

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Muscular endurance is the component of physical fitness that enables us to continue to perform actions that we need to engage over a longer period of time without wearing out. A person could possess great muscular strength, but lack endurance. In the spiritual life, it is PRAYING that is our capacity for endurance and perseverance over a lifetime of challenges.

As muscular endurance requires the development of all the muscle groups working together, so praying requires a communal effort. In the Bible, the ideal of the Bible is never simply individual, but always communal. Jesus says: *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.* (Matthew 18:20) This is true because prayer is the expression of love that most conforms us to the image of Jesus. Jesus begins his mission in retreat in the desert, in which his relationship with the Father is tested and strengthened in prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray to God as Our Father with the same confidence. The honesty of Jesus' prayer, and the honesty of his favorite prayers - the Psalms - show us that we can be totally open with our feelings in prayer. The Father wants to hear from us. The last words of Jesus are words of prayer for others and for the completion of his mission in service to others. Jesus' praying in the desert and praying on the cross shows us that prayer does not require any particular conditions. In fact, the most powerful prayer often arises out of conditions that are less than ideal.

Authentic prayer is always communal; an act of solidarity. First, we pray in solidarity with the risen Jesus himself. Scripture emphasizes that the power of our prayer is found most fundamentally in the fact that we pray in Jesus' name, and that Jesus is interceding for us at all times (Romans 8:33-34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2). In prayer, the Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus in prayer to the Father. (Romans 8:26-27)

Second, we pray in solidarity with the whole communion of saints, both visible and invisible. We pray together to OUR Father, as Jesus taught us. It has always been part of Catholic tradition that we can ask for the intercession of particular saints, especially Mary, the most perfected of the saints. But even the power of the intercession of individual saints comes from the fact that the saints always pray in unity - in communion with one another.

Third, we intercede for another in prayer amid the struggles of life lived day to day. An "intercessor" is a "go-between." We go to God on behalf of others in solidarity with them. An "intercessor" is a "reconciler." We pray that our relationships with one another will be reconciled with God's will for us - brought into harmony with God's will. Pope Francis speaks often about this: "One form of prayer moves us particularly to take up the task of evangelization and to seek the good of others; it is the prayer of intercession...Intercessory prayer does not divert us from true contemplation, since authentic contemplation always has a place for others. This attitude becomes a prayer of gratitude to God for others...The great men and women of God were great intercessors. Intercession is like a leaven in the heart of the Trinity. It is a way of penetrating the Father's heart and discovering new dimensions which can shed light on concrete situations and change them." (*Evangelii gaudium* 281-283)

Francis recalls Jesus' words about leaven: *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened.* (Matthew 13:33) Our mission depends on the constant leavening process of our communal prayer together, wherever and whenever we are moved by the Holy Spirit to pray. Francis reminds us that all authentic prayer is Eucharistic. It is an expression of thanksgiving to God for the blessings of our lives, especially for those God has placed in our life journey.

All this reminds us that the challenges of our current situation of social distancing are no match for the power of prayer. Indeed, these challenges can expand and deepen our prayer if we are open to it. This can be an opportunity to develop a regular discipline of prayer - spiritual exercise - if we are not already doing it. The beauty of the Catholic tradition is that it offers a rich variety of ways and styles of praying that are all valid, and all express different facets of the precious gem of our spiritual life as the light of Jesus shines upon it. Jesus says: *The one who has been instructed in the kingdom is like the head of household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.* (Matthew 13:52) So there are ancient ways to pray which come to us from tradition, and there are new ways to pray that arise in each generation as the Holy Spirit inspires the People of God.

*Admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all. See that no one returns evil for evil. Always seek what is good for each other and for all. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.* (1 Thessalonians 5:14-18)

Peace Be With You,