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Modern Ascetic Practices – Theory and Practice from the Perspective of Catholic Context

Współczesne praktyki ascetyczne – teoria i praktyka z perspektywy kontekstu katolickiego

Summary: The aim of the article is to discuss the changing place of ascetic practices in Catholic consecrated life today. In our investigation of the proposed problem, we focus on official Church documents, sociological studies of the phenomenon and interviews with nuns which we conducted in Poland in 2018. The three sources not only allow for defining the very phenomenon but also unveil the changing place of ascetic practices in Catholic consecrated life today, and beyond the

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consecrated context. The article is divided into three sections. The first one presents official Church definitions of the phenomenon under scrutiny and depicts its selected, contemporary theological understandings. The second one reviews sociological studies of contemporary ascetic practices in the Catholic context. The last section concentrates on selected aspects of our qualitative study of contemporary transformations of religious life in Poland. Using data collected during qualitative interviews, we demonstrate how nuns from a cloistered monastery understand ascetic practices in their life.

Keywords: asceticism; contemporary asceticism; ascetic practices; consecrated life; female religious orders.

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest omówienie zmian w praktykowaniu ascezy w życiu osób konsekrowanych Kościoła katolickiego. W niniejszym badaniu tego problemu opieramy się na oficjalnych dokumentach kościelnych, socjologicznych badaniach zjawiska i wywiadach z zakonnicami, które przeprowadziliśmy w Polsce w 2018 roku. Trzy źródła nie tylko pozwalają zdefiniować to zjawisko, ale także ukazać zmieniające się miejsce ascetycznej praktyki w życiu osób konsekrowanych dzisiaj i poza kontekstem konsekrowanym. Artykuł jest podzielony na trzy sekcje. Pierwsza z nich przedstawia wybrane definicje ascezy w teologii katolickiej. Drugą część stanowi przegląd socjologicznych badań współczesnych praktyk ascetycznych w kontekście katolickim. Ostatnia sekcja przybliży wybrane aspekty naszych badań jakościowych współczesnych przemian życia religijnego w Polsce. Wykorzystując dane zebrane podczas wywiadów jakościowych, pokazujemy, jak zakonnice z klasztoru klauzurowego rozumieją praktyki ascetyczne w swoim życiu.

Słowa kluczowe: ascetyzm; współczesna asceza; praktyki ascetyczne; życie konsekrowane; zakony żeńskie.

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According to father Jacek Woroniecki OP asceticism and mysticism are relevant processes contributing to the development of a human which – as

Woroniecki states – is an idea lost in the contemporary culture¹. He understood asceticism as practice through which morality shall be and may be learnt. Hence, investigation of the idea of asceticism and ascetic practices are relevant in an educational perspective. However, ascetic practices did not vanish in our culture – they are still being cultivated in monasteries, by the religious but they have also gain popularity in the secular context. Our article is devoted to the very phenomenon of asceticism in the Catholic context. The first section of the article presents official Catholic Church definitions and theological understandings. In the second section, basing on selected sociological researches, we show the very idea is being practiced today. The last part presents selected aspects of our qualitative study of contemporary transformations of ascetic practices in the female, cloistered monastery. From the pedagogical perspective, our article highlights how the cloistered monastery in general and ascetic practices in particular contribute to the formation of (religious) subjectivity. Hence, this shows that besides theology and history (which greatly dominate in studies of the religious life), pedagogy and social sciences in general may shed new light on the very phenomenon.

The goal of asceticism in the understanding of the Catholic Church is in following Christ. Asceticism is, therefore, mortification, which is to defend the proper hierarchy of values, strengthen the bond of love with God, be expiation for sins, and also educate and shape the will of humans. Thus, ascetic practices are the very means of forging religious subjectivity. However, the very practices have been transformed in the last 50 years. In modern asceticism, the Church stresses more strongly the positive than negative way of practicing them; ascetic practices not only refer to the problem of uncontrolled desires and attachments but are focused on the implementation of the Christian vocation.

