How do we keep our minds and hearts fastened on the kingdom of God from one day to the next, from month to month and year to year? I think every religious, every priest, every married couple that looks at life in vocational terms, and any Christian called to remain single in the world knows how much attentiveness and effort are required to remain God-centered. The great commandment about loving God with all our mind, heart and strength is realizable, but it is also the project of a lifetime. The discipline necessary in order to lead our lives according to the Great Commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5 is what asceticism is all about.

Whenever it becomes linked to mortification asceticism gets a bad name. A healthy Christian spirituality today has to start with a positive assessment of the created world. God fashioned the heavens and the earth and pronounced them “good.” While sin has certainly distorted things, even to the point of rendering some parts of the human world grotesque, it has not canceled the Creator’s primeval blessing. For this reason we dare to live in patient expectation of the new heavens and the new earth envisioned in Isaiah 65:17 and Revelation 21:1—a world in which the power of sin will have been definitively broken. Mortification—the killing of the flesh—sounds strangely at odds with the sentiments of our age precisely because its underlying attitude is one of suspicion toward creation and a chronic nervousness about physicality, bodiliness and sexuality. Indeed, it would be hard to defend any number of penitential practices of the past which treated the
human body as an obstacle to grace or as sinful flesh needing to be beaten into submission by the spirit.

But asceticism is to the spiritual life what exercise and practice are to the development of athletic skill. Physical exercise is a way of caring for oneself, which is a healthy thing to do so long as working out does not become addictive or narcissistic. In the same way, asceticism is healthy so long as it does not degenerate into bloodless routine or into a dogged pursuit of spiritual growth as if union with God were “something to be grasped” (Phil 2:6). In the matter of spiritual growth the problem is less the intransigence of the flesh than the daunting challenge of learning to live by faith.

**Asceticism and contemplation**

To insist that asceticism should not ignore or deny the goodness of the created world actually states things negatively. To make the point in positive terms I would say that the practice of asceticism focuses our attention upon those aspects of creation that are transparently good, wholesome, healing and fulfilling. Or to express the idea a bit differently, asceticism should never be divorced from prayer and contemplation, since contemplation almost by definition is loving attentiveness to the mystery of God loving us. And the first and only place where we meet that mystery is in what God has fashioned, as Paul reminds us: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:20).

The things God has made (and continues to make) cover the gamut of divine works: from the creation of light to the creation of Adam and Eve, from the formation of the chosen people to the birth of prophets, from the great homecoming
when Jewish exiles returned to the land of Israel to the conception and birth of Jesus, from the formation of the Church to the testimony of martyrs, from the birth of children to the formation of friendships, from the planets and stars in the night sky to the herbs and flowers in one’s garden, and so on. To view absolutely everything as coming from the hands of God is the fruit of contemplation, and whatever we do in order to foster “the contemplative attitude” belongs to the practice of asceticism.

Only a disciplined heart knows how to pay attention to God. And the human heart becomes disciplined not simply through regular and fervent praying, but by allowing one’s praying to be framed by the question, “Where is God present and laboring in my life and in the world?” Searching for God, constantly, out of the conviction that the divine mystery never stops revealing itself and redeeming us, chastens human desire and purifies motivation. Many people address words to God from time to time, but loving attentiveness to God cannot be cultivated if one only prays sporadically. The seeking needs to be regular and persistent, as we read in the Psalms: “‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, do I seek” (Ps 27:8).

**Asceticism and the gospel**

Yet there is also something else. Whatever is distinctive about Christian asceticism comes from the effort to follow Jesus and letting ourselves be formed by the gospel narratives. Three times in the Gospel of Mark, for example, Jesus announces what awaits him in Jerusalem. On each occasion his disciples misunderstand him, which furnishes Jesus an opportunity to instruct them about what journeying with Jesus means. Walking with Jesus means denying oneself, taking up one’s cross and
coming after Jesus (Mark 8:34). It means becoming “last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35), and it further means not lording it over others but becoming their slave (Mark 10:42-44). From these texts it would appear that asceticism boils down to doing whatever is necessary in order to join Jesus on his “way.”

The language about servant and slave, about denying self and losing one’s life both for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of the gospel (Mark 8:35), is deeply antithetical to upward mobility, cultural privilege, social respectability and the politics of patronage. Joining Jesus on his “way” is going to land us sooner or later in the company of the Bartimaeuses of this world—disenfranchised, disesteemed, discarded. The burning sense that we are walking with such folks is a quintessential expression of an asceticism based on the gospel. Jesus, the one who though rich became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8:9), invites his disciple to do the same, especially the disciple who has hitherto enjoyed status, financial security and privilege, like the enthusiastic rich man of Mark 10:17.

There are sound reasons for suggesting that solidarity has emerged as a major form of Christian asceticism in our time. Solidarity disciplines our wants and affections, and it tames our insecurities. The more mindful I am of the condition and needs of others, the less likely I am to want to acquire more and more things for myself. The more mindful I am of how hard some people have to work and then just barely survive, the less likely I am to think that, like James and John, I have earned a position of special closeness to Jesus. But as soon as solidarity diminishes or disappears, ambition rears its divisive head. Someone who journeys in solidarity with Bartimaeus is hardly likely to want to lord it over anybody. It is much easier to resist the seductions of a consumerist culture when we are in touch
with people who cannot pay their rent, carry no health insurance, or live in constant fear of deportation. Conversely, it is far easier to maintain our vocational awareness the more readily and confidently we allow ourselves to be drawn into other people’s lives, particularly the lives of the poor. Setting aside time to meditate and pray becomes a lot less burdensome or even annoying the more we recall how much men and women depend upon our being people who regularly meet the Lord in prayer.

