Self-Flagellation as Sanctification in the Roman Catholic Church’s Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei

Andrew Nicholas Cirillo, 2012
Adviser: Professor Anne Merideth, Ph.D., Department of Religion and Classics
Department of Religion and Classics, University of Rochester

Defining religious ritual as something that harbors faith more deeply through the practice of a dramatic, yet spiritual act of gravity, we can see that corporal mortification is one way this can be done. The society of Opus Dei’s rituals of corporal mortification, and most specifically the one dealing with self-flagellation, is what I will put into the most careful consideration within this paper. In addition to the attention that the movie The Da Vinci Code has placed on Opus Dei, the overall action of corporal mortification can be seen by present society as appalling and outrageous. However, using the viewpoints and objectivities of such ritual explication as symbolism, performance theory, and rite of passage, I argue that the ritual process of self-flagellation, specifically for the organization of Opus Dei, is one that fosters an ideal way to live, and one which fulfills the overall goal of life here on earth: sanctifying yourself and others to be closer to God.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, people try to avoid pain at all costs, whether it be psychological, physical, or even spiritual. Western society takes pride in providing the best doctors with the best pharmaceutical products and pain-reducing techniques to provide patients with the most technologically advanced healthcare. After all, medicine has come a long way since Hippocrates laid out the first basic medical guidelines in his Corpus Hippocraticum. Nevertheless, the central point remains that people do not want pain, or anything to do with it. It causes sickness, depression, loss of self-confidence, and worst of all, death. However, what if pain was to be considered acceptable in ritual practice? This is the case in many religions all over the world, including that of Christianity. As the media has recently centered on the Catholic religious group of Opus Dei and its usage of corporal mortification, especially evident in the popular book and film The Da Vinci Code, we have to be more concerned with how corporal mortification is religiously feasible.

In this paper, I focus on Opus Dei’s ritual practice of self-flagellation. I examine the physical as well as the mental aspects that members foster from such a ritual practice of corporal mortification. This technique, although not exclusive to the traditionalist Catholic sect, holds much significance in its weekly occurrence amid the presence of prayer. First, I will discuss the background of Opus Dei in order to provide a general layout of how such strict bodily penitence came about. The main goal, aside from the aforementioned objective to explain the ritual to the reader, is to apply various theories to the ritual of self-flagellation, and to explain what is really happening in the eyes of a practitioner of this exercise of faith. I will talk about this more soundly in the following paragraphs, but first, ritual and its all-encompassing generalities will be discussed, so as to relate to what the theorists can apply toward the practices carried out by Opus Dei.

RITUAL IN GENERAL

What does one normally think when the word “ritual” comes to mind? Is it something sacred or fantastic, something moving or symbolic, and/or something performative or dramatic? All of these terms can be applied to such a word, especially concerning its religious connotation. What the ritual actors focus on is mostly the symbolic and performative components of what can often times be compared to a theatrical production. Aside from these elements comes overwhelmingly the idea of liminality, or the idea behind stages of progress while the performer of the ritual witnesses and takes part in a process of change. This change, both spiritual and physical, oftentimes is what separates simple theater from religious rituals. So, what does one procure from these rituals? By performing these rituals repeatedly, one grows in his/her faith and develops a standard of beliefs so that the ideas behind the institution in charge of the ritual seem to hold valid truths within society. In this paper, the central religious ritual discussed and elaborated upon will be that of self-flagellation in the only personal prelature of the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, what is written above concerns the controversial group of both religious and lay members of Opus Dei, translated from Latin to mean “God’s work.” First, I will center on performance theory, most notably prescribed by Roy Rappaport. Rappaport’s vision of ritual as a “performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers” applies perfectly to the
ritualized action of whipping. Although some ascetics would consider themselves as creators of the ritual, it has existed for centuries as a form of penitence and as an imitation of Christ’s suffering on his last days on Earth. When we finally move from a performance background to a more in-depth analysis surrounding the actual stages of the ritual itself, I will exercise the writings of both Arnold van Gennep and Victor W. Turner, using their revision on the traditional rites of passage, including liminality. Therefore, I will explain the physical actualization of carrying out the flagellating act and then subsequently move toward the purifying and spiritual “rite[s] which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.”

