice on how to live out a Christian baptism, as well as a guideline for how much asceticism is appropriate for each Christian life or vocation. In brief, there is no one answer—it depends; it depends on the relationship we each have with Christ through our baptism.

In the next to last chapter of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, when a crying Mr Rochester asks Jane to marry him, she replies that her answer “depends on circumstances” and on the choices that they each choose to make.²⁶ The blind Edward Rochester, with an amputated hand, sees himself as an “old lightning-struck

²⁴ p. 259. The corresponding virtues are humility, generosity, love, kindness, self-control, faith/temperance, and zeal. See the website: <http://whitestonejournal.com/index.php/seven-deadly-sins> .

²⁵ Pelikan’s summary is powerful: “...the book of Acts serves notice that in the first century and in the twenty-first, as well as in the centuries in between, ‘faith in Jesus Christ’ (Acts 24:24-25) and the righteousness it brings through justification (Acts 13:38-39) has set itself apart from ‘the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’ (1 John 2:16) by summoning the disciples of Christ to be ‘the salt of the earth’ (Matthew 5:13) and to practice a life of ascetic discipline and self-control” (p. 259).

²⁶ London: Penguin, 1847/2003.

chestnut-tree,” “a ruin” covered with “decay” who is not entitled to the “freshness” of a relationship with Jane. **Perhaps at times we too see ourselves as too debased in whatever our private and public sins might be to deserve the freshness of a relationship with Christ.**²⁷ Jane’s reply to Rochester is relevant to us if we feel inadequate to grow in our relationship to God. Jane says:

You are no ruin, sir—no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind around you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop.²⁸

That is also true for us. In the shadows of our lives, because of grace (not because of our strengths) we can bless others and be blessed by our relationship to God and to others. After Jane and Rochester have each made their choice to marry, Rochester prays:

I thank my Maker, that in the midst of judgment he has remembered mercy. I humbly entreat my Redeemer to give me strength to lead henceforth a purer life than I have done hitherto!²⁹

The language is formal, but the prayer is Pauline: God judges, but in His grace gives us strength. And if God can do it for Rochester, God can do it for each of us, because there is not a sinner in this room who sinned as consistently as the angry Rochester who felt for decades that he had been unfairly treated by God and by humanity.

6. Desert Monastic Asceticism and Its Impact on the Church

Let us turn from the Biblical perspective to Orthodox praxis—from what the Bible teaches to how that teaching can be put into practice. Lecture 53: Martyrdom and Monasticism has already set out in considerable detail the impact which desert-

²⁷ The website of Whitestone Journal has polled some 7,400 people over the past 14 months and reports in a highly unscientific survey that people vote for their biggest failing as: lust (27%), anger (18%), pride (16%), sloth (12%), envy (11%), gluttony (10%) and greed (6%). The wide spread of the inclination to sin is of interest. See <http://whitestonejournal.com/index.php/seven-deadly-sins> .

²⁸ Chapter 37, p. 493.

²⁹ p. 497.

based monastic asceticism had upon the early Church. Both the eremitical (or hermit) life and the cenobitical (or communal life) modelled respectively by St Antony (c. 251-356) and St Pachomius (c. 290-346) were grounded in an awareness that asceticism could lead to a greater oneness with Christ.³⁰ Perhaps the two most important points to remember from that lecture are: (1) the early monks “were not scholars or clerics, wealthy or with positions in society, but just ordinary people who were sincerely seeking to live out their understanding of the Gospel;”³¹ and (2) The impact of a monastic rule has been to create and sustain “a form of life where dependence on God is to be a felt reality.”³² It is remarkable that during the whole of his life, St Antony could neither read nor write and dictated to a scribe.³³

It was St Antony who hid his later biographer St Athanasius (c. 296-373) in the desert from his Arian persecutors, enabling St Athanasius to defend the Incarnation. In a helpful study of early monasticism, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Stelios Ramfos points out that:

Without the doctrine of the Incarnation there would have been no possibility for a corresponding human deification, which transformed ascetic practice from a (pre-Christian) means of purification into a (Christian) means of inward change.³⁴

It is that process of inward change which is also a possibility for each of us, in the midst of struggle, without going either to the desert or to a monastery.

³⁰ An impressively balanced approach to asceticism was evident in the Christian community in Cappadocia (now Turkey) which began as a series of hiding places in caves in the 4th century, and with the leadership of St Basil the Great (ca. 330-379) grew into an impressive series of cave dwellings, churches cut in rock, hospitals and hostels, much of which can still be seen today (Cross & Livingstone, p. 166). The earlier monastic influence of the Cappadocian Fathers—Saints Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa—grew into a strong community that drew many people to commit their lives to Christ.

