

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Asceticism vs. Predestination** Fifth Week of Easter Tuesday, May 20, 2014 8:15 AM  
**Acts 14:19-31a;** Jn 14:27-31 (St. Bernardine of Siena, priest) (We have to find our way to validate this claim of hardships without going to extremes on one side or the other.)

**“They strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith, saying, ‘It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.’”**

This rather short sentence contains volumes; and the Acts of the Apostles really formed, you might say, a basis, a paradigm, for growth in Christian discipleship. The apostles were all martyred, except for the beloved disciple, who was maybe not technically an apostle, or at least this is the usual story the Church received. The martyrdom of many was a brute fact.

And the **martyrdom of the many is the basis for the Book of Revelation and for Christian spirituality for centuries.**

Now once persecution stopped, Christians reflected on this, and they said, well, we still have to undergo many hardships. As long as the government, the Roman Empire or the Jewish authorities, were persecuting the Church, well there was the hardship; but what happened when that stopped? There was born **a new spirit of asceticism, a life of self-imposed hardship.** And this became **the model for Christian spirituality,** Catholic spirituality, for centuries. It was promoted by such people as St. Francis of Assisi, and it became the basis for **monasticism,** and it became the basis for **holiness,** as it was understood. **It was a constant striving for perfection. It was a self-induced life of suffering.** It was a life of deprivation, a life of poverty, a life of detachment from the joys and pleasures of the world. All of this because “it is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”

Now the great St. Augustine actually didn't agree with this, and for that reason the later writings of Augustine were not accepted in the Catholic Church; but they were accepted in the Protestant Reformation by the reformers, namely, **the belief in predestination**. These are, in a sense, opposites to believe that we have to undergo hardships, that free will has to be employed in the work toward redemption, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world, that we have a share, as St. Paul put it, "in what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ"—that whole idea. That formed the basis for the ascetical model of sanctity and holiness in the life of the Catholic Church. That's rejected if you say everything is predestined: the saints are all predestined; they are saints because they are predestined to be saints. Sinners, well, they are predestined to be sinners. And that is really **what St. Augustine said toward the end of his life. And that is what Luther believed and what Calvin believed. It undermines the whole role of free will, and it undermines the whole life of virtue. And it really eliminates the value of suffering for the faith and, therefore, of martyrdom and asceticism.**

So there is a lot packed into this. As the Church grew and developed, it was understood in many different ways: some of it very healthy, some of it not so healthy. The radical challenge to this belief in the Reformation goes way too far it seems.

Now in this fifty years after Vatican II, **we have to find our way to validate this claim without going to extremes on one side or the other.**