

Destroying the Body for the Salvation of the Soul: A Modern Theological Approach

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Abstract : Apostle Paul repeatedly mentioned the bodily sufferings that he voluntarily went through for Christ, as his body was in chains for the 'mystery of Christ' (Col 4:3), while on his flesh he gladly carried the 'thorn' and all his pains and weaknesses, which prevent him from being proud (2 Cor 12:7). In his view, God's power 'is made perfect in weakness' and when we are physically weak, this is when we are spiritually strong (2 Cor 12:9-10). In addition, we all bear the death of Jesus in our bodies so that His life can be 'revealed in our mortal body' (2 Cor 4:10-11), and if we indeed share in His sufferings, we will share in His glory as well (Rom 8:17). Based on these passages, several Christian writers projected bodily suffering, pain, death, and martyrdom, in general, as the means to a noble Christian life and the way to attain God. Even more, Christian tradition is full of instances of voluntary self-harm, mortification of the flesh, and body mutilation for the sake of the soul by several pious men and women, as an imitation of Christ's earthly suffering. It is a fact, therefore, that, for Christianity, he or she who not only endures but even inflicts earthly pains for God is highly appreciated and will be rewarded in the afterlife. Nevertheless, more recently, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Veritatis Splendor* decisively and totally overturned the Catholic Church's view on the matter. The former characterised the practices that violate 'the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind' as 'infamies' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27), while the latter, after confirming that there are some human acts that are 'intrinsically evil', that is, they are always wrong, regardless of 'the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances', included in this category, among others, 'whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit.' 'All these and the like', the encyclical concludes, 'are a disgrace... and are a negation of the honour due to the Creator' (*Veritatis Splendor*, 80). For the Catholic Church, therefore, willful bodily sufferings and mutilations infringe human integrity and are intrinsically evil acts, while intentional harm, based on the principle that 'evil may not be done for the sake of good', is always unreasonable. On the other hand, many saints who engaged in these practices are still honoured for their ascetic and noble life, while, even today, similar practices are found, such as the well-known Good Friday self-flagellation and nailing to the cross, performed in San Fernando, Philippines. So, the viewpoint of modern Theology about these practices and the question of whether Christians should hurt their body for the salvation of their soul is the question that this paper will attempt to answer.

Keywords : human body, human soul, torture, pain, salvation

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