³¹ Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. xxii.

³² Daniel Rees, in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason & Hugh Pyper (Eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 446.

³³ Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), p. 388.

³⁴ Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000, p. 52.

Deacon John Chryssavgis has reflected that asceticism should not be identified with individualism, escapism, idealism or angelism, but rather with the “authentic liberation of the person . . . integrating body, soul and society.” Thus “even after years of harsh and frugal living, the early desert Fathers and Mothers would emerge in their relationships as charming and compassionate, accessible and tranquil.”³⁵ Whatever the culture or the living situation it remains true that: “In the final analysis, the aim of asceticism is to regain a sense of wonder, to be filled with a sense of goodness and of God-liness.”³⁶

7. Asceticism and the Calendar of the Orthodox Church Today

Each year the Orthodox Calendar contains roughly as many days committed to fasting from meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, oil, alcohol and sexual intercourse, as “ordinary days” in which life proceeds “as usual.” The aim of such a calendar, with its daily Bible readings as well, is not to acquire “individual virtue,” but rather to live “in an ecclesial manner, being in communion with Christ.”³⁷ As Father Alexander Schmemmann emphasised in *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, the goal of such a calendar and its resulting liturgy is to draw Orthodox Christians into “a living relationship with God and his kingdom,” rather than to observe certain rules and obligations.³⁸

³⁵ Chryssavgis, “The Spiritual Way,” in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 160-162.

³⁶ For further reflections on asceticism and its potential impact upon the person, see Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP), 1985

³⁷ Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, “Some key themes and figures in Greek theological thought,” in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 226.

³⁸ Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1973), cited by Michael Plekon, “The Russian religious revival and its theological legacy,” in Cunningham & Theokritoff, p. 208. For helpful tools to link Bible reading and fasting with the Orthodox Calendar, see *The Orthodox Fellowship of St John the Baptist’s Calendar and Lectionary for 2011* and Johanna Manley’s *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary for Orthodox Christians* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1990). The latter work is especially useful for preserving a balance between liturgical and personal prayer, as Father John Breck suggests in the Preface. Metropolitan Kallistos stresses in the Foreword that: “We read Scripture, not as isolated individuals, but as members of the Church” (p. iii).

With those seasons of the year in which asceticism is uppermost—the fasts of Lent, Advent, the Apostles’ Fast and the Dormition Fast, as well as almost all Wednesdays and Fridays—Orthodox Christians are challenged to decide to what extent asceticism is part of their lives. **The Church offers monastic guidelines, rather than rules for lay people; but it is up to each of us—monastic, clerical or lay--to decide how best to live in “a living relationship with God and his kingdom.”** Whatever degree of asceticism we choose to exercise is a means to that living relationship with God, not an end in itself. Father Alexander Schmemmann warns that:

... however limited our fasting, if it is true fasting it will lead to temptation, weakness, doubt, and irritation. In other terms, it will be a real fight and probably we shall fail many times. But the very discovery of Christian life as fight and the effort is the *essential aspect of fasting*. A faith which has not overcome doubts and temptation is seldom a real faith.³⁹

The real movement in our lives is away from “a symbolic and nominal fast—the fast as obligation and custom”—to the real fast which can be “limited and humble but consistent and serious.”⁴⁰

Father Alexander’s advice on fasting is positive and practical, but challenging:

Ultimately, to fast means only one thing: *to be hungry*—to go to the limit of that human condition which depends entirely on food and, [while experiencing] being hungry, to discover that this dependency is not the whole truth about [humanity], that hunger itself is first of all a spiritual state and that it is in its last reality *hunger for God*... Let us honestly face our spiritual and physical capacity and act accordingly—remembering however that there is no fast without challenging that capacity, without introducing into our life a divine proof that things impossible with men [and women] are possible to God.⁴¹

³⁹ Schmemmann, *Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2001), p. 99; italics in original.

⁴⁰ *Great Lent*, p. 99.

⁴¹ *Great Lent*, pp. 97, 99.

St Cyril of Jerusalem (315-387) developed the same theme some 1,600 years earlier: “Men [and women] can attain to holiness only in God, ‘not by nature, but by participation, by struggle and prayer.’”⁴² Thus trying to live the Orthodox calendar leads directly to the contemporary pursuit of holiness.