Throughout the paper, I will expound upon the symbols, both physical and psychological, of the action itself. I will provide a description of not only the individual tools used within the ritual, but also of each separate action of mental choice and deliberation that carries weight on how important the ritual is to the members of Opus Dei. Only through these religious and sociological theories can we truly understand and recognize such a pain-inducing ritual.

By using the historical and theoretical approaches mentioned above, I argue not only for the clarification of ritualized whipping within Opus Dei, but also that it functions mentally as a ritual of purification through means of sacrificing the comfort of the body to experience the similar suffering of Christ. Through this suffering, the Christian identity of “sanctification through work” presents itself as a cleansing step toward the divine.

BACKGROUND

Opus Dei was, and is, an organization of membership and community, with a striking contrast of individuality as well, even more so than might be thought. John Allen states, “At the level of individual initiative, Opus Dei members are generally committed Catholics involved in their parishes, their dioceses, and other aspects of the life of the Church,” but at the same time “It’s only at the personal level that people are asked to ‘do’ Opus Dei,” creating their own personal sanctification through membership. Formed over the course of his life by Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer of Aragon, Spain, Opus Dei was something Escrivá had seen in a vision telling him to do God’s work: “He saw Opus Dei, as the Lord wanted it and as it would be, down through the centuries.” From October 2, 1928, onward, the Spanish priest elevated his idea of the sanctification of life onto the Vatican, which finally was approved and recognized as a personal prelature in 1982 by Pope John Paul II.

The central tenet within Opus Dei thought, belief, and membership, is that “to be holy means to sanctify work itself, to sanctify oneself in work, and to sanctify others with work,” and thus, “Escrivá’s conception of personal sanctification through work is inextricably linked to the apostolic vocation of the Christian, to ‘the apostolic mission through work.’” This is central to members of Opus Dei and truly limits them to a description of not only the individual tools used within the ritual, but also of each separate action of mental choice and deliberation that carries weight on how important the ritual is to the members of Opus Dei. Only through these religious and sociological theories can we truly understand and recognize such a pain-inducing ritual.

In his apostolate the Opus Dei member is exhorted ‘Esto vir: Be a man’ (Maxim 4), a man of will-power, energy, example (Maxim 11), whose motto is ‘God and daring’ (Maxim 401). He is ambitious—for knowledge, for leadership, for great adventures (Maxim 24). He remembers that his heart is a traitor (Maxim 188), and that it is beautiful to be a victim (Maxim 175). He is uncompromising, for to compromise is a sure sign of not possessing the truth (Maxim 394)...he needs to be strong, for ‘The plan of sanctity that God asks of us is determined by these three points: body intransigence, body erosion, and body shamelessness’ (Maxim 387). These demands often come hard on those members who join and on those who do not understand the concepts fully. As a former numerary, María del Carmen Tapia states, “I was cut off from my entire family. This ostracism lasted eighteen years, exactly the time of my stay in Opus Dei.” However, for most of the members, including the numeraries, priests, and numerary assistants, ostracism is not a problem, as they, albeit having other professions in life, are mostly dedicated to the care of and commitment to Opus Dei households and their members.

STRUCTURE

Numeraries, the most controversial subset of the Opus Dei membership, are those who are extremely devoted to Opus Dei. These positions are restricted to “members who make Opus Dei their immediate family.” Despite “remaining lay, [they] pledge celibacy, live together in one of about 1,700 sex-segregated ‘centers’ and extend their training to a degree rivaling a priest’s.” Numerary assistants are relatively similar to their numerary counterparts, but often are women who take on the traditional role of cleaning and cooking. Furthermore, there are members who have equivalent responsibilities to numeraries, who are called associates. The only difference lies in their residency with family members instead of at an Opus Dei center. Aside from all these roles lie the most prevalent members, the supernumeraries, who are not celibate-bound and who do not live within Opus Dei households. Often required to seek out “spiritual direction from a numerary of Opus Dei,” they also support the association financially with regular monetary gifts.