Was Jesus an ascetic? Understanding asceticism along the lines in which we have been discussing it here, the answer is certainly yes. His mind and heart were absolutely fastened on God; he was totally God-centered. How else could we account for the heavenly voice that owns Jesus both at the waters of the Jordan and at the mount of the transfiguration? But we are not simply born God-centered. There needs to be a steady, lifelong practice of contemplative awareness—of relating oneself every day, through the exercise of prayer, to the divine mystery that creates and sustains us. Jesus was also an ascetic in the further sense that he had died to self and was living for his people; he looked not to his own interests but to the interests of others (Phil 2:4). Jesus practiced the asceticism of love.

An asceticism shaped by mission

But not all asceticism is alike, even though it may be motivated by strong religious conviction. I think of the problem that arose because, unlike the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist, Jesus’ disciples—and presumably Jesus himself—did not fast (Luke 5:33). Granted, Jesus replied that when the bridegroom is taken away, then they would start to fast. Nevertheless, Jesus and his followers seem to have been better known for their eating and drinking. Indeed, Jesus
himself was charged by his adversaries not only of being a friend of tax-collectors and sinners, but a drunkard and a glutton (Luke 7:34, Matt 11:19)! It is hard to imagine such an allegation ever being leveled against Moses, the Buddha or the Prophet, let alone against Christian saints after their conversion.

Historically the reason that the Pharisees adopted a distinctive fast might possibly have originated in their longing for the completion of the construction of the temple. The reason John fasted may have been connected with his ardent longing for the coming of God’s anointed. If so, then Jesus’ not fasting would have sent a message to both groups. The new temple was finally complete in the person of Jesus and the people that had gathered around him, who were largely society’s throwaways. And the new age John had been preaching about had in fact finally dawned. Of course, there would have been other motives for fasting besides these. The community of Israel fasted on the Day of Atonement, for example, and the Old Testament mentions other occasions when fasting was undertaken.

Jesus instructed his disciples about the proper way to go about fasting (Matt 6:16-18), which implies that Jesus too must have fasted from time to time. But we are still left with the remembrance of Jesus frequently at table, eating and drinking, as an enduring sign that the kingdom had come and the moment of reconciliation was at hand. Besides, given the prominence of hunger within the gospel story—disciples having to pick grain on the Sabbath, famished crowds with Jesus in the wilderness, an impoverished widow with nothing left to live on, Lazarus outside the rich man’s gate, and so on—we can appreciate why many of the people with whom Jesus associated might not have been in a position to observe religious fasts. For them, hunger had become a way of life: not the hunger that leads to
immediate death but the gnawing pain of stomachs that were rarely ever filled. Against such a background we can understand the words of Isaiah regarding the sort of fasting that God desires: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isa 58:6-7).

Clearly, not all asceticism is alike. Not every form of asceticism is patterned after the life and ministry of Jesus, nor does every form of asceticism promote the same sort of vocational awareness. It seems pretty clear that not every form of charitable contribution qualifies as almsgiving. Nor does tending an infirm parent seem to be what Jesus was urging when he said, “I was sick and you took care of me” (Matt 25:36). He had once said, after all, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matt 5:46) If we want to understand distinctively Christian asceticism and the sort of practice that shapes and continually nourishes vocational awareness, then the religious vision underlying the judgment scene of Matthew 25 is going to point us in the direction of actions aimed at helping and serving others. While it would not be hard to think of a variety of rich devotional practices that might contribute to the birth and development of vocational awareness, Christian asceticism embraces more than a person’s devotional life. Regular contact with disadvantaged people, finding ourselves in situations where we have to meet others on the shared ground of our common humanity in its poverty, is one of the surest ways I know of for keeping us mindful of why God has called us in the first place.
I would conclude, then, that Christian asceticism is going to be shaped by mission. Apostles and missionaries have long realized that preaching the gospel has to take into account the cultural context in which people live and the message is heard. A certain amount of evangelical pragmatism is healthy and to be expected as part of the process of inculturation. This means that there are forms of asceticism that might be congenial to one religious culture but not to another. For apostles, however, the vocation to preach the gospel and embody its power and beauty through bold, selfless witness generates a particular ascetical style.

Jesus’ devotional life would have borne an indelible Jewish imprint, but his asceticism was intrinsically tied to his mission. On one occasion, we are told, he had gone off to pray; but the disciples tracked him down and Jesus resumed his activity of teaching and driving out demons (Mark 1:35-30). On another occasion, plans for much-needed rest were upset by the arrival of “a great crowd” (Mark 6:30-34). Finally, Jesus’ saying “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27) reflects a liberating insight that has repercussions on how we conceive of asceticism within a Christian framework.

As a religious ritual sabbath observance comes under the umbrella of asceticism, but the observance cannot be absolute. Means must not become ends; hence the heated exchanges between Jesus and religious leaders over sabbath regulations. The “end” is human life itself—its dignity, peace, and well-being—which Jesus ultimately defended with his life. What guided Jesus’ practice, therefore, was the mission he had received from God. As always, our vocational awareness finds its energy in the gospel texts. In contemplating those scenes and
sayings we need to keep our eyes fixed on how Jesus is habitually responding to people and their needs, just as generations before us have done. The asceticism that characterized the life of Jesus was determined fundamentally by his call to love and serve the people of Israel—a call which may have come from the people as much as it came from God. Different people (but the same God) has also called us.

[2004]