

CHAPTER 6

Spiritual Exercises

“I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence towards God and men” (Acts 24: 16)

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A) BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Spiritual readings, from all their sources, will remain mere sayings for mental knowledge until they are changed through exercises to become part of your life. Anything you train yourself to do will even eventually become a habit and easy for you to perform. The more you practice, the more it will become part of your qualities. This is the advantage of spiritual exercises.

The person who practices these spiritual exercises will climb the ladder of virtues step by step. Day by day his heart will be purified and he shall experience the spiritual life, so that if he were to tell others about it, he will be speaking out of actual experience and not just theory. Not only does he learn of the path to good deeds, but finds out the difficulties encountered along the way and how to overcome them.

He also knows his nature, his points of strength and weakness. He distinguishes the desire to do good from the ability to do it. He knows of all the factors that may influence him, and what temptations he can go through and win by the grace of God, and what situations he has to escape because of his inability to face the temptations.

Through exercises, a person knows the level of his spiritual status and the extent of his God granted capabilities. He knows his limits, and hence does not think of himself more than he should. Unveiling oneself makes it easier for a person to confess, and the task of seeking help through the father of confession becomes more effective.

Not only do the exercises make an individual aware of God's ways, and not only does he find out more about himself (his strengths and weaknesses), but also he can sympathize with others who are similarly struggling in God's way because he has experienced some of the enemy's devious ways and knows the strength of evil. He also knows of the times where one is unable to struggle and the times when God's grace forsakes him and he reasons for that! Hence, those who have mastered the spiritual exercises are God's children who are most likely to sympathize with fellow strugglers, who can endure people's faults and who are more capable of aiding those who succumb to temptations since they themselves have experienced how easy it is to be enticed and how difficult it is to overcome.

The individual who exercises knows the kinds of sins that tempt, from within, and from without, and the conditions under which one yields to temptation. He also knows the sins that tempt a person gradually and the type that comes in the form of virtues. He knows the diseases of the soul, whether hidden or apparent.

B) SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Spiritual exercises are either negative or positive. The negative ones train you to resist specific sins or to overcome personal weaknesses. But the positive ones enhance your spiritual virtues and qualities. Therefore, the most important sources of spiritual exercises are the following:

1. Previous Sins: sit and examine yourself and know your sins. You will find that you have occasional sins and repetitive sins. Exercise yourself to overcome the repetitive sins. Know the causes of these sins, what leads you to transgress, and then train to rid yourself of their roots.

2. The Holy Bible: God's Word is a light to your path; it guides and teaches you how to conduct yourself. **You can find His commandments and Biblical verses are good sources of for your spiritual exercises.**

3. General Church Practices: This is a very important matter. To begin with, practicing in all church services is a must because they were designed, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to help build the spiritual life of all believers. Therefore, a person cannot exercise one particular kind of worship while neglecting general worship services where all believers join in one spirit as members of one body. For example, **a person cannot practice a specific private fast and neglect the rest of the church fasts. The same applies to prayers and meetings. Examples of general church practices are: attending church regularly and on time, learning church hymns and rites as well as participating in them, general church prayers such as the Agbeya and Tasbeha, attending church in all special occasions, observing all church fasts, attending liturgy and receiving communion regularly, attending all services with humility and an alert mind.**

4. General Social Virtues: Many people train themselves to master the virtues of worship but neglect general social virtues. That is, an individual should **practice being a helpful and loved member of his immediate family and his close social circle.** He should train himself to treat everyone with courtesy and to be a productive member of the society.

5. The Lives of the Saints: The virtues of the saints are many and they can be a source of spiritual exercises. A person has to know the extent of his spiritual growth. That is, he cannot while yet a beginner, exercise on a virtue that a saint had attained under different circumstances and after a long struggle lasting several years. Therefore, we have to be wise in choosing the saints' virtues that suit our personal circumstances and our spiritual level, being gradual in practicing them.

6. The Causes of a Failure of Previous Exercise: If you have trained yourself for a virtue successfully and recorded how well you have done, you will find that at times you'll fail to maintain that virtue. **Consider the cause of failure and make it the target of a new exercise.** For example, suppose you have exercised the virtue of "Not to condemn others," then one day you failed doing that while engaging in a discussion concerning general church policy. Take that

reason for failure and practice not to meddle in a discussion until you have learned how to discuss without transgressing, or at least to be careful when you face similar situations.

C) CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:

Many have failed in their spiritual exercises because of the nature of the exercise itself. Therefore, **we shall discuss some characteristics which may lead to the success of spiritual exercises:**

1. The Clarity of the Exercise: For example, concepts such as “Meekness” or “Poor in spirit”, or “God's love” or “Estrangement” may be very vague to you. Do not attempt, therefore, to train yourself on such virtues, without knowing precisely how to go about it, which brings us to the following point:

2. Being Specific: Do not take the broad more encompassing virtues (Mother virtues), as the subject for your exercises, but **divide them instead into their various categories, and make each category a subject for an exercise.** For an example, you cannot exercise yourself on “love”, because love has a very broad meaning which covers the whole meaning of Christianity. St. Paul has mentioned some of the classifications of love in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). He divided love into fourteen classifications, and you cannot train yourself in all fourteen at one time. **Similarly, you cannot exercise other “Mother virtues” like meekness, humility, service, perfect prayer, silence, because they are all inclusive, but rather divide them and exercise yourself on one classification at one time. It is easier to implement a specific exercise.**

Also, you cannot carry out different exercises at the same time. Some people try to train themselves on five or six exercises all at one time. The result is that they forget some of them completely because of the inability to concentrate. Some may oppose that opinion claiming that this procedure is too slow, for they want to reach the end of the road fast. Our advice is that spiritual life needs patience and long endurance. When you achieve a specific virtue fast, you might lose it just as fast. A lasting virtue is very important, and to be steadfast in it is very essential. Do not get impatient, one cannot rush into a virtue, since the path to spiritual life is slow and stable. At times when God grants you His grace and you feel invigorated, you might then think that perfection is at hand and easy to attain. Keep in mind, however, that this is just a temporary visitation from God, and that you may return to your usual self because one's life is constantly changing.

3. The Time for Exercising: You cannot practice being silent, for instance, on a day when you are going to attend a special party or if you are planning on visiting many people or going to a picnic. This kind of exercise is liable to fail on such a day, and even if you do succeed, it will be at the expense of other unnecessary losses. Therefore, if you are afraid of making mistakes on such occasions, do not practice an exercise of complete silence but rather

one which would help you “to avoid evil talk.” **Also, some exercises may fail if they are inappropriate to the person's health, the availability of time, family circumstances, social environment, level of education, and the spiritual strength of the individual.**

4. The Element of Gradualism: Big thrusts into the spiritual life are unsafe, threatened by sudden failure and depression. If you carry out a detailed exercise in one big step, you may succeed a little due to your enthusiasm. But, because of your lack of training, it may not last, and you may even experience opposite results. **Therefore, go step by step,** and make sure you are well settled in one step before you go on to another. Hence, when tribulations arise and you are forced to regress, you will just go backwards to the previous step, and then be able to proceed forward again.

Those who do not train themselves gradually, however, will go all the way backwards because originally they did not pass through the various steps along all the way. Here is an example: two persons are training for the exercise of “silence.” The first person takes the one big step of not talking. The second one tries gradually, like avoiding passing judgment, avoiding topics of no concern to him, giving brief answers, not interrupting discussions, talking in a low voice, starting only necessary discussions, circumventing unfamiliar topics of discussion, and finally practicing complete silence.

Then, when circumstances arise and both persons are obliged to talk, the second person will be more cautious as he has trained himself, whereas the first one might fall back to his original state of condemning others, interrupting, talking loudly and uselessly, and so on. This is only because he did not practice going through the phases of silence. He then contemplates and realizes the importance of progression. He becomes aware of the fact that he kept his tongue silent without correcting the mistakes he could make when he does talk. This then leads us to the following important factor.

D) DURATION OF THE EXERCISE

How long does one keep practicing the same exercise? One saint practiced a single exercise for a whole year. St. Agathon practiced “silence” for three whole years before he could perfect the virtue of silence. One might wonder then, how we can train ourselves for so many virtues if each virtue takes that long to be attained. The answer is clear: all virtues are interrelated. For example, the one who practices “Continuous praying” will no doubt achieve the virtue of “silence” because talking with people will impede his talking with God. Therefore, he will not talk unless it is absolutely necessary. This will then lead to seclusion, for fear that mingling with people would lead to talking instead of praying. And seclusion, in turn, will lead him to exercise the virtue of “fasting.” The more seclusion, the less use of his energy, hence the lesser the need for food, and therefore he is able to fast.

Prayer, therefore, leads to fasting, and fasting, in turn, leads to silence. The nature of silence helps in meditation, the reading of the Holy Bible, and self-examination. All of this will help an individual to be pure at heart and thought. Prayers in themselves help us to be pure

because a mind that is occupied with God has no place for Satan. Fasting, in turn, also helps us to be pure by restraining the desires of the flesh.