In addition to the various lay members of the organization, there exist clergymen, bishops, priests, and deacons, as well as the supreme leader of the prelature itself, currently Prelate Bishop Echevarría Rodríguez. The other half of the society namely comes from the governing organization of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Although the ordained members “comprise only about 3 percent of the total membership,” they have the most power and the most senior spiritual direction to guide the numerary members, who then take responsibility for the formation of the remainder of the members.

CORPORAL MORTIFICATION

Above, I have laid out a basis and history of the organization so the reader can now begin to understand just how corporal mortification works within the society. The idea of inflicting pain on one’s body, both physically and mentally, has been part of religious practice for centuries. Not limiting itself to Christianity, there are numerous examples of corporal mortification in such rituals as the Remembrance of Muharram in Shi’a Islam and the Thaipusam Festival in Hinduism. Aside from the obvious point of this paper centering on self-flagellation with a whip-like device called a discipline, the numeraries of Opus Dei also
partake in wearing the cilice on a daily basis. This small chain-like device has its roots in the hairshirt, which was a “garment made of rough cloth, often woven from goats’ hair or inlaid with barbed chains and worn as [an] undershirt or as [a] girdle in order to inflict discomfort.” Furthermore, members are also obliged to be full participants of corporal mortification, in which not just the physical aspects of self-flagellation and wearing of the cilice apply, but also the mental aspects, which are very much a complementary component to the more carnal commitments. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that corporal mortification is “the deliberate restraint that one places on natural impulses in order to make them increasingly subject to sanctification through obedience to reason illumined by faith.”

Countless Catholics, especially ascetics and monastics, have practiced the role of ritualized corporal mortification, but as Simone Weil states, “the extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for suffering.” Hence, the very act of the ritual itself, that of participating in the imitatio Christi, or, reliving the suffering and pain that Christ went through while sacrificing himself for our sins, means something very sacred to those who practice such actions. Therefore, the ritual flagellants are, as Mircea Eliade states, “conscious that they are reproducing, to the smallest detail, the paradigmatic acts of the god[s] as they were performed in illo tempore.”

It was said of the late Pope John Paul II in his self-participation of self-flagellation that “We would hear it --we were in the next room at Castel Gandolfo. You could hear the sound of the blows when he would flagellate himself. He did it when he was still capable of moving on his own.” This description by a group of Polish nuns confirms the commonality of the act and what Rev. Michael Barrett stated for a CNN article in January of 2010: “This voluntary accepted discomfort is a way of joining oneself to Jesus Christ and the sufferings he voluntarily accepted in order to redeem us from sin.” However, are we to believe that the only reason for these self-inflicted acts of pain come from desiring a closer adherence to the divine? As the theorists will point out, there is a purely felt divine and objective reason for doing such an action to oneself, but it is not the only reason. Ritual takes place out of precedence to provide an earnest belief in the teachings of that particular religion or group, and in the case of Opus Dei, the belief in living in closer companionship to God is one of the key elements.

SELF-FLAGELLATION RITUAL

I will describe the ritual of self-flagellation subsequently. The whole purpose of describing such a sacred act is to understand how it is done, in order to elucidate its efficacy, with help from theorists to come later. Since this particular ritual is not the only one practiced throughout the faith of the Opus Dei group, I will employ careful consideration on the length, duration, and specificities of this ritual. Within the group, every action builds on the next, and self-flagellation is just one of those steps in becoming closer to God. Therefore, we can assimilate the discussion of the ritual itself around many other practices that members of Opus Dei participate in, and the sum total relation of all of them to God and to the theorists’ works.

In the ritual, the person encloses himself in a private room such as a bathroom or a bedroom. The Opus Dei member makes the Sign of the Cross, in order to initiate both the prayer that will be said, as well as the sacrifice of bodily pain for one’s sins. Furthermore, the flagellant removes either the shirt or pants, as the small whip-like device resembling a macramé is used on the back or buttocks area. Next, the performer starts whipping oneself while simultaneously reciting the Angelic Salutation or the Lord’s Prayer. After this is finished, the person cleans himself of any blood or wounds, dresses in clothing, and ends the prayer with the Sign of the Cross. A real-life description by former member and numerary Agustina López de los Mozos Muñoz is accounted below:

“I learned about the “disciplines” after being in the Work for a little more than a year. It is another form of corporal mortification. It is a whip made of cord that ends in little points. It is used on Saturdays, and only on Saturdays. You go into the bathroom, lower your underwear, and on knees, you whip your buttocks during the time it takes to pray a “Salve.” I have to say that I recited the “Salve” at one hundred per hour, because the cracks of the whip on such a painful area leave the skin (in carne viva) for much of the time while you are reciting your prayer.”