Today, we observe that, on the one hand, ascetic practices are diminishing in monastic environment and in the lives of monks and nuns. On the other hand, we observe the development of secular asceticism which stands for the actuality and even popularity of the phenomenon. One may say that in contrast to the unchanging tenets of faith, asceticism changes with the changing society.

Studies conducted show that the very change in attitude towards the ascetic practices is vital. However, the practices are still omnipresent in the

¹ Jacek Woroniecki, *Metoda i program nauczania teologii moralnej* (Lublin: Uniwersytet Lubelski, 1922).

monastery under scrutiny and they prove to be a means of religious subjectification.

1. Asceticism – definitions and aims

The Greek noun ἄσκησις, *askesis*, with its semantics, shows that this concept stems from the ancient practice of bodily exercises². *Askesis*, secondarily by ancient thinkers, has been referred to spiritual exercises, whether it is undertaken autonomously or through the body. Concurrently, unlike in certain periods and manifestations of Christian asceticism, the emphasis was put not on mortification but on controlling the body and passions to achieve the ideal of autarchy. In ancient philosophy, such as Stoic philosophy, it was a very important supplement to *dogma*, doctrine, because philosophising in antiquity was not limited to the development of doctrines, but was also to be assimilated on the principle of exercise. *Askesis* is an ambiguous concept and one may wonder how much it still connects and how much it breaks with the Hellenic tradition in a Christian context³.

The ancient philosophers, above all, practiced philosophy in their lives, and this *praxis* was realised within human⁴. This is why Pierre Hadot called the philosophy of this period a spiritual exercise, internal action of thought and will – engaging the whole spirit⁵.

We must also remember that philosophy and theology are closely connected to each other. According to Józef Bocheński, when theology is both

² *Askesis* means exercises, athletic training, then intellectual or spiritual training, practicing a given lifestyle, and finally Christian asceticism [cf. Henryk Wójtowicz, “Asceza w hellenizmie”, in: *Wczesnochrześcijańska asceza. Zagadnienia wybrane*, ed. Franciszek Drączkowski, Jerzy Pałucki (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1993), 9–11].

³ Cf. Krzysztof Łapiński, “Odkrycie filozoficznej *praksis*”, in: *Therapeia, askesis, meditatio. Praktyczny wymiar filozofii w starożytności i średniowieczu*, eds. Krzysztof Łapiński, Robert Pawlik, Rafał Tichy (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, Wydział Filozofii i Socjologii, 2017), 10.

⁴ Cf. Juliusz Domański, “*Praksis* wewnątrz człowieka. Zagajenie konferencji”, in: *Therapeia, askesis, meditatio. Praktyczny wymiar filozofii w starożytności i średniowieczu*, eds. Krzysztof Łapiński, Robert Pawlik, Rafał Tichy (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, Wydział Filozofii i Socjologii, 2017), 30.

⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Filozofia jako ćwiczenie duchowe* (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2003), 70–71 et passim.

pagan and Christian, both are called “philosophies”⁶. The assimilation or reception of philosophical askesis through Christianity is already evident in the writings of apologists (especially Justin Martyr) from the second century⁷. It is not wrong, then, to fail to mention these philosophical origins of Christian asceticism, although one should pay attention to the different motivations for practicing asceticism: the character of Christian life is inspired by the death and resurrection of Christ and the life of the divine Persons of the Trinity⁸.

Karl Rahner distinguishes three types of asceticism in the history of religion: moral, cultic and mystical. Moral asceticism is self-education; self-control, aimed at achieving internal harmony and internal attitude, is a means to acquire virtue. This understanding of asceticism, however, does not show the specifics of Christianity. Similarly, religious asceticism (posts, vigils, washings, sexual temperance), preparing a human to worship, sacrifice his or her deity, although it is important, because s/he takes a human from the sphere of profanity to the sacred sphere, is also understood in the non-Christian world, and is sometimes contrary to Christianity if a human practises it, wanting to reach God with his/her own strength. However, mystical asceticism is to prepare for a mystical experience – in this sense, it is at all contrary to Christianity, in which supernatural life is a gift – and an undeserved gift – from God. Christian asceticism assumes grace from God and excludes all willingness to rule over Him: an attempt to achieve inner transformation only through ascetic practices is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel⁹.

Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “Whoever wants to remain faithful to his baptismal promises and resist temptations will want to adopt the means for doing so: self-knowledge, practice of an ascesis adapted to the situations that confront him, obedience to God’s commandments, exercise of the moral virtues, and fidelity to prayer.”¹⁰

Thus, what is Christian asceticism? Karol Wojtyła explains that spiritual values are objectively higher than material values, but concurrently they are weaker. For human is stronger, more directly feels what falls under the

⁶ Józef Bocheński, *Zarys historii filozofii* (Kraków: Philed, 1993), 15.

⁷ Hadot, *Filozofia*, 72; cf. ibidem, 69–93; cf. Wójtowicz, “Asceza”, 14: “the postulate of asceticism was a characteristic feature of the Hellenistic-Roman period, especially in the period of late antiquity, not only in pagans but also in Christians”.

⁸ Cf. Hadot, *Filozofia*, 70.

⁹ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Saggi di Spiritualità* (Roma: Edizioni Paoline, 1965), 100–113.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), n. 2340.

senses and gives him satisfaction. If these lower values prevail in the life of a human, he suffers a defeat, because his perfections are confirmed by higher and spiritual values. Therefore, he must defend himself against such a defeat and fight for all values (spiritual and material) experienced by man to be in the right place for them. This effort is just asceticism. It is not something “extraordinary”, but it is something normal and a necessary coefficient of moral human life: it is a reliable and uncompromising commitment of a human to work on himself, on self-improvement and maturation. Asceticism is not an escape from life, but it is supposed to give a person fullness of life through a perfect mastery of various areas of life, especially the most difficult ones. By asceticism, human is to enter all values and live them in truth, without illusions and without disappointments. It is thus a means of forging subjectivity. It has a profound realistic meaning and only a realist can do it: the passion of reality, interest for the real good, and love of his order are the elements on which all ascetic activities in the proper sense of the word are based¹¹.

Karol Wojtyła notes that asceticism is also of great importance in the religious aspect. Ascetical effort is particularly visible when a human, pursuing moral perfection, aspires to an objective ruthless good, means to God. Asceticism strives to ensure that all values reliably organised by human effort are in a proper relation to the highest good. Such a relationship is emphasised by the God, it gives God glory and the human fuses with God on the principle of good¹².

Christian asceticism is to strengthen the Christian’s union with Christ, not just being in some virtue. Jerzy Wiesław Gogola lists three features of this asceticism, directed by faith, hope and love (three theological virtues): unconditional adherence to Christ (asceticism of faith, faith is obedience to the saving plan of God), faithful adaptation to the choices made by Christ, and, therefore, that he made them (the asceticism of the cross, love is obedience not retreating even from the sacrifice of life) and striving for full and final participation in his mystery (eschatological asceticism, hope is the dynamics of faith leading to good – to the heavenly Jerusalem – and preparing for the coming of the Lord)¹³.

There have been various distortions of asceticism, and these are mainly its under-appreciation (eg. the view that human is obedient to the Holy Spirit, if his/her active involvement is lower) and its overestimation (eg. exagger-

¹¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Elementarz etyczny* (Kraków: Znak, 1979), 72–74.

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, 74–75.

¹³ Jerzy Wiesław Gogola, “Pojęcie chrześcijańskiej ascezy”, in: *Asceza chrześcijańska. Materiały z sympozjum*, ed. Jan Machniak (Kraków: Wyd. Naukowe PAT, 1996), 14–15.

ated attention to the techniques of body and spirit training – bypassing the action of God's grace)¹⁴.

As Andrzej Bober explains, neither Christ nor the apostles left us a treaty of ascetic life:

The principles of Christian asceticism have been worked out for many years by the Church, and this work continues to this day. In the search for the best ways of perfection, history has not been without error and even serious deviations from the gospel. There are also forms of asceticism that we can safely call de-humanizing. These ones Church strongly rejected and stigmatized¹⁵.

