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The Understanding of Asceticism in Christianity¹

Abstract: Just as all the world's religions know asceticism, so does Christianity. This fact raises different questions: Is asceticism the same in Christianity as in other religions? How do Christians understand asceticism? Can we say that there is a Christian asceticism? In this article the authors try to answer these questions. First, they briefly define the term asceticism, and then they outline the biblical foundations of asceticism and its history. Then they show how Christians understand asceticism and in what sense it is Christian asceticism, and its various forms. Finally, they show the criteria of discernment that must be observed in order for asceticism to be authentically Christian and to enable one to live freedom in Christ and the fullness of life in the love of God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: (Christian) asceticism, Christianity, spirituality, discernment

Rozumienie ascezy w chrześcijaństwie

Streszczenie: Tak jak wszystkie religie świata znają ascezę, tak i chrześcijaństwo. Fakt ten rodzi różne pytania: Czy asceza w chrześcijaństwie jest taka sama jak w innych religiach? Jak chrześcijanie rozumieją ascezę? Czy możemy powiedzieć, że istnieje chrześcijańska asceza? W niniejszym artykule autorzy starają się odpowiedzieć na te pytania. Najpierw krótko definiują termin „asceza”, a następnie przedstawiają biblijne podstawy ascezy i jej historię. Następnie pokazują, jak chrześcijanie rozumieją ascezę i w jakim sensie jest to asceza chrześcijańska oraz jej różne formy. Na koniec przedstawiają kryteria rozeznawania, których należy przestrzegać, aby asceza była autentycznie chrześcijańska i umożliwiła życie w wolności w Chrystusie oraz w pełni życia w miłości Boga Ojca przez Jezusa Chrystusa w Duchu Świętym.

Słowa kluczowe: (chrześcijańska) asceza, chrześcijaństwo, duchowość, rozeznawanie

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Introduction

All world religions know asceticism and practise various ascetic practices, e.g. fasting, renunciation, physical penance, vegetarianism, self-restraint, etc. This fact gives rise to various questions: Is asceticism the same in Christianity as in other religions? How do Christians understand asceticism? Can we say that there is a Christian asceticism? In this article we will try to answer these questions. First, we will briefly define the term asceticism, and then we will outline the biblical foundations of asceticism and its history. Then we will show how Christians understand asceticism and in what sense it is Christian asceticism, and its various forms. Finally, we will present the criteria of discernment that must be observed for asceticism to be authentically Christian and to enable one to live freedom in Christ and the fullness of life in the love of God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

1. Terminology

The Greek words *áskesis*, ‘asceticism’, and *asketés*, ‘ascetic’, are derived from the verb *askéin*, which has several meanings: to exercise, to train, to cultivate, to work diligently, to arrange, to form. In the beginning, asceticism meant the realisation of a work through effort and method. At first it had a more physical meaning (it denoted the exercises of athletes, sportsmen), but from Plato onwards it extended to man’s inner life. Thus it acquired an intellectual (asceticism as philosophising), a moral (asceticism as doing good, as control of passions and instincts) and a religious meaning (asceticism is Hippocrates’ term for devotion to the divine). For the sophists, asceticism was one of the areas of education of the young. For Epictetus and later for the Stoics, it describes the attitude of one who voluntarily submits to abstinence and renunciation in order to achieve dominion over oneself (‘self-control’). In the light of this understanding of asceticism, it therefore meant the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual exercises by which one directed oneself towards a goal attainable by a certain method (Miller 2022). Over time, it came to signify all human endeavours for moral and religious growth. In Christianity, asceticism took on several other meanings: bodily penance, mortification, penitential acts, the development of virtue and the striving for Christian perfection (Borriello 1998, 154-159; Laudazi 1995, 211-224).

