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## A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

### The Virtue of Temperance

Yesterday we had thematized the virtue of fortitude, which is so important for following the Lord firmly and perseveringly. Today we will look at another of the four cardinal virtues: temperance.

*"For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom 8:13).*

The disorder that remained in humanity as a consequence of original sin, must return to the order disposed by God, through His grace and our cooperation. It is necessary to wisely restrain the rebellion of the senses and passions against the spirit.

As with the sexual instinct, so too eating and drinking are positive and vital powers of Creation, which the Creator gave us to serve Him. Everything that comes from God bears the stamp of His goodness and love, and we can delight in His works with gratitude and praise. But we must use these good gifts of God in the right way, using them reasonably, so that they do not affect the life of the Spirit.

This is where the virtue of temperance comes into play, which aims to help us find inner harmony and balance, so that we can manage our appetites in such a way that they serve us and we do not remain in inner disorder. If disordered appetites are not restrained, we remain weakened or even fall into sin induced by them. A life that is driven by desire, without restraining and ordering it, cannot be modeled after the Spirit of God. It cannot become profound or bring the spirit to regain dominion in "one's own house," so to speak. The person remains trapped in his inconstancy and, depending on the intensity of the disordered sensuality, remains enslaved.

This is why the Apostle Paul exhorts us to "put to death the deeds of the flesh". This expression refers to the fact that we must put on the brakes and perceive when we lose the proper measure and, consequently, our inner balance.

Let us think, for example, of the consumption of alcohol... How cautious we must be so that our disordered appetite does not bind us to alcohol, so that it does not become a habit or even, by taking it in excess, degenerate into a vice! How much a man's heart rejoices with a cup of good wine (cf. Ps 104:15); but how much he is derailed when he drinks it to excess!

Although it is not so easy to understand, the virtue of temperance is just as important when it comes to eating. If we do not restrain our appetite, we will easily foster our selfishness and focus our gaze on ourselves. Fasting, which, unfortunately, has been almost completely lost in the ascetic practices recommended by the Church (it is worth noting that this is not the case among Eastern Christians), counteracts this disordered appetite.

In a Lenten preface, these words resound: *"For by our voluntary privations you teach us to recognize and be grateful for your gifts, to master our eagerness for sufficiency and to share our goods with those in need, thus imitating your generosity."*

An important point for the practice of the virtue of temperance has been touched upon here. It is a matter of acquiring greater interior freedom. Indeed, every time we do not restrain a disordered appetite, our freedom, which must be totally centered on the Lord, diminishes. Thus, fasting is not simply a disciplinary matter for self-control; rather, it is at the service of the Lord, without considering here many other dimensions of fasting, such as, for example, its efficacy in the fight against the devil.

Then, the virtue of temperance becomes an "interior guardian" to use the gifts of God appropriately, so that they do not affect the life of the Spirit and so that we can overcome the disharmony that original sin and personal sins marked in us. But we will not achieve this without renunciation, what St. Paul calls "putting to death the deeds of the flesh", "mortification"...

Temperance is related to other virtues, such as sobriety, chastity, continence, modesty... If we look at each of them, we will see their inner kinship, because they all serve the same end: to protect and foster the life of the Spirit and, therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

One more point must be added. When we practice the virtue of temperance with our will, we are not only rejecting all debauchery and the serious dangers it entails; but in the long run this virtue will be healing to the restlessness of our appetites our senses. And this effect, in turn, will help equip us for the spiritual combat against the three enemies of our soul. In fact, the practice of temperance is itself an important component of combat.

Of course, the virtue of temperance is not limited only to the sphere of the external senses. We have dwelt in the first instance on this aspect, because day by day we have to deal with it; it is, so to speak, a daily battlefield. This does not mean that we should be scrupulously nail ourselves to the effort of attaining the virtue of temperance or fall into extremes that are unhealthy. Temperance must also be practiced in relation to goods that are not material, for here too there can be excesses and debauchery. There is, for example, a disordered thirst for knowledge, wanting to know everything, or curiosity must be restrained, etc.

Let us end with this wise phrase of St. Augustine, which will give us the proper orientation to practice this virtue: "The virtue of temperance is that love which preserves man uncorrupted and intact for God."