As one can see, the ritual, although not long or extensively harsh on the body, causes quite an impact on the mind and spirit of the persons involved. Therefore, the idea of imitatio Christi, or the reenactment of the suffering of Christ through one’s own actions, and in this case through self-flagellation, is carried out just enough to push the performer in the right direction toward the divine. As observers and theorists, the main set of credentials we must gain from this ritual, as well as the similar one of wearing the cilice for two hours a day, is the idea that “Mortification is, first of all, a means of training the body to endure hardships.”

Adding to this statement is the idea that the Catholic Encyclopedia explains in the cleansing of the soul: “Of the diseases it [mortification] sets itself to slay, sin, the one mortal disease of the soul, holds first place.” Hence, the mental reasoning for doing such an act is to be granted a clean slate from God concerning the purity of the soul, for “Sin committed it destroys, by impelling to true penitence and to the use of those means of forgiveness and restoration which our Lord has confided to His Church.”

Furthermore, an Opus Dei numerary in Madrid, Spain, described the purpose of the self-flagellation ritual as a means “To join Christ in his passion, to ask forgiveness for our sins, [and] to gain control over our passions.” The main term here is control, which is what the Bible stresses in 2 Peter:

“Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.”

This passage perfectly explains what members of Opus Dei are trying to accomplish through corporal mortification in general. ‘Moral excellence’ is key, but it is self-control which solidifies how one interacts with others in the world and how one can interact to
be more like Christ. This is sanctification, the most central tenet that St. Josemaría Escrivá wanted to disseminate throughout the Christian world: the idea that one has to be holy in all forms of life in order to be increasingly aware and to possess the ‘knowledge’ of the divine.

THEORISTS’ APPROACHES

I will now explain how the theories of rites of passage and liminality play a factor within the self-flagellation ritual of members of Opus Dei. Firstly, I will clarify the terms in order to understand them in light of the ritual at hand.

Arnold van Gennep describes rites of passage as a subdivision of three separate but related stages: rites of separation, transition rites, which he coins the liminal stage, and rites of incorporation.28 These three stages set to describe the ritual performer in terms of his departure from a former nature toward the actual transitioning stage, which may involve symbolic meaning and direction, to the readmission to nature and society stage, albeit cleansed anew. However, this idea puts significance in the transitional phase, or the liminal stage, which is mentioned in Victor W. Turner's book, The Ritual Process. Turner regards those who are subject to the liminal stage to be involved in liminality, which he describes as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”29 Therefore, the ritual performer is concentrated within an element that is indistinguishable from all others, and in the case of those involved in the self-flagellation ritual, the stage of the actual whipping process of the body would be this liminal phase of transition. Limen, which in Latin means ‘threshold,’ accounts for the ritual performer to be in a state in which only participants are allowed. It is rather closed off, as the sole purpose of the ritual, the self-mortification through whipping, is to communicate penitence for sins and to harbor the passions of life between the performer and God. This ritualized act, however, incorporates cleansing of the body and of the mind, as again, the entire idea of mortification is “that the passions and sensual concupiscences, which when freely indulged exercise so pernicious an influence on human conduct, should be trained by judicious repression to subordinate and conform their desires to the rule of reason and in faith, as discerned by the mind.”30 Moreover, this rite of purification, just like the monthly mikvah cleansing of menstruating women in Judaism, allows the flagellant to start anew on his journey toward sanctification through work. It is a conversation of sorts, and one that Roy Rappaport describes as “the non-instrumental aspect or component of events that may also include an instrumental component: ‘technique.”31 The “technique” of the ritual, although not too strict, as the numerary member in Madrid states, is formalized and bound. Therefore, the ritual is strict in the sense that each individual who participates in it is doing it rigidly in his own way. This statement ties back in with the idea of sanctification that was touched upon earlier. The individual strives to do his best in what he sees as the proper way to grow closer to Christ and to God. Through the act of whipping oneself, all of the elements of getting down on one’s knees, the taking off of clothes, etc., are performative in the sense that the ritual “serves to express the individual’s status in the structural system in which he finds himself.”32 The structural system the ritual performer is involved in would have to be not only Opus Dei, but the private devotion to God as well. This is somewhat different from most rituals, in which “the participants transmit information concerning their own current physical, psychic, or sometimes social states to themselves and to other participants.”33 Furthermore, one must also take into consideration the prayers that are said during the ritualized whipping. Both the Hail Mary and the Our Father convey obedience and intercede on behalf of both the Virgin Mary and God. These powerful prayers, along with the coincidental act of self-flagellation, present a strong effect on the performer. One can almost feel a sense of “awe” when reciting and whipping oneself, which suggests that Rudolf Otto’s ineffable experience of the “numinous” may be in play within the performer.34 Those who experience such strong emotions of all types: guilt for sins, fear of the Almighty, remorse, etc., may not be able to explain where it is that these feelings originate. Theorists such as Rappaport would argue that these feelings are manifested in the ability of performance acting as “not merely a way to express something, but is itself an aspect of that which it is expressing.”35

