

## FOOT PILGRIMS TO THE UGANDA MARTYRS' SHRINE - NAMUGONGO: *AN ACT OF SELF-MORTIFICATION—AS A PATH TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND SALVATION*

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In the past 2 weeks in Uganda, various groups of Christians across the country have been blessed and dispatched by their respective Bishops or other Clergy—and started their foot pilgrimage to the Uganda Martyrs' Shrine – Namugongo—to commemorate, participate and celebrate *The Uganda Martyrs' Day*—on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Uganda Martyrs' day celebrations are commemorated every year.

The practice of foot pilgrimage has gained traction over the years and the collective numbers have progressively increased. However, the practice has been mis-interpreted and/or in some instances misconstrued with the possible risk of negating it to a “public show” of endurance and prowess.

As at 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024, over 3,200 Foot Pilgrims were reported by Uganda Police to be on the road to Namugongo—and more numbers are expected to arrive just before the 3<sup>rd</sup> June.

The Catholic religious tradition, has long emphasized the importance of self-discipline and self-denial as a means of deepening one's spiritual connection with God.

This practice is commonly referred to as “mortification.” Mortification comes from the Latin word “*mortificare*,” which means “to put to death.” In the context of Catholicism, it refers to voluntary acts of self-denial and self-discipline, often involving physical or material sacrifices, with the ultimate goal of strengthening one's faith and achieving spiritual growth and its benefits. Mortification is seen as a way to imitate Christ's suffering and death on the cross, as well as to combat the desires of the flesh and worldly temptations.

Jesus taught us that “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay all according to his conduct (see Mt 16:21–27).”

The practice of mortification has deep historical roots within the Catholic Church. Early Christian ascetics, practiced various forms of self-denial as a means of drawing closer to God. Ascetical practices (i.e. *practices of self-denial and abstinence from physical desires and other worldly pleasures*)—when exercised in moderation, are part of the Christian tradition, for the union with the redeeming suffering of Christ which comes through accepting the trials and suffering of life, with the voluntary choice of physical suffering.

Foot Pilgrims—such as from Rubanda District—walking distances of over 400km with limited solid food and drink, practice a form of corporal mortification, and since the foot pilgrimage is accompanied by prayers—especially prayer of the rosary, and regular intervals of rest and self-reflection, this frees the pilgrims from the bondage of what is material, pleasurable and mundane and things which enslave us and prevent us from doing what is right and good. And with this, there is spiritual progress and growth.



Figure 1: Foot Pilgrims from Rubanda District, S.W Uganda.

St. Paul in the New Testament and many other saints throughout the centuries, are examples of uniting oneself "to Christ with self-sacrifice and by participating in His sufferings" Paul exhorts Corinthians—in his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

*"Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So, run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:24-27). To pommel literally means to strike and beat.*

There are various other scriptural references of mortification such as when Prophet Isaiah speaking on behalf of God prescribes the wearing of sackcloth (Is 32:11). Jeremiah does the same (Jer 4:8; 6:26). Ahab's use of sackcloth, fasting, then Colossians 1:24 *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 2 Timothy 2:11 . . . If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; etc.*

Other examples include St. Benedict who is said to have jumped into a thorn bush to quit thinking lustfully, St. Gemma wore a thin belt of knots tightly under her clothes and more recently St. (Pope) John Paul II who slept on the floor. Mortifications are saintly because self-mastery is a requirement of every Christian.

For Catholics, mortification serves as a powerful tool for spiritual growth and, with proper guidance, helps to lead to a deepening of faith, ultimately helping them live a more virtuous and Christ-like life.

It is worth observing that there are other forms of mortification—other than physical mortification highlighted above—namely 1) Fasting and Abstinence, 2) Prayer and Meditation and 3) Almsgiving—which are normally prescribed by Mother Church for practice during the Lenten period but can be practiced any time of the year—especially on certain Holy Days, to achieve same benefits that accrue to self-mortification.

The Spiritual Benefits of Mortification include—but are by no means limited to;

- a) *Greater Self-Control*—Exercising self-control over personal desires and impulses, which can lead to a more virtuous and disciplined life.
- b) *Humility*—helps individuals recognize their dependence on God and their own weaknesses. It fosters humility and a deeper understanding of one's need for grace.
- c) *Detachment from Worldly Pleasures*: By voluntarily renouncing certain pleasures and comforts, individuals can detach from the materialistic and hedonistic aspects of modern life, focusing instead on the spiritual.
- d) *Spiritual Growth*: Ultimately, mortification is a path to spiritual growth. It deepens one's relationship with God, fosters a greater sense of purpose, and helps individuals overcome spiritual obstacles.

Therefore, the role of Catholic mortification in the lives of believers is rooted in a long history of self-discipline and self-denial as a means of drawing closer to God, and as such it is imperative that participants in the "Namugongo Foot Pilgrimage" across the country and from neighbouring countries appreciate the broader and enriching spiritual benefits of this activity.



Figure 2: Foot Pilgrims receiving Basic Medical Care from a Volunteer