The term *askesis* is mentioned only twice in the Bible: once in the Old Testament (2 Macc 15:11) and again in the New Testament (Acts 24:16), where the apostle Paul, before the imperial deputy Felix, speaks of his endeavour to “always have a clear conscience before God and man”. The question therefore arises why it was so important to the Alexandrian Fathers, especially to Clement and Origen. The Apostle Paul indeed used asceticism only once, but he speaks of asceticism in broad synonymous terms. The synonym is *gymnasia* (from the verb *gymnázēin*), used by the Apostle Paul when he exhorts his disciple Timothy to

“exercise true devotion” (1 Tim 4:7). A synonym for ascetic is also ‘competitor’ or ‘athlete’ (1 Cor 9:24-27).

Related to ascesis is ascetics, the doctrine of ascesis. It appeared in theological literature in the modern period (17th century). Theology also included the theology of mysticism, which became independent in the 18th century. With the constitution *Deus scientiarum Dominus* (1931), ascetic, together with mysticism, became an integral part of the study in theological schools. This subject had already been taught in many theological schools. Related to ascesis is asceticism, which means doctrine, ascetical exercises and an ascetical way of life. This term was used by H. Bremond (1865-1933) to describe a spiritual movement which was to prevail among some Jesuits and also in the Church after the death of Ignatius of Loyola. It was based on a misinterpretation and dissemination of his Spiritual Exercises. Asceticism expresses itself as an overconfidence in active ascesis, which can lead to distrust in the primacy of grace and the Holy Spirit; it is, in other words, a radical anti-mysticism (Marchetti-Salvatori 1995, 226).

2. Biblical foundations of ascesis

The Old Testament, from its first pages onwards, has a very positive attitude towards all that has been created. Everything that exists is good in itself (Gen 1:31) (Szamocki 2010). The narrative of Joseph (Gen 37:50) shows how much the characters act under the influence of their own desires, but beyond their passions and ideals there is a higher divine plan of history (Avsenik Nabergoj 2022). In the Song of Songs, the highest good for humans is the gift of mutual love (Avsenik Nabergoj 2021). Once settled in the Promised Land, Israel quickly forgot their God and began to seek earthly riches and a secure future. Although God had warned them through the prophets, the people increasingly fell into idolatry and injustice (Hos 2:7-10). The consciousness of their guilt led the people to make various penances to show God their regret and their desire to return to Him, to show their love and devotion to Him (Skralovnik 2022, 265-291). At the time of the apocalyptic books, some new communities arose, which withdrew into the wilderness in order to move towards the coming kingdom. In these communities, voluntary renunciations and preparations for the trials of the messianic times were established. From one of these communities came John the Baptist. He lived the life of an ascetic, preparing the way for conversion and the coming of the kingdom of God by fasting, chastity, renunciation, solitude and prayer (Mt 3:1-12; Jn 1:19-28).

In the Gospel, Jesus makes it clear: “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24) He also made it clear that the source of the fullness of life is not in this world, but in God the Father: “Man should not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). Jesus Himself gives the example of the battle against Satan (Lk 4:1-13) and teaches that demons and temptations

are overcome by fasting and prayer (Mr 9:29). He also taught what true fasting is (5:16-18) and that it should be linked to prayer and almsgiving (Mt 6:1-14).

The apostle Paul emphasizes the spiritual battle (Eph 6:10-12) in which the Christian struggles against the old man (Eph. 4:22), the flesh and its weaknesses (Rom 8:12-13; Eph. 6:8), and demonic powers (Eph. 6:12). It also encourages the constant exercise of self-control, humility, meekness and patience (1 Cor 9:24-27; Eph 4:2; Phil 2:3; 1 Tim 4:7), so that we may live in communion with Christ (Rom 6:1-3) (Skralovnik and Matjaž 2020, 505-518). The Christian, through asceticism, prepares a place in himself for the grace of Christ to work in him, and allows it to attract him to Himself and to strengthen him: "Draw strength from the Lord and the power of His might." (Eph 6:10; cf. 2 Tim 2:1) The Christian's asceticism is based on faith in Christ's resurrection (Eph 1:15-20) and is realised in the power of the crucified and risen Christ (Col 1:29).