Hence, we find the individual who theoretically trained at one virtue, has actually practiced several other virtues, all linked together like a mesh. A brief period of training is not enough if you are to benefit fully from the exercise, neither it is sufficient for you to sincerely test your steadfastness and durability. You might be able to endure well during the short period of training but fall apart in the long run. Moreover, the short period might not be enough to determine whether there is any conflict between a certain exercise and other virtues, nor whether there are any exceptions. Short periods of exercising, therefore, are not useful, and as Mari Isaac puts it: “Any exercise practiced briefly is fruitless.” The longer the period, the more useful the exercise will be.

We see that saints have found it necessary to train themselves over several years, what then of the average layman? Persistent, long term training is essential. Give yourself ample time and resist the boredom that you might experience during that seemingly tedious period. A solution could be to maintain a major exercise (one which requires an extended training period), alongside a relatively minor exercise that could be fully accomplished in a short period such as in two weeks.

E) EXCEPTIONS TO CERTAIN EXERCISES

There are some exercises that cannot be compromised, such as those pertaining to sin. We train ourselves to resist sin at all times, with no exceptions. There are some virtues, however, that can be practiced with flexibility. The virtues of silence, fasting, prayer, retreat or period of solitude, modesty, all fall within the category of flexibility or exceptions. Train yourself but do not become a slave to any one exercise. For example, a person becomes aware of his faults when he does talk, and he then decides to practice “silence,” as a goal to overcome such faults. Being a member of society, this individual should not adhere strictly to the exercise of “silence” because of his social obligations.

At times, the benefits of talking outweigh the benefits of keeping silent, and a person might actually be committing a sin against God if he does not speak out. This is considered an “exception.” St. Bersenofios said, “Talking for God is good.” And as Solomon puts it, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven, ... a time to keep silence and a time to speak.” (Ecclesiastes. 3:1,7) As a result of the exceptions, a person learns when to talk and when not to talk, whom to talk to, and whom to avoid, when to be concise and when to elaborate, when to be strict in talking and when to be kind and courteous. Once a person learns all that, he surely has gained the benefit of the exercise of “silence.”

Such a person is allowed to talk as he pleases, because he has learned the limits of talking. But he who offends or angers others, or causes problems by his silence, and if other people's rights are forfeited due to his silence, that person is considered a “Pharisee”, one who

follows the exercise literally not spiritually, and is a slave to that exercise without understanding the wisdom behind it.

F) PURPOSES AND INCENTIVES OF THE EXERCISES

Any person practicing an exercise has to be convinced of its benefits and the wisdom behind it, and the exercise has to be rooted in, or based upon Bible verses, the sayings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints or all of these combined.

A person might fail in an exercise if he does not know its general advantages or its benefit to him personally. If he encounters an obstacle in accomplishing the exercise, he will ask himself. What do I benefit from that exercise? If he does not know the answer, he will then stop exercising.

Therefore, before you start any exercise, understand it and be convinced of its benefits to you personally, and seek guidance. It might be beneficial to others but not to you, because you have different circumstances. After you are convinced of its benefits to you, study Biblical verses which encourages that exercise, and repeat the verses in your heart often especially when you encounter an obstacle, and remember then the sayings of the Church Fathers. This will support you, and you will not fall. Remind yourself constantly of the exercise so as not to forget it, and to renew your energy as well. Pray for long periods that the exercise be successful, and do not ever think that you may succeed without stumbling because of your strong will or your desire to accomplish that exercise. You do not know Satan's temptations, and you may not know your own weaknesses. Ask for God's help because you cannot accomplish anything without Him. Hence, when you do succeed in that exercise, thank God for helping you, and do not think that you have accomplished it on your own.

G) A NOTEBOOK FOR EXERCISES

This is an essential tool to remind you of the exercise, and to help you in self-examination. Keep a detailed record in your notebook. Do not just put check marks, but write the name of the exercise, the date, and how long it will take to accomplish. Write the Biblical verses, and the sayings of the Church Fathers that encourage that exercise. Write each day's date in the margin and have a blank space to record your self-examination at the end of each day.

If you succeed completely in an exercise, write down: "Thanks be to God," and you could indicate the factors that helped make the exercise a success. Or you can write down, "There was no evidence that the exercise was successful." And in case you quit the exercise, record the number of times you have abandoned it, why you have failed and with whom. Was the failure partial or complete, and was it intentional or unintentional? Try to avoid the causes of failure in the future, or take the causes themselves and exercise to overcome them. Some people put grades to evaluate themselves.

