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Setbacks

Fr. Randy Roche

Loyola Marymount University

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Setbacks

I know of at least two kinds of setbacks. The first refers to buildings that are placed at a designated distance from the sidewalk; the second is descriptive of a plan, a way of life, or an undertaking that is obstructed. When a building has a setback of a certain distance, it will almost certainly remain that way as long as the street and building exist. But most of us think of personal setbacks as only temporary, rather than permanent losses. We cannot do much about construction projects once they are completed, but we can almost always find ways to move around or beyond obstacles in our lives.

Streets and buildings do not have feelings, nor are they concerned about their setbacks. But we humans experience pain, sorrow, anger, fear, and other feelings when we encounter setbacks to our dreams of either stability or movement. What we do about hindrances, complications, and problems not only defines who we are for others, but makes us the persons we are in ourselves. We are not created as objects to be admired in our perfection. We continually participate in a living, loving, and growing flow of life that is fulfilling to us largely through our responses to the effects of opposition. We thrive in conditions of the constant pull of gravity, whereas those who experience weightlessness for any length of time need to consciously create physical tension or they will become debilitated.

However well we understand with our minds the long-term benefits of working through a variety of setbacks in our lives, when we hurt, we hurt. We cannot by-pass feelings of pain or anger any more than we can evade the effects of gravity merely by thinking about them. Though we are committed to moving forward and not backward, we are not so strong that we can or should try to handle every situation on our own. Each of us must make our own decisions about how to respond to setbacks, but we are not alone. We have one another, and we have our relationship with God.

Calling to mind how we managed to get through previous setbacks can serve us well, even though each new situation has unique elements, especially the set of thoughts and feelings that accompany it. Rather than spending time and energy with thoughts of "not again," or, "it should not have happened," we can recall the amazing personal stories each of us has of actually profiting from a setback, as when someone takes ill and misses an important

event but gains a much-needed creative insight while being cut off from normal interactions, and achieves a much more significant and fulfilling point of view than would otherwise have occurred.

Some setbacks seem to us not at all temporary. We experience losses that can never be restored, and that leave us with life-time wounds. In all honesty, we cannot consider a death, a broken love-relationship, or a serious health issue as "only a setback." We either go to a deeper level of reality in order to find a personally satisfying perspective, or we identify with the permanent concrete setbacks of buildings. Spirituality is nothing, if not the deep core of our humanity that enables us to live with dignity, meaning, and purpose even when a quite unwelcome and unlooked for serious challenge comes to us. When we seem unable to take the internal step forward that we somehow know is necessary, God is to be found precisely in that place within us where we are finally able to decide that we are winners, not losers.

Nothing and no one has power to set us back from our very selves. We live with, and then through, setbacks.