Stanisław Urbański asserts that ascetic practices are not contrary to the normal human psyche, but are absolutely necessary in the maturation of the human person. Concurrently, it reminds that contemporary asceticism must be confronted with psychology and the rights of free personality development¹⁶.

The Second Vatican Council admonishes in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* 14 promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965:

Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator. For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, wounded by sin, man experiences rebellious stirrings in his body. But the very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart.

Now, man is not wrong when he regards himself as superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man. For by his interior qualities he outstrips the whole sum of mere things.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 7–8; cf. Stanisław Urbański, “Asceza dawniej i dziś”, in: *Asceza, odczłowieczenie czy uczłowieczenie*, ed. Walerian Słomka (Lublin: Tow. Naukowe KUL, 1985), 138–141.

¹⁵ Andrzej Bober, “Asceza – uczłowieczenie czy odczłowieczenie w świetle źródeł wczesnego chrześcijaństwa”, in: *Asceza, odczłowieczenie czy uczłowieczenie*, ed. Walerian Słomka (Lublin: Tow. Naukowe KUL, 1985), 107; cf. Walerian Słomka, “Chrześcijański sens ascezy”, in: *Asceza, odczłowieczenie czy uczłowieczenie*, ed. Walerian Słomka (Lublin: Tow. Naukowe KUL, 1985), 162–166.

¹⁶ Urbański, “Asceza”, 144.

He plunges into the depths of reality whenever he enters into his own heart; God, Who probes the heart, awaits him there; there he discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God. Thus, when he recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter.

The goal of asceticism is to follow Christ¹⁷. Asceticism is, therefore, mortification, which is to defend the proper hierarchy of values, strengthen the bond of love with God, be expiation for sins, and also educate, shape the will of human. In addition, it is a mortification that occurs in the three areas of the believer's life: towards the body, towards the world as a living environment and to the relationship with God. Mortification of the body (eg. fasting, limitation of sleep, drifting of heat or cold, wearing scratching clothing, enduring disease, work hardships) was very important in the spirituality of the Middle Ages. Currently, the emphasis is on spiritual mortification and the participation of free will: the attitude of the heart is the most important. Human is a bodily-spiritual unity, therefore mortification of the body must be closely connected with the inner attitude. Asceticism towards the world reminds us that gathering material goods, striving for fame, caring for a career is not enough for a man to be happy and does not give him real freedom if man will not be guided by morality and will not care about the common good. Finally, asceticism is present in prayer, which requires cooperation and perseverance, and also seems to be more difficult than acting. The action gives satisfaction with the goals achieved, and the prayer requires complete acceptance of God and His initiative¹⁸.

As Adolphe Tanquerey explains, the basis for the practice of mortification is its voluntariness and intention – forced, unaccepted mortification does not have a supernatural value. Furthermore, mortification must be adapted to the duties of marital, priestly and religious conditions and mortification must be gradual and prudent¹⁹. As we read in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* 17:

Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly to be sure. Often

¹⁷ Ibidem, 145.

¹⁸ Gogola, "Pojęcie", 18–23.

¹⁹ Cf. Adolphe Tanquerey, *Zarys teologii ascetycznej i mistycznej*, vol. 2 (Kraków: WAM, 1949), 769.

however they foster it perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain “under the control of his own decisions,” so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he acts according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. Since man’s freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God’s grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower.

In modern asceticism, the Church stresses the positive more strongly than the negative way of practicing it: ascetic practices not only refer to the problem of uncontrolled desires and attachments, but are focused on the implementation of the Christian vocation; therefore, although there is still a cross in spirituality, resurrection is important for an altruistic attitude, ready to accept the duties and sufferings that the involvement in the world affairs, in relations with people (not isolation from the world, but sacralisation) brings²⁰.