Every Christian is called to follow the example of Jesus' suffering and to "walk in his footsteps" (1 Peter 2:21). Following Christ, crucified and risen, is the foundation of Christian asceticism.² That is why the martyr is the model of the Christian ascetic. By dying for the sake of fidelity to Christ, he confirms the redemptive power of the cross.

3. History of asceticism in Christianity

In the patristic era, the general emphasis is on flight from the world as a prophetic protest against the privileges granted to the Church after the first three centuries of persecution. We trace the following emphasis: a) the physical and material dimension of asceticism is central; only material renunciation is supposed to make it possible to truly follow Christ; b) the goal of asceticism is the liberation of the soul; c) ascetics supplement their flight from the world by physical work; in this way they seek to prevent a fall into spiritualism; d) penance is supplemented by fasting and abstinence, by scourging and vigils; from the beginning, some Christians fasted twice a week, on Wednesday and on Friday.

In the first three centuries, the ideal of martyrdom and virginity is emphasised, and later monasticism. The monks of the third and fourth centuries imposed on themselves torturous and exhausting physical exercises: long fasts, vigils, etc. Monastic asceticism, which was highly valued in the East, also came to the West. Under Augustine's influence, interior mortification was emphasised: the Christian life is a battle (*De agone christiano*). But all saw the goal of asceticism in the perfection of love. The East emphasised bodily penance to a greater extent, while the West saw love as both the goal and the tool: the most important tool for learning to love is love (Gozzelino 1989, 101).

² Kierkegaard noted the unique effect of following Jesus through suffering. As Žalec presented his insight: "We should understand that following Christ is the only way by which more suffering means more blessing." (Žalec 2020, 7)

In the Middle Ages, the following emphases in asceticism: a) in reaction to the over-emphasis on physical work, there was an effort to prolong the choir (Mass, prayers and breviary), but physical work continued to be valued as penance; b) the habit of periodic solitude became institutionalised: individuals isolated themselves completely; they left one window open to receive spiritual advice and meals; c) penitential bands, pilgrimages, etc., were introduced. d) the penitential exercises took on a new meaning in the representation of the poor, humiliated and crucified Christ. Francis of Assisi, together with his confreres, lived again in the spirit of the Rule of Jerome: to follow Christ naked (*nudus nudum Christi sequi*); e) the demands and difficulty of study led the Dominicans to understand it as an asceticism; f) the monastic rules gave priority to corporal penance; g) the secularism that entered some areas of the Church led to an ascetic reaction from the extremists (the flagellants); h) the conviction, promoted by Bernard, that no asceticism compares with love, prevailed.

Influenced by the heritage of the Middle Ages, modernity still emphasised the value of suffering and pain in the following of the suffering Christ, but new emphases also emerged: a) the rules of the new orders show a relaxation of bodily penances in favour of interior renunciation; b) with the development of the bourgeoisie and the education system, physical work no longer has primacy, nor does bodily penance; abstinence and fasting are put on the second place; penance and interior mortification are emphasised; c) the teachers of modern asceticism are Ignatius of Loyola and Francis of Sales. The first abolished mortification from the monastic rules and concentrated on penance as the realisation of perfect obedience, while the second directed asceticism to the service of devotion and the radiance of love. No longer only monks and religious were called to asceticism, but every Christian who wished to advance in the spiritual life. d) Asceticism was also opened up to the human sciences. Francis de Sales and the school of St Sulpicius used introspection (self-observation) to evaluate the Christian's inner states; e) love and its growth remained the goal, the stimulus and the justification of all asceticism; f) the devotion of the heart of Jesus (Margaret Mary Alacoque) expanded the asceticism of satisfaction (Gozzelino 1989, 102-103; Ruiz 1999, 448-450).