It is best to sum up this information at the end of each week and to arrive at conclusions which will help you in knowing yourself better. Some people write additional information in their notebook with this prayer **“Lord, without You, I can do nothing. I cannot control myself. These exercises are only a kind of prayer to express my desire to live with You, and not to show that I am depending on my own strength. Please Lord, help me with Your grace.”**

H) EXAMPLES OF EXERCISES

A. Exercises of Meekness:

1. **Not making anybody angry:** to avoid bothering or hurting anyone's feelings.
2. **Not losing one's temper.**
3. **To be calm at all times:** when talking, walking, or working and to be peaceful within yourself.
4. **Talking in a soft voice.**
5. **Avoid talking in a haughty manner.**
6. **Being courteous to others, big or small,** to avoid hurting anyone's feelings.
7. **Not interfering in other people's business.**
8. **No to be argumentative,** which could irritate others.
9. **Not interrupting a conversation** even if you have heard the topic before.
10. **Not to complain:** if need be, a complaint ought to be about a situation and not about other people.
11. **Bearing other people's faults with patience.**
12. **A pleasant face to all.**
13. **Being kind to everyone.**
14. **Obedience in general:** but not in matters pertaining to the guidance of one's life which is the concern of the father of confession.

B Exercises of not condemning others:

1. **Not to talk about people behind their backs.**
2. **Refraining from insults.**
3. **Avoiding complaints about people.**
4. **Not to display disgust with others in any manner.**
5. **Not to condemn a group as a whole, whether large or small.**
6. **To refrain from indirect condemnation,** that is when your listener condemns others from what you have said.
7. **Avoiding the discussion of certain topics that are known to lead to the condemnation of others.** This category can be divided into several parts.
8. **To avoid talking about certain individuals** with whom you are not quite friendly.
9. **Not defending oneself in a way which would consequently shed the blame on someone else.**
10. **Resisting condemnation by thought.**

C. Exercises of Silence:

These were discussed earlier and some are interrelated with the exercise of meekness and the exercise of not condemning others.

D. Exercises of Prayer:

1. Physical deference: the raising of the hands towards heaven, standing straight, avoiding a sluggish posture, kneeling at the appropriate times and guarding the senses (sight, sound, touch). This exercise can be done gradually, and not all at one time.

2. Veneration from within: the feeling of the presence of God and His greatness deep within the heart.

3. Training to pray with the aid of “Agbeya” or prayer book.

4. Memorizing psalms and other prayers from the “Agbeya”, so that eventually one can do without it.

5. Special prayers (not memorized) in addition to those found in the “Agbeya.”

6. Praying, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me, a sinner,” to be said at all times and in every place.

7. Continuous prayers: while walking or at work, or driving, or being with people.

8. Prayers before every deed: for example, before meals, before reading or studying, or before any act, whether physical or mental.

9. Blending work with prayers whenever possible.

10. Extending the periods for prayer: (especially when time permits, like before going to sleep to guard against dreams, and before meals to curd the feeling of hunger.) This exercise can be carried out gradually and may include adding memorized prayers and resisting the temptation of getting the prayers over with.

11. Not limiting prayers to times of need. The main factor in praying is the love of God and not merely the fulfillment of needs. This exercise includes: prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of confession and admitting one's shortcomings.

12. Prayers for enemies and foes.

E. Exercises for Fasting:

This needs special wisdom and spiritual guidance and it includes:

1. The church fasting days: especially Wednesdays and Fridays, Lent, Holy Week, Advent, Apostles Fast, St. Mary's fast.

2. Special fasting days for specific events, whether personal or on behalf of others.

3. A period of abstinence from food: this differs from one person to another and it grows gradually. It starts by skipping breakfast.

4. The kind of food: not just eating special fasting food, but abstaining from fasting food that may be good enough to stimulate one's appetite.

5. The amount of food: fasting does not mean eating only special fasting food but reducing the amount to be eaten as well.

6. The amount of liquid intake is also cut down, but wisely. (Note the difference between winter and summer and the times of exhaustion versus resting periods.)

7. Not eating between meals (which is good for your health): requires the planning of visiting hours and meetings.

8. Not eating unnecessary types of food that you can do without, like sweets and some drinks.

9. Not showing that one is fasting.

10. Abstaining from some meals or certain kinds of food and giving the money instead to the poor, over and above what you ordinarily give.

Note: There are certain church fasts that are particularly strict, for example, during Holy Week, the church requires complete abstinence all day till sunset and then breaking the fast by eating only bread and salt. If you are unable to do so, then at least don't eat any dessert or appetizing food in addition to your abstaining from food for a certain period of time according to your ability.