The three elements of symbolism, purification through liminality, and performance theory allow us to see a different side of the highly questionable ritual, a side that is clearly more explanatory in nature. The ideas presented forth regarding the flagellant and the ritual are very much tied to the Catholic ideals of “good works.” This Christian idealism is therefore prominent in the actual self-flagellation ritual by way of allowing the performer to become a sanctified member of the Church in all aspects of life. Through self-flagellation, he cleanses himself anew, purifies himself of sin, and presents himself to the Lord with the goal of producing an inner self devoid of sin and one involved with the holy. Ariel Glucklich states, "The task of the religious practitioner is often to convert accidental pain or illness (conceived perhaps as punishment) into a positive force acting on behalf of passage, healing, or some other spiritual advantage.”36 This statement ties back into the very first paragraph of this paper, regarding the overall dissatisfaction concerning pain. It is true that leaders and prominent figures of all religions, priests, rabbis, imams, etc., try to rid themselves and their congregations of spiritual pain through divine counsel and prayer. Nevertheless, the above quotation holds true for those that “purposefully” inflict pain on themselves as well. These people, including those who participate in self-flagellation, are looking for a “positive force” that will lead them to a forgiveness of sins and an outlook on life that is full of sanctification through pain-inducing purification.

CONCLUSION

Ritualized pain, although strange to a global worldview convinced on ridding itself of suffering in general, is just another way that many ascetic, religious, and lay people come into a closer relationship with the divine. Throughout this paper, I have argued that the ritual of self-flagellation practiced within the Catholic sect of Opus Dei be analyzed more deeply, in terms of its mental and spiritual implications. By describing the ritual and by providing actual accounts and viewpoints on said ritual, I
have illustrated that the ritual incorporates much more than just the realm of physical pain. Furthermore, I have reached deeper inside the ritual’s true meaning by using theories such as rites of purification and performance.

It is through this analysis that I have reached the conclusion that self-flagellation, and corporal mortification in general, has a much deeper impact on the mind than on the body. Through these various rituals, the practitioners receive a will to carry on the Christian ideals that Jesus set forth 2,000 years before, as accountedin the New Testament: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” These good works are what Opus Dei members describe as a life full of sanctification. By suffering and controlling themselves through corporal mortification, the participants claim to achieve a clean slate in life, and are thus sent forth to carry this message as well.

NOTES
4. Ibid., 385.
5. Ibid., 47.
7. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 23.
25. Ibid.
26. Ricardo Rovira Calleja, Interview by Andrew Nicholas Cirillo, E-mail, (Madrid, Spain, April 11, 2011).
32. Ibid.
37. Ephesians 2:10.

REFERENCES
3. Calleja, Ricardo Rovira. Interview by Andrew Nicholas Cirillo, E-mail, Madrid, Spain, April 11, 2011.