After the Second Vatican Council, the violent and emotional reaction to asceticism has led in many places to an unreasonable rejection of the rich ascetical heritage. Often overlooked was the fact that, in order to properly understand the various forms of asceticism at that time, it is necessary to place oneself in the context of the ideas, motives and actions of different periods in the past. In the effort to eliminate certain unacceptable ascetical practices (e.g. various forms of mortification of the body, etc.), a sense of gospel asceticism, which has permanent value, has been lost.

4. The understanding of asceticism in Christianity

Ascetic exercises such as "sexual abstinence, fasting, bodily mortification, certain breathing exercises, renunciation, vegetarianism, penitential clothing, prayer methods, inner renunciation of self, have always appeared in the history of religions as a preparation and

a tool for religious enthusiasm, for mysticism in one sense or another. This can be seen wherever monasticism appears: in Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Taoism (...). But asceticism is also found in other areas, in primitive Islam, in later Muslim Sufism, in explicitly dualistic religions, in various forms of Gnosticism and Manichaeism” (Rahner 1964, 82). In view of the factual similarities, the question arises how the various forms of asceticism are different from asceticism in Christianity or Christian asceticism³. The answer is offered by Karel Rahner (1964, 73-104) and Friedrich Wulf (1967, 358-367), who distinguish three forms of asceticism in the history of humanity and in the various religions: moral, devotional (cultic) and magical (mystical).

Christian asceticism is not merely moral asceticism, which usually leads to the control of the self and includes exercises in self-discipline and self-control, so that man may achieve harmony and freedom from dangerous inclinations. If Christian asceticism were only moral, then it would be a tool for the attainment and development of virtue. This is an important part of it, but it is not the whole of asceticism; an important part of asceticism is that the ascetic should not forget the primacy of grace. Christianity emphasises that people are called to the fullness of life in the power of God’s grace. Without it there is neither true freedom nor fullness of life in love.

Christian asceticism is not only a devotional (cultic) asceticism, which includes acts and renunciations that serve to prepare for participation in the worship of the divine. It aims at the purity necessary for an encounter with a holy God. Ritual purity is emphasised in non-Christian religions. The Bible also places great importance on fasting, vigils, sexual abstinence, washing before the celebration of major feasts. This is the origin of fasting, vigils, Eucharistic fasting in the Church. Devotional asceticism springs from the sense of holiness and develops it. The Old Testament prophets warned that this form of asceticism could be in danger of being profaned if a dangerous belief prevails that asceticism confers a moral right to communion with God. Union with God is always a gratuitous gift of God. Man can cooperate with God’s grace, but he cannot acquire it for himself.

Christian asceticism is not a magical (mystical) asceticism that seeks to facilitate mystical experiences by using various techniques of self-control, emptying, concentration, renunciation of reason and will, dying to the world and to the self. It carries within itself the desire for (magical) power. Christian asceticism cannot be a preparation for a mystical experience of God in the sense that various techniques and inner emptying can make possible a direct and ecstatic union with God. Every authentic spiritual experience is a gratuitous gift of God. The various Christian ascetical exercises, which are put into practice by the Christian in personal union with God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit and in cooperation with Him, can be freely used by God Himself to bestow the grace of spiritual/mystical experience, or not. No asceticism can determine or force the grace of *kairos*.

³ Asceticism and its various exercises are practically the same or very similar in the different religions, but what differs is the understanding of what its fundamental origin and purpose is. For this reason, each ascetic practice is different in some way depending on who is practising it or within which religion it is practised. In this sense, we can speak of asceticism in Christianity or Christian asceticism.

When we speak of Christian asceticism, we must always remember that it does not in any way lead to becoming conformed to Christ, but springs from him. It does not aim at the formation of general virtues, but at the consolidation and deepening of union with the Lord, not by its own power, but by the power of God's grace, which springs from faith in the triune God. Christian asceticism is therefore above all a following of Christ, as Vladimir Truhlar says, "who inserted himself vividly into historical-social activity, living in it his service to his brothers - his renunciation, which he completed by his death on the cross. It is precisely with this crucified and risen Jesus Christ that the Christian is experientially united in his asceticism. In this union, his human love-renunciation becomes Christian 'love crucified'." (Truhlar 1974, 26-27)