8. Asceticism and the Contemporary Pursuit of Holiness

This lecture has hopefully made it clear that Father Alexander is right to say:

There is no short-cut to holiness; for every step we have to pay the full price. Thus it is better and safer to begin at a minimum—just slightly above our natural possibilities—and to increase our effort little by little, than to try jumping too high at the beginning and to break a few bones when falling back to earth.⁴³

Lectures 67 and 68 on deification and St Seraphim of Sarov certainly indicated the heights, so perhaps in order to avoid any broken bones, it is appropriate to note simply with Father John Chryssavgis that:

While the end of *ascesis* may be the vision of God or *theosis*, the way of *ascesis* is none other than the daily life of self-knowledge or integrity, carved out of the ordinary experience of everyday life perceived in the extraordinary light of the eternal kingdom. It is the gradual—and, as a result of our resistance, painful—process of learning to be who you are and do what you do with all the intensity of life and love.⁴⁴

That same reflection about the importance of learning “to be who you are” has been well phrased by St Isaac the Syrian (d. c. 700):

The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within your soul. Flee from sin, dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the stairs by which to ascend.”⁴⁵

⁴² Cited by Pomazansky, p. 70.

⁴³ *Great Lent*, p. 99.

⁴⁴ “The Spiritual Way,” in Cunningham & Theokritoff, p. 162.

⁴⁵ The quotation is taken from a calendar of daily readings. For further insights, see Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000).

Father John suggests simply that the sign “that one is on the right track is the ability to share with someone else.”⁴⁶ That is a good beginning for the pursuit of holiness.

In a profound series of lectures delivered in Europe shortly after the end of the Second World War, *The Struggle for Virtue: Asceticism in a Modern Secular Society*, the Russian Orthodox Archbishop Averky (Taushev) (1906-1976) reminded his listeners and readers that it is wrong to think that “spiritual struggle and asceticism is the lot [only] of certain exceptional people and is required only for monastics.”⁴⁷ Archbishop Averky points out that the difference between monastics (both men and women) and lay people consists:

Only in the *external* forms of life: monks developed for themselves more convenient external forms of life in order more easily and without hindrance to attain the goal of human life, common to all: communion with God... The spirit of life for both monks and laypeople ... must be, of course, *one and the same*.⁴⁸

Within each of us—monastic, cleric or lay person—our “once healthy nature” has been “damaged by sin” which “makes asceticism necessary:”

The essence of asceticism consists in **constantly forcing oneself**, constantly making oneself to do not that which the sin living in us wants to do, but rather that which the law of God, the law of good, requires. Without this, it goes without saying, there can be no success in the spiritual life. The ascetic is one who forces himself [or herself] to do everything that is conducive to growth and development in the spiritual life and does nothing that would prevent this.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ p. 160. Father John Chryssavgis stresses the importance of sharing with others: “**People need others because often the wounds that they feel are too deep to admit to themselves; sometimes, the evil is too painful to confront alone.**” P. 160.

⁴⁷ Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Publications, 2014; p. xix.

⁴⁸ *The Struggle for Virtue: Asceticism in a Modern Secular Society*, p. xxi. Italics in original text.

⁴⁹ p. xv. Bold type in original text.

Archbishop Averky then sets out the goal of seeking to grow into a straight-forward but challenging life style that is genuinely ascetic—to perform “works of love in relation to God and in relation to one’s neighbour.... The ascetic is one who constantly forces himself to perform good works and to refrain from evil works.”⁵⁰ However, “the main thing is not works but [a person’s] inner disposition,” because “asceticism ... is the only trustworthy and reliable means for realising the clear and direct will of God for man” as set out in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification;” and as Archbishop Averky insists “We can achieve this only through the spirit of Christian humility [when] we embrace Christ and learn meekness and humility from Him.”⁵¹

It is clear that the contemporary pursuit of holiness is no different now than in earlier centuries, and the advice of Bishop Ignatius (Brianchaninov) (1807-1867) remains apt:

A resolute determination, enlightened and strengthened by the grace of Christ, can overcome even the most deeply-rooted habits.... A habit initially fiercely resists one who wants to overthrow its yoke, seeming invincible at first, but in time, with constant battle against it, and with every act of disobedience to it, grows weaker and weaker.... If in the course of battle it should happen to you that you are defeated, *do not be troubled*, do not fall into hopelessness, but begin the battle anew.⁵²

Archbishop Averky’s insights about asceticism apply to all of the E-Quip lectures: “It is not enough to undertake a merely formal study. It is essential to apply immediately what you have learned to yourself, to your life.”⁵³

⁵⁰ pp. xv-xvi.