In the context of our research on contemporary asceticism in the female cloister²¹, it is worth quoting a fragment of the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* written by Pope John Paul II and published on 25 March 1996. In chapter 38, we read what the Pope indicates the directions for contemporary asceticism of consecrated persons:

There is also a need to rediscover the *ascetic practices* typical of the spiritual tradition of the Church and of the individual’s own Institute. These have been and continue to be a powerful aid to authentic progress in holiness. Asceticism, by helping to master and correct the inclinations of human nature wounded by sin, is truly indispensable if consecrated persons are to remain faithful to their own vocation and follow Jesus on the way of the Cross. It is also necessary to

²⁰ Urbański, “Asceza”, 147–149.

²¹ The founders of religious orders, also in Poland, always discussed the asceticism of a given community in the rules [cf. Włodzimierz Gałązka, *Charyzmat zakonny. Święty Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński* (Warszawa: Wyd. UKSW, 2010), 251–257; Marek Szymula, *Duchowość zakonna. Duchowość zakonna według nauczania bł. Honorata Koźmińskiego* (Warszawa: Wyd. UKSW, 1999), 215–221].

recognize and overcome certain temptations which sometimes, by diabolical deceit, present themselves under the appearance of good. Thus, for example, the legitimate need to be familiar with today's society in order to respond to its challenges can lead to a surrender to passing fashions, with a consequent lessening of spiritual fervour or a succumbing to discouragement. The possibility of a deeper spiritual formation might lead consecrated persons to feel somehow superior to other members of the faithful, while the urgent need for appropriate and necessary training can turn into a frantic quest for efficiency, as if apostolic service depended primarily on human means rather than on God. The praiseworthy desire to become close to the men and women of our day, believers and non-believers, rich and poor, can lead to the adoption of a secularized lifestyle or the promotion of human values in a merely horizontal direction. Sharing in the legitimate aspirations of one's own nation or culture could lead to embracing forms of nationalism or accepting customs which instead need to be purified and elevated in the light of the Gospel. The path to holiness thus involves *the acceptance of spiritual combat*. This is a demanding reality which is not always given due attention today. Tradition has often seen an image of this spiritual combat in Jacob's wrestling with the mystery of God, whom he confronts in order to receive his blessing and to see him (cf. *Gen 32: 23–31*). In this episode from the beginnings of biblical history, consecrated persons can recognize a symbol of the asceticism which they need in order to open their hearts to the Lord and to their brothers and sisters.

Returning to the Greek meaning of askesis, we can conclude that Christianity, through its faith in God the Creator and Redeemer, gives human the ability to discover the proper hierarchy of values and appropriate asceticism, which directs a person towards humanisation and deification: Christian asceticism is like spiritual-moral-religious training and spiritual-moral-religious athleticism striving for a human fulfilment in all possibilities as far as the vocation and the help of God's grace allow²².

2. Asceticism today – the sociological perspective

Stanisław Urbański, a Polish theologian, wrote in 1985 that modern times are not free from the struggle for the authentic face of asceticism, because the process of secularisation and liberal-humanist theology sought to

²² Cf. Słomka, "Chrześcijański", 172.

diminish its significance in Christian life and to eliminate it from human life – today, we are witnessing a wide but late reaction to this kind of recognition of asceticism²³. At that time, Urbański already perceived threats to human spirituality and disturbances of his equilibrium, stability: consumer culture, which triggers comfort, laziness, pursuit of pleasure; permissive culture, which allows satisfaction of all whims and freedom of morals; in addition, a fast pace of life, nervousness, interest in external reality, the urge to experience ever stronger emotions²⁴.

The problem of asceticism – in the Catholic context – in the modern world is also analysed by non-theologians. Their research is an important contribution in exploring this issue.

Particularly noteworthy is the work of Italian scholar Giorgio Agamben *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), originally published in Italian under the title *Altissima povertà: Regole monastiche e forma di vita*, originally published by Neri Pozza editore, Milano 2011. The author returns to the beginnings of monasticism and to the first rules, such as the rule of Pachomius.

The works of the French researcher Isabelle Jonveaux have recently also been published: *Moines, corps et âme. Une sociologie de l'ascèse monastique contemporaine* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2018) and “La redécouverte de l'ascèse”, *Études* 3 (2019): 67–77.