5. The anthropological-theological dimension of Christian asceticism

The Old Testament account of man's creation makes it abundantly clear that man is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). For the apostle Paul, the body (soma) is man himself. Accordingly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (364) says that the body also "shares in the dignity of the 'image of God'". In Christianity, therefore, corporeality is not an evil to be escaped, but a space of consciousness of self and others, of awareness of the world and of God, "a 'space' of redemptive action, a 'space' of the sensually revealed love of God, which otherwise people would not be able to perceive at all" (Turnšek 2001, 22). The body is also, according to the teaching of St. Pope John Paul II, a topos, a place of encounter between the triune God and man in a fully concrete way (West 2014, 3-8). For this reason, Christian asceticism does not reject the human body, but rather helps man to discover and live his corporeality in accordance with the dignity he possesses as the image of God.

Revelation tells us that original sin introduced a schism between the image of God in man and his other abilities and aspirations. The schism creates images that obscure the true image of God. Because the image of God is dynamic, it takes a long period of time, sometimes decades, for someone to become free from a false image of self and God and allow the true image of God to prevail in him. As long as the body is more influenced by worldly tendencies (e.g. selfishness), it is the epicentre of rebellion against true love. To love is to give oneself to another, which includes accepting suffering and renunciation for the sake of another. The body must be educated for love. Of course, "the epicentres of self-centredness", as M. Turnšek says, "cannot be overcome by will and reason alone, nor by emotions. Christ allowed himself to be nailed to the cross, expressing the radicality of a love that can escape nothing. (...) It is only within this radical relationship of love that everything is torn from death: the body, the soul and the whole world. Only what dies for love truly escapes death. In this vision it is possible to understand why so much is said in the history of the Church about asceticism, overcoming, even mortification" (Turnšek 1993, 12; cf. 2018, 190-194).

In Thess 4:1-8, the apostle Paul describes Christian life and asceticism in the context of faith in the Triune God, which distinguishes Christian asceticism and spirituality from Jewish and Hellenistic asceticism and spirituality (Sorč 2003, 130-131). Through baptism, a person becomes a partaker of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In this perspective, the Christian life is an ongoing asceticism, through which the Passover, i.e. the passage from death to life, is realized, and the baptismal rebirth, through which man becomes a free child of God (1 Cor 15:31; 2 Cor 4:10-12).

The Apostle Paul was deeply aware of freedom in Christ and therefore stressed that every Christian should be aware that he is called to live it: "For you, brothers, are called to freedom" (Gal 5:13). At the same time, he was aware of the fragility and vulnerability of this freedom and of the duty of each one of us to acquire it (Gal 5:13-26). It is from the experience of freedom in Christ that the awareness of the duty and responsibility for it is born in the Christian, and of the need for an asceticism that would help him to live it, to build it up and to avoid its dangers (Szentmártoni 2015, 41).

Christian asceticism is not only the fruit of man's own strength and efforts, but above all a response to God's gratuitous love. It enables man to live in harmony with his body, which, according to the teaching of St. Pope John Paul II (2006, 9;11), "remembers" its Creator, the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit, and calls him to become aware of him and to live out the self-giving love that He has imprinted in him.

To live ascetically is to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who leads man from slavery to the 'flesh' to the freedom of the children of God, so that he may freely fulfil and cooperate with what God is doing in him. The way to evangelical freedom involves a voluntary renunciation of all that is bad and of many of the world's goods and values. When someone, with the help of God's free grace, puts God at the centre of his life and becomes obedient to the laws of his love, he frees himself from his selfishness. True freedom is found only in complete obedience to love and complete dependence on it, which is also truth (Turnšek 2001, 24). To live ascetically means to live a real mystical relationship with God. In the mystical relationship with God, man is called to taste his love and mercy, and to live this experience of love and loving-kindness in his daily life. A genuine mystical relationship means "a leap into the unknown-known", a leap into the embrace of God (into the arms of God), which liberates man from narcissism and egoistic self-centredness (Pevc Rozman 2017, 298).

