

## Street Cleaners

A group of nuns living in China at the time of the Communist revolution faced many hardships and unusual suffering. One day the nuns were ordered by the authorities to sweep the streets. In a panic, the abbess went to her bishop and complained about being forced to leave the monastery to sweep the streets. The bishop listened sympathetically and calmly said, "Well, then, blessed Mother, I guess you'll just have to sweep the streets." Faced with an additional activity, the nuns in China had to adjust to their new situation that threatened to take them away from their customary routine and spiritual practices.

Living in the world creates similar situations. Concerns about finances, the work place, raising children and taking personal time often overwhelm our thoughts and result in the neglect of one's spiritual life. Time for activities like praying, reading books that inspire or volunteering at Church does not exist. The key to finding time for Christ is in applying basic spiritual disciplines known as ascetic practices.

Asceticism is not limited to monks taking vows of poverty, leaving the world and living alone in the desert. Christians living in the world need asceticism if they desire not to neglect their spiritual lives. Asceticism is a "lifelong training in self-control that is essential to spiritual growth." (In *The Spirit of Happiness*, By the Monks of New Skete) There exist within the monastic tradition positive expressions of asceticism. "True asceticism can give positive power, vigor, and vitality to our lives. . . We tear down bad habits only to replace them with good ones..." (The monks of New Skete). In this approach, habits leading a soul away from the spiritual life are replaced with actions that strengthen the soul. Living a spiritual life requires "pushing ourselves beyond our own static self-conceptions toward living in an ever-deepening communion with the source of life itself." (The Monks of New Skete). This positive approach facilitates growth, awareness, and spiritual maturity.

As an athlete knows in order to reach a certain goal of performance, likewise spiritual athletes know that prayer is the foundation of all things. A simple ascetic discipline is beginning each day with prayer and contemplating the divine scriptures. Starting with a little prayer each day eventually leads to the forming of a good habit. Every morning spent meditating on how to live each day according to the Way of Christ opens the door to growing in awareness. The soul requires training in order to break destructive ways of being. The result of an active prayer life is having a spiritual awareness of Christ's Way of being. As St. Paul instructs, "Set your mind on things that are above and not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:2). Inevitably, prayer leads to a dying to destructive ways of being.

Dying to one self can be superficial when it is only concerned exterior disciplines e.g., denying oneself meat, dairy products and alcohol. Eliminating meat from the diet does not make one a better Christian. If, however, the abstinence from meat is a discipline

that leads to the realization of a bad association with food as a form of self-indulgence, then the discipline has opened the door to change, repentance, and spiritual growth. "...Dying to self is spiritual shorthand for rooting out all manner of exaggerated self-interest, characteristics of ourselves that constrict us in narcissism and blind self-centeredness" (Monks of New Skete).

Prayer destroys self-centeredness and gives birth to an awareness of the needs of others. The Lord warned against having our treasures in the wrong place when he says, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). When a spiritual awareness of Christ's Way does not exist, the accumulation of possessions fulfills the narcissistic cravings of a soul blinded by an exaggerated self-interest.

Christ is our Life. He tells us that "life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Luke 12:23). Moreover, the Lord commands, "And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind . . . Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:29, 31, 34). Every moment a self-centered desire enters the thoughts, think of Christ who is the source of all desire; He is the Bread of Life and the Way.

Having Christ at the center of one's life changes the perception of the many day-to-day routines. Something as simple as "picking up after ourselves around the house, assuming proper responsibility towards those we love, or listening with complete attention to a person you are having a conversation with" (The Monks of New Skete) are all ascetic practices that train the soul to respect our environment and the gift of other personalities. Making a regular exercise routine if done in order to maintain proper health is an ascetic practice because improper health is a sign of imbalance and excesses. Ascetic disciplines like eating healthfully and in moderation enhance self-control.

The Nuns in China had to leave the peace and quiet of their hermitage in order to sweep the busy, loud, and dirty streets. They discovered how to make that action into an ascetic discipline by not allowing the physical burden to be an empty action. They gave the physical activity of sweeping the street an eternal value by making it a prayer in action. Creation is a gift from God and reflects his beauty. By caring for the streets, they were honoring God and His creation. This made others who walked daily on the streets see their world differently. A clean street gave the message that someone cared how the condition of the city affected the lives of others. In turn, thankfulness was born in the hearts of the people that was not present before. It is in this thankfulness that God is glorified, and the human person is elevated.

In Christ's Love.

+ Fr. Andrew