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Exercise

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Exercise

The concepts of “exercise” and “spirituality” go quite well together as noted by Ignatius of Loyola in his book, *The Spiritual Exercises*. Some of us learned early in life, some of us later, that exercise has benefits that are easily recognized in terms of improved health, mental activity and spiritual endeavors. We might re-learn this kind of lesson at various times in life. Recently, I noticed that my energy level increased for daily work, thinking, and prayer, as a consequence of adding a bit more physical exercise to my habitual routine.

Some people never engage in deliberate physical exercise, and live long and productive lives. If we were all the same, life would be devoid of the delightful variety that we find among us. But all of us certainly use some of our physical muscles on a daily basis, just as we all use our minds and spiritual capacities regularly. In that sense, all of us exercise the full range of our faculties, but in widely varying levels of intensity and purposefulness. No two of us exercises all of the capabilities we possess in the same way, and no one of us exercises the various aspects of our humanity in the same proportion from day to day.

If we decide to do so, we can build up muscles through physical exercise, and we can build up mental aspects of ourselves through hobbies and careers, and we can also build up our spiritual components of faith, hope, and love by exercising them, too. The positive side of “use it or lose it” is this wonderful capacity we have of “gaining by exercising.”

Initiating any kind of exercise can be difficult or challenging. We have resistance to change. Muscles, unaccustomed to exercise, might become sore. The first time we have to write a new kind of letter or report, or fill out a form on-line, the process can be less than pleasurable. People who want to establish a routine for prayer often find that getting started is difficult. But, after some repetitions, we gain facility, and then begin to experience the benefits: an increase in energy, pleasure in writing, enjoyment at actually saving time when working on-line, and a sense of interior peacefulness in prayer. Many of us have found deep satisfaction in having developed a habit that we had decided upon. By exercising a particular set of muscles, or our minds, or our spirits, we find increased joy in living.

If we decide that we want to increase our faith and love – our practice of trust and of care for those whom God loves just as God loves us –

we should rely on the assistance of our Personal Trainer. The union of exercise and spirituality has this unique characteristic: when we ask for assistance from God, we will exercise the very faith and love that we seek to enlarge.

We can see, or hear, or at least read a book by, some other person who can help us with almost any activity. But God, as our Personal Trainer, is invisible, and is infinitely greater than all people. We relate with God primarily by trusting the desires within us that incline us towards God. Trust and love grow together when we respond to the movements of God within us, such as our yearning for better health, more knowledge, a deeper sense of purpose, or most of all, love.

The union of spirituality and exercise is most readily perceived when we attend reflectively to our experiences. For example, I could say, "Come, Holy Spirit, please help me to increase my trust in God" or "Please help me to love people as You love them." The immediate experience might not be that of more trust in God or love for people exactly as God loves them. But, if I reflect on my experience, I can surely notice whether or not I was content with what I said, and whether or not I was honest in my expression. Most of us come away from such encounters with God with a sense that we "did the right thing," and find satisfaction in the interaction. Our experience, upon further reflection, actually is that of someone who has trusted, and who has grown in love, even in a very small way.

Exercise faith, and it grows; act or speak with good will, and love grows. This is how we are made, and this is how very well our spirituality is enhanced through appropriate exercise.