6. Forms of Christian asceticism

There are different forms of Christian asceticism. Alejandro Masoliver Masoliver (1994, 98) proposes a division into the negative, which involves the renunciation of everything that can oppose an integral following of Christ, a full participation in the paschal mystery and the eschatological hope, and the positive, which involves the mortification of everything that is not fully Christian. In reality, these are complementary aspects of one and the same

ascesis. Anton Mlinar speaks of two forms of ascesis. “Positive ascesis represents all forms of willing, intentional renunciation for the sake of a particular interest. The negative method is that where there is a mere renunciation without any direct benefit to the one renouncing. [Both forms are constant and present in all times, in all places and in all cultures” (Mlinar 1994, 111). An interesting division is offered by Servais Pinckaers (2000, 189), who divides ascesis into passive ascesis (acceptance of trials that come independently of our will, such as illness, failure, suffering, poverty, etc., cf. 2 Cor 6:4-5; Rom 5:3-5); and active (which depends on our will and includes fasts, vigils, renunciations, penances and various efforts; cf. 2 Cor 6:5-6). Mihály Szentmártoni (2015, 41) also maintains the twofold division and points out: “From the perception of freedom for the positive ascetical exercises are born, which have the purpose of growing in love for God and Jesus Christ. From the perception of freedom from, i.e. from the limitation of our freedom, are born negative or indirect ascetical exercises which seek to remove the obstacles on the way to perfection, or to refuse to be slaves of anyone.”

The main purpose of the positive ascetical exercises is to progress in love for God and through God for oneself, others and creation, and in the freedom of the sonship of God in a direct way. This includes, above all, meditation, spiritual conversation and spiritual direction, spiritual talks and homilies, spiritual writings, spiritual exercises and days of recollection and, in a special way, prayer, which is certainly of primary importance and must permeate, illuminate and guide all ascetical exercises. The negative (indirect) ascetical exercises involve a certain renunciation, which does not primarily mean the renunciation of sin, but also the renunciation of values and things that are good in themselves and which the ascetic could have, but which he renounces for the sake of some higher goal. The Christian must keep this constantly before his eyes, for only in this way does he realize that renunciation, penance, mortification and all ascetic exercises are only tools, and that the values and things he has renounced have not become bad, but still have their value. This way of seeing helps him to look positively on renunciation and penance and to understand their indirect role in spiritual maturation. Among the exercises that indirectly help to grow in love by removing various obstacles on the way to a deeper experience of God’s love and freedom in it are silence, bodily penance, renunciation and sacrifice (Szentmártoni 1990, 54-66).

7. Criteria for discernment

From the point of view of logotherapy, a renunciation is pathological or pathogenic if it is not rational. In its extreme form, a pathological renunciation may be masochistic. Some mental patients want to be martyrs in every way and enjoy this role. Pathogenic renunciation is typical of egoists who want to please everyone. They want to buy love, recognition and gratitude by giving up, or to protect themselves from being rejected. In the long term,

it always causes illness. For such renunciation comes from an inner weakness (they do not want to disappoint other people in any way) and not from the strength that comes from true love of oneself and others. What is needed is a positive motivation, grounded in sense and directed towards the realisation of values. Meaningful renunciation is independent of any gratitude. Whoever makes it is doing so because of a decision to do so freely and out of love. The motive is therefore in the value itself, which is sought to be achieved in this way (Lucas 1991, 102-108).

Because human nature is wounded by original sin (Roszak 2022), asceticism can degenerate into some form of self-punishment. In Christianity, masochism manifests itself - often covered by various Christian illusions - as identification with the suffering Christ. A particular form of this is moral masochism, which manifests itself in constant, more or less explicit punishment, emotional tension and frustration. Such persons show by their behaviour a subconscious need to accept punishment and to be underestimated. They always present themselves in the worst possible light and say that they always fail. Masochists are incapable of cooperating with God's grace and of accepting consolation, even when it is given by God himself (Szentmártoni 1998, 97-99).