⁵¹ pp. xvi, xxii-xxiii, 48. In keeping with the insights about healing and deliverance set out in Lecture 72, Archbishop Averky notes that “the battle between good and evil goes on in the soul of the ascetic ... [and] is called ‘spiritual’ or ‘unseen warfare’ [and] is the very essence of asceticism or spiritual life.” p. xviii.

⁵² Cited by Archbishop Averky, pp. xvii-xviii. Italics in original text.

⁵³ Archbishop Averky, p. 51.

9. Asceticism and the Global Economy: A New Lifestyle to Protect Creation

Lecture 62: Creation—Applied Theology set out the Orthodox doctrine of salvation “which insists that deification is not only a restoration and a transformation of humans to their divine purpose and calling but through them also to the metamorphosis of the Cosmos itself.” The doctrinal foundations of this perspective are beyond the scope of this lecture.⁵⁴ However, it is important to understand that “a spirit of asceticism ... can lead to a spirit of gratitude and love, to the rediscovery of wonder and beauty in our relationship with the world.”⁵⁵ In this relationship with the world, both in our local living situation and globally, we are engaged in “a struggle to free ourselves from a relationship with the world that is predatory and addictive.”⁵⁶

The struggle is great at this time, not only between the developed and developing nations over how to control greenhouse gas emissions, but more deeply within ourselves, wherever we live. Costi Bendali, proposes that asceticism, grounded in a genuine commitment to fasting, is:

a means to liberate the ‘desire’ from the ‘needs’ within which the culture of ‘consumption’ wants to confine it. Desire would thus be freed to return to its origin, namely to become a desire for God, an aspiration to perfection. In this way, desire opens up to *agape* so to become a loving attitude towards the beings and things of the world.⁵⁷

This approach is more than simply an attempt to move beyond a Freudian understanding of sexuality, but rather an attempt to create a new lifestyle. As Elizabeth Theokritoff suggests: “Love and desire, whether for people, other

⁵⁴ See [Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, “Eastern Orthodox Theology,” in Adrian Hastings (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 185-187.

⁵⁵ Deacon John Chryssavgis, *Light through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), p. 116.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Creator and creation,” pp. 63-75 in Cunningham & Theokritoff, p. 75.

⁵⁷ Nicolas Abou Mrad, p. 249, “The witness of the Church in a pluralistic world: theological renaissance in the Church of Antioch,” pp. 246-259 in Cunningham & Theokritoff, drawing upon Bendali’s *Jeûne et oralité*, Beirut: Annour, 2002.

creatures, things or places, are constantly merging into the urge to grasp, to possess, to keep for ourselves, to consume.”⁵⁸

With respect to the human impact of consumption on ecology, the humanist and Christian message is similar: “In a world running out of resources, the most important ethical and political and ecological idea can be summed up in one simple word: ‘enough.’⁵⁹ The issues arise in how to implement that message. The Orthodox Christian approach is simply to acknowledge that we each have “let the purity [we] received in baptism be sullied in dire fashion;” therefore, as Tito Colliander sets out in *Way of the Ascetics: The Ancient Tradition of Discipline and Inner Growth*, the solution is to “Arise,”

... do so at once, without delay. Do not defer your purpose till ‘tonight’ or ‘tomorrow’ or ‘later, when I have finished what I have to do just now.’ The interval may be fatal. No, this moment, the instant you make your resolution, you will show by your action that you have taken leave of your old self and have now begun a new life, with a new destination, a new way of living. Arise, therefore, without fear and say: ‘Lord, let me begin now. Help me!’ For what you need above all is God’s help.⁶⁰

From an Orthodox perspective, the new lifestyle that the global economy demands of each of us is to learn to rely on God, to seek and to accept his help.

10. Conclusion

To conclude then, our focus should be on asceticism as a viable lifestyle with an awareness that we will each experience our own struggles with whatever prevents us and the entire world from coming closer to God. Whatever our situation, it is appropriate to study the Bible, engage with the fasts of the calendar, and seek guidance from the early Christians—both lay and monastic.

⁵⁸ Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2009), p. 93.

⁵⁹ John Lancaster, “More, more, more,” *The Independent*, 10 December 2010, pp. 11-12, Viewpaper.

⁶⁰ Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1960/1985, pp. 2-3.

Engaging with prayer in the struggles that God permits us to experience is a good start toward building a lifestyle in which we seek to reach out toward holiness and deification in our relationships with others and with the world. With such an approach, we may well become alternative persons who are part of alternative communities. Like Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester, we each make our own choices.