

Decoration and Mutilation

He had the bedraggled look of a parent losing a war of attrition. "Ask Father what he thinks", he said.

"Father, is it OK if I get a tattoo? It's not against our religion, is it? What if I get a tattoo of a cross - that would be OK, wouldn't it?"

"I've been telling him that he shouldn't do it", his father said, "but he keeps asking 'why?' and I've run out of answers."

Nowadays people from all walks of life, rich and poor, famous and infamous, sport "body art". It's no wonder that many of our young people are curious about it. Are tattoos and piercings consonant with our faith or not? If it's OK to pierce ear-lobes, why not pierce eyebrows, tongues, or navels? If colouring my skin temporarily with make-up is OK why not colour it permanently with ink?

The first and perhaps most important point which must be made is that simply having a tattoo or a piercing doesn't make a person good or bad. Many people act simply on the basis of their "cultural conditioning". They "go with the flow" of society and get a tattoo or a piercing because a friend, athlete, or movie character has one. Many good, loving and caring people happen to have tattoos or piercings. When looking at anyone we should always try to ignore the externals and see the person themselves.

Some people believe that a tattoo or piercing will make them more attractive. Others use "body art" as a means of drawing attention to themselves. Still others do it out of a sense of insecurity, low self-esteem, or because they've been made to feel ugly or revolting. The reasons people get tattoos or piercings are as unique as the individuals themselves. Are there general principles we might apply in deciding whether such practices are good, bad, or neutral?

There is a difference between a temporary decoration and a permanent mutilation, as well as between the culturally acceptable and the theologically virtuous. In order to understand what should or shouldn't be done to or with the body, we've got to understand the body from a Christian perspective.

As Christians we believe that our entire being – soul, spirit and body – is to be offered to God (*cf. Rm. 12:1*); that we are created in the image of God (*Gen. 1:27*); and that our bodies are not our own (*cf. I Cor. 6:15 – 19*). If someone entrusted a beautiful vase or a valuable painting to me for safe keeping would I attempt to deface or alter it?

We are saved in our bodies. Our bodies will be resurrected. God lived on earth in human, bodily form. The body should consequently be respected and cherished. Anything disrespectful of the body – my own or someone else's – is unacceptable.

So what's the difference between colouring grey hair brown, getting studs in my eyebrows, having cosmetic plastic surgery, or having a tattoo needled into me? Why would one be "appropriate" and another "inappropriate"?

God has made us the way we are. He had a reason. A fundamental rule of the spiritual life is that we must deal with reality – including the reality of our bodily form – as it is. If by colouring my hair or getting a tattoo I'm trying to avoid my personal reality (whether it's age, vanity, or low self-esteem) I probably shouldn't do it. If the problem is that I'm not comfortable in my own skin a tattoo probably isn't the answer.

Another spiritual principle is that we must live in function of God. If I derive my identity or sense of worth from a tattoo, a piercing, my job, or the size of my bank account, I'm not living in function of God.

My value as a human being is based on the fact that I'm made in the image of God, and that God loves me absolutely and perfectly. If I

am convinced of this, what possible joy or fulfillment could a tattoo or piercing add?

All of us have a limited amount of money and will be judged on the basis of how we use it. Is money for a tattoo or piercing well spent? In accordance with the Gospel wouldn't it perhaps be better to use this money to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc?

Ultimately, do tattoos and piercings beautify or desecrate the body? St. Peter, in talking about true beauty, says: "Do not let your adornment be merely outward - arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel - rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" (*I Peter 3:3-4*). Our beauty as children of God should be deep, not superficial, emanating from a loving heart, not simply "skin deep".

So what did I tell the young man? "God made you the way you are. You don't need a tattoo to make you handsome or interesting. Use the money you would spend on it to help the poor. If you go through with it you might feel some satisfaction and enjoy the curious attention of other people for a while. But if you concentrate on fulfilling God's commandments and try to be a real image of Christ you will surely be appreciated and respected by other people here on earth and enjoy the loving attention of God eternally as well. Your choice."

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