The most delicate and difficult thing about asceticism, especially negative asceticism, is to find the right measure. External penance is never the goal, but is always at the service of inner liberation. There are no precise rules for determining the measure in penance. It all depends on the individual, especially on the history (story) of his spiritual life. In moral and spiritual education, one must take into account everything that has led to a particular situation and guard against reducing this formation of the person only to negative asceticism (Bernard 1993, 310-311).

In discerning about renunciation of various good things, the principle of "as much as" given by St Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* (23) can also be very helpful: "Man is created to glorify and honour God our Lord and to serve Him, and so to save his soul. Others on earth are created for man, to help him achieve the goal for which he was created. From this it follows that man should use things as much as they help him to his end, and abandon them as much as they hinder him."

Christian asceticism is not imposed on man from outside. Psychology testifies that man's need to reorder his life according to the ideals he has learned arises from his psyche (Szentmártoni 1998, 100). Nor is asceticism ever an end, but a means given by God's grace. The use of this tool, in turn, helps to respond to the impulses and the action of God's grace. In this light, asceticism is a response to God's invitation to order our lives, to become free to live love in all our relationships, and to build a solid foundation for our spiritual life. For there is no solid building without a solid foundation (Lk 6:46-49). Proper submission of the physical senses also leads to their transformation and to perfect obedience to the spirit (Zyzak 2022, 413).

Conclusion

The research has shown the understanding of asceticism in Christianity and its spirituality. This becomes particularly clear in the following aspects:

- a) Christian asceticism enables Christians to live the freedom of God's childhood in Jesus Christ, which they receive through baptismal rebirth (Rom 8). By it, they freely and willingly renew the grace of freedom by dying to the old man's way of life together with Christ, in order to be able to live more and more fully the new life of freedom in and through him (1 Cor 15:31; 2 Cor 4:10-12). Its origin, therefore, is precisely the experience of this freedom and the desire to be able to live it forever. For by it they can strengthen this freedom and prevent everything that seeks to diminish it or take it away from them (Vodičar 2022, 702).
- b) Christian asceticism is not based on human will and power alone. Christians should always be conscious that they do not practise the various ascetical exercises in their own strength, but that they can only do them in the strength of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and in union with him through the Holy Spirit, for without him they can "do nothing" (Jn 15:5).
- c) Christians do not seek or buy God's love and mercy through asceticism, because they believe and are conscious that God the Father loves them through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit freely and unconditionally. For by Baptism, they are already in this love as the branches of the vine, as Jesus Christ clearly says (Jn 15:1-10). The ascetical exercises only enable them to remain in this gratuitous freedom, love, and joy of the Triune God. Christian asceticism is always a response to the gratuitous love of God and a way in which Christians, in cooperation with God's grace, can become more and more like the Father (Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36), his sons/daughters in Jesus Christ and the image of God in the midst of this world.
- d) Christians can only put asceticism into practice in a Christian way and live ascetical spirituality in a liberating and edifying way when they are personally and deeply united to the Father through Jesus Christ and receive the help and guidance of their Spirit and discern in him. Then they can avoid the danger of being caught in the snares of various renunciations: various forms of self-punishment, masochism, satisfaction, penance, etc.
- e) Holy Spirit and discernment in him also enable Christians to live their asceticism and ascetical spirituality in such a way that they do not get trapped in a calculate, consumerist or individualistic spirituality, in which many often seek more themselves, their own perfection, freedom from all afflictions and difficulties, gratification of their need for peace, self-validation, physical health and the experience of special and extraordinary things (Francis 2013, 78. 89).
- f) True Christian asceticism and its spirituality helps Christians to become ever more human, makes them solidarity-oriented, open to every person, seeking God the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit in all things, and enables them to be his interlocutor and collaborator in building God's kingdom of love, mercy, peace, joy, and justice in the midst of everyday life, here and now.

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