Isabelle Jonveaux notes on the basis of her research that nowadays the term ‘asceticism’ is used increasingly rarely by monks and nuns who associate it negatively with previous practices, such as whipping. Additionally, in studies on monastic asceticism this concept is not in fact used. Jonveaux notes that previously the main pillars of asceticism – according to Benedictine Adalbert de Vogüé – were fasting, sleep and purity, but nowadays not many Benedictine communities abstain from meat, also the rules of shortening sleep and getting up to morning prayers were changed. Finally, it seems – at first glance – that chastity is unchanged, but also its understanding of the body evolved towards a positive diagnosis of the body and its emotions. At the same time, the level of general comfort increases: monasteries have private bathrooms, monks and nuns have access to the Internet and a mobile phone²⁵.

Jonveaux reports that parallel to this erasure of asceticism from monastic life, monks and nuns to their secular customers, more and more products

²³ Cf. Urbański, “Asceza”, 141.

²⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, 143.

²⁵ Isabelle Jonveaux, “La redécouverte de l'ascèse”, *Études* 3 (2019): 68–69.

and services show and advertise as directly provoking the well-being of the body: catalogues of religious houses hosting secular guests or nursing homes for the elderly praise good food or well-being brought by a bubble bath. Monasteries sometimes offer guests yoga or qi gong sessions and secular types of fasting according to the method of Buchinger Lützner (it is a holistic way of fasting from Germany). Monastic life is no longer perceived by society as a place of mortification of the body; on the contrary, some experience of monks in the field of natural health and the balance of life, which we try to rediscover, is increasingly appreciated²⁶.

Concurrently, Jonveaux notices the rediscovery of asceticism, which is partly based on the desire to reincarnate the spiritual life. The common point of various secular ascetic practices is a three-component system: “body, soul and spirit”; these three terms are most often used in interviews conducted by the researcher on this type of secular asceticism. Currently, the harmony of these three dimensions is being pursued, adding to them a connection with nature. Jonveaux discusses the results of the questionnaires, which show how these three elements affect the combination of fasting and tourism in Austria and France²⁷.

A holistic post is also to be a new method of purification, because confession as a traditional Catholic way of purification is now much less practiced than it was fifty years ago²⁸. Another reason for the popularity of such a post is protest against the consumer society: mass consumption has transpired not to be a way to happiness; therefore, by voluntary limitation today, we would like to suggest that more consumption does not necessarily bring more happiness. Thus, fasting is often regarded as an expression of commitment to society, but also as the inaugural experience of a new lifestyle²⁹. As Jonveaux observes, secular asceticism carries with it a utopian dimension of the regeneration of the natural society and combines with ecological commitment: fasting and walking in the open air is recommended. Similarly, meat fasting is based on the ecological vision of vegetarianism. Thus, it seems that “great transcendence” has been removed from such secular asceticism and that the issue of eschatological salvation is no longer a real concern for the individual: the salvation we are seeking now is rather temporal (*hic et nunc*)³⁰.

²⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, 69–70.

²⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, 71–72.

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, 72–73.

²⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, 73–74.

³⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, 74–76.

Jonveaux notes that when we compare the rapid decline of practices in the Catholic Church and the simultaneous development of holistic diets, she wonders why lay people voluntarily take harsher practices than religion recommends (monks and nuns very rarely have complete fastings). These new practices correspond to the needs of a society that is not suited to either the consumer society or the institutional Church³¹.

Despite the facts noted above, Jonveaux at *Moines, corps and âme. Une sociologie de l'ascèse monastique contemporaine* also gives more positive results for consecrated persons. The researcher believes that despite the intellectual distance from the original concept of monastic asceticism and despite the suppression of certain practices, accompanied by a general increase in the level of monastic comfort, monks and nuns still follow the path of life, which can be sociologically determined as ascetic. The religious experience of the beginning of the 21st century exists in monasteries, however, without cancelling the ascetic element. In contrast to the unchanging tenets of faith, asceticism changes with the changing society³².

