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On Fasting and Praying in Secret

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The philosopher, David Hume, once made a distinction between something he called as genuine virtues and something he termed monkish virtues. Genuine virtues, he said, were those qualities inside us that are useful to others and ourselves. Monkish virtues, on the other hand, are qualities that don't enhance human life, either for society or for the particular person practicing them. As monkish virtues he lists, celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, and solitude. These, he attests, contribute nothing to society and even detract from human welfare. For this reason, he affirms, they are rejected by "men of sense". For a religious person, this isn't easy to hear.

But what follows is even harsher. Those practicing monkish virtues pay a stiff price, he says, they are excluded from health and human community: The gloomy, hare-brained enthusiast, after death, may have a place in a calendar, but will scarcely be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself.

As brutal as this may sound, it contains a healthy warning, one with a discernible echo to what Jesus said when he warned us to fast in secret, to do our private prayer in secret, to not put on gloomy faces when we are practicing asceticism, and to make sure our piety is not too evident in public. If Jesus is clear about anything, he's clear about this.

Why? Why should we avoid all public display of our fasting, ascetical practices, and private prayer?

Partly Jesus' warning is against hypocrisy and insincerity, but it is more. There is also the question of what we are radiating and of how we are being perceived. When we display asceticism and piety in public, even if we are sincere, what we want to radiate and what is read by others (and not just by the David Humes of our world) are often two different things. We may want to be radiating our faith in God and our commitment to things beyond this life, but what others easily read from our attitude and actions is lack of health, lack of joy, depression, disdain for the ordinary, and a not-so-disguised compensation for missing out on life.

And this is precisely the opposite of what we should be radiating. All monkish virtues (and they are real virtues) are intended to open us to a deeper intimacy with God and so, if our prayer and asceticism are healthy, what we should be radiating is precisely health, joy, love for this world, and sense of how the ordinary pleasures of life are sacramental.

But this isn't easy to do. We don't radiate faith in God and health by uncritically accepting or cheerleading the world's every effort to be happy, nor by flashing a false smile while deep down we are barely managing to keep depression at bay. We radiate faith in God and health by radiating love, peace, and calm. And we can't do this by radiating a disdain for life or for the way in which ordinary people are seeking happiness in this life.

And that's a tricky challenge, especially today. In a culture like ours, it is easy to pamper ourselves, to lack any real deep sense of sacrifice, to be so immersed in our lives and ourselves so as to lose all sense of prayer, and to live without any real asceticism, especially emotional asceticism. Among other things, we see this today in our pathological busyness, our inability to sustain lives of private prayer, our growing incapacity to be faithful in our commitments, and in our struggles with addictions of all kinds: food, drink, sex, entertainment, information technology. Internet pornography is already the single biggest addiction in the whole world. Prayer and fasting (at least of the emotional kind) are in short supply. The monkish virtues are more needed today than ever.

But we must practice them without public exhibitionism, without disdain for the good that is God-given in the things of this world, without hinting that our own private sanctity is more important to us and to God than is the common good of this planet, and without suggesting that God doesn't want us to delight in his creation. Our asceticism and prayer must be real, but they must radiate health, and not be a compensation for not having it.

And that, a health that witnesses to God's goodness, is exactly what I see in those who practice the monkish virtues in a healthy way. Prayer and fasting, done correctly, radiate health to the world, not disdain. Had David Hume witnessed Jesus' health and love inside his prayer and asceticism, he would, I suspect, have written differently of monkish virtue.

So we need to take more seriously Jesus' words that asceticism and private prayer are to be done "in secret", behind closed doors, so that the face we show in public will radiate health, joy, calm, and love for the good things that God, whom prayer and asceticism brings us closer to, has made.

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