As the Church today places more emphasis on personal responsibility, every religious in his or her ascetic practice becomes his or her own superior. This currently requires a greater discipline from the friar. Asceticism is a changing reality that has been redefined in accordance with the social context in which it occurs. Asceticism, although usually veiled or invisible today, has not disappeared from the lives of monks who still have to be ascetics, because asceticism is an inseparable part of their vocation³³.

3. The ascetic practices from the perspective of a female monastery

The following section focuses on selected aspects of our qualitative study of contemporary transformations of religious life in Poland. By using data collected during qualitative interviews, we demonstrate how nuns from a cloistered monastery understand ascetic practices in their life. Our study was conducted in one female, cloistered monastery in Poland in 2018. We conducted seven interviews (structured by a list of topics) and two biograph-

³¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 76–77.

³² Cf. Isabelle Jonveaux, *Moines, corps et âme. Une sociologie de l'ascèse monastique contemporaine* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2018), 275–276.

³³ Cf. *ibidem*, 277–279.

ical interviews. In the monastery live more than ten nuns who are between 25 and 83 years old). Due to the anonymity reasons, we do not provide more details concerning the monastery. The analysis is divided into three parts. Based on interviews with nuns, we discuss the presence of ascetic practices in the cloistered monastery, transformations of ascetic practices: from external to internal ascetic practices, and goals of ascetic practices. Referring to the last point, we pose a question whether ascetic practices deindividualize or lead to religious subjectification?

3.1. Presence of ascetic practices in the cloistered monastery

Living in a cloistered monastery means separation from the world. Nuns cannot get out and cannot freely contact with outsiders. They live in a strict, papal enclosure. Additionally, they have to keep silent for most of the day, except for two hours per day devoted to communal chats (called recreational time). Every day is similar and regulated according to internal rules which divide a day into communal and individual praying and working. Nuns produce religious figurines for sale and in order not to talk during work, they divide the production process: one paints, another models etc. It takes time to adapt to this form of living. Even though they cannot personally communicate with the outside world, they can use the Internet which they treat as a source of information and a means for shopping (thanks to this they do not have to go out for food and other relevant items as they did before the Internet revolution).

Ascetic practices are omnipresent in the life in the cloistered monastery. They display not only in concrete acts but they are related to the broader system of the communal life of consecrated women and in other practices such as work or relationship with others. Hence, the life in the cloistered monastery – according to nuns – is not mundane and easy but the very opposite of it. It deserves giving oneself away which is a constant hard work, a sacrifice.

Sometimes women come here and they imagine that because it is a quiet and calm place, and life is regulated they will find here the enclave. But the reality is very different. It is very expecting (S4).

The day schedule and outfit are regulated which is also the display of asceticism:

I cannot say that because today I am tired and sleepy I will not follow rules. I have to follow the rule no matter what (Prioress 1).

Another aspect of asceticism is the attitude towards things. Nuns do not possess things – they only use. Depending mostly on work, nuns use different objects but they do not own them. As such, the work is also a form of asceticism:

Work has to be systematic and well done, so it needs focus and mobilization. If one made easy, monotonous work such as handmade rosary it requires self-discipline (S4).

Lastly, the everyday sacrifice and, hence, asceticism, is communal life.

3.2. Transformations of ascetic practices: from external to internal ascetic practices

Withdrawing from the world in the quest to God is a fundamental and radical decision for women living in the cloister monastery. It is the broader form of asceticism which is being detailed by different practices. After Vatican II, the process of transformation of these ascetic practices has been introduced. Depending on an order, a community and a country this very process may take diverse forms. In the community that we studied, one observes a general shift from external to internal ascetic practices. The prioress of the monastery says that they feel that the Church expects them to revise the way they live:

Previously, as old nuns say, external practices were very important. Today we focus more on internal practices [...] Today the asceticism is being understood broader. It means practicing virtues, tiny renunciations, the spirit of love and sacrifice, and the sacrifice in one's life. It does not mean that external ascetic practices or penitential acts have disappeared but their quantity has dropped significantly. [...] in our community in every week a penitential act, for instance a prostration takes place [...] We also do not eat meat and for a few months we fast and we abstain from dairy. This is a food mortification. Last but not least, one may also pick a voluntary mortification but only after the approval of a supervisor – this last form is disappearing today significantly (Prioress 1).

Not only legitimate ways of asceticism has transformed but also the individual attitude towards them. The prioress acknowledges that for her external ascetic practices are not so relevant:

For me, personally, these penitential acts... well, I do practices them, but I do not feel that they had a deepen impact on my life (Prioress 1).

She also claims that external practices may be hazardous:

It may happen, but it is not the rule, that if one focuses on these external penitential acts, traditional practices or – I would say – ostentatious acts which are visible for the community, in fact it means that the one may have problems with deepening her internal life. Hence, in a way this person seeks to catch up on (Prioress 1).

3.3. Goals of ascetic practices – deindividualisation or religious subjectification?

Ascetic practices seek to control feelings, imagination, and behaviours:

Formation also aims at controlling one's feelings so they do not dominate one's behaviours and relationship with others (Prioress 1).

In fact all ascetic work aims at controlling feelings and imagination by spiritual elements such as reason and will (S4).

Taking these goals into account, one may easily come to the conclusion that ascetic practices deindividualize. For instance, this is what in monastery rules saw Erving Goffman³⁴, the American sociologist who in the 1960s called the monastery a total institution. According to him, the monastery resembles a psychiatric hospital, a jail, a penitentiary, a concentration camp, and an army barracks³⁵. These institutions are designed to repress individuals' needs rather than increase personal development. Total institutions are,

³⁴ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books: 1961).

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

thus, the very opposite of basic and dominant institutions of modern society such as the home, the family and the workplace; they embody outdated concepts of the individual (collective and governed instead of separate and free). Inmates of these institutions are understood as de-individualised, governed and manipulated, hence, as the very opposite of a vision of the free, rational human being, erecting the modern, enlightened social imaginary.

It is relevant to stress that this view is not the only sociological understating of consecrated life. We will now give voice to those who live this lifestyle and seek for their understating. According to the nuns' view – which is rooted in ascetic tradition of religious subjectification – these practices lead to development:

It allows for development of one's humanity thanks to the acceptance of sacrifice and openness for the further sacrifice (Prioress 1).

The enclosure and ascetic practices regulate nuns' life, yet for them it is developmental since it helps them reach their communal and religious goals:

In fact, an enclosure serves as a means of repressing stimuli from the outside world which distract. Walking down a street we see advertisements and meet a lot of people. And whether we like it or not we perceive it, our senses register it. The purpose of the enclosure is to isolate us from these stimuli, but not to enclose us in our world; it allows us to focus on the One, on God, and thanks to it to see the world from His perspective (S4).

Thanks to the cloister everything can amazingly unite. No matter whether I am in a choir or I pray, or I carry out some simple duties, or if I have a quieter time, or there is an excess of work, all this is to serve this one purpose, which is to dedicate myself to Jesus Christ (S2).

Hence, the religious sisters who practice asceticism find it rather developmental than destructive to their individualities. It is easy to notice that Goffman's understanding did not take into account the local point of view, meaning the insiders' understating of their religious life which is based on different anthropology.

Conclusion

The ascetic practices in the Catholic context have evolved since the 1960s. In the perception of the religious, they have become more oriented on internal life rather than its external manifestations. In the secular context they are being discovered as a means of reaching secular goals. In both environments they are being treated as vehicles of forging growth and perfection – religious or secular.

Pedagogy is a discipline focusing on how external factors shape the individual's psychological constitution. The discussed ascetic practices, and the formation process of the religious in general, are the element of the monastic pedagogy. In theological terms, this very process allows approaching God, from the pedagogical perspective we unveil that this very quest is also a complicated psychological and social process which aims at shaping (religious) subjectivity. It has to be highlighted that – as we showed in this article – these practices have changed in which we may see that also models of formation adapt to and are related to the general societal and institutional transformations. This general conclusion may be also read as a call for more pedagogical, and in general social investigations and theocratisations of the religious life which is being mostly studied by theologians and historians. Pedagogues and social scientists in general may also contribute to depicting and interpreting the phenomenon of the religious life.

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