

Fit For The Race

St Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth: *All the fighters at the games go into strict training; they do this just to win a wreath that will wither away, but we do it for a wreath that will never wither.* In encouraging the Christian community in the practice and building up of their faith, Paul was using an example that would be familiar to them - that of the Greek athletes and fighters who would train long and hard in preparation for the competitions in which they were to take part and all for a simple laurel wreath awarded to the winner. (Would today's Olympic athletes settle for so simple a prize?) How much harder we need to train and how much more dedicated we need to be, Paul says, in order to strive for the prize that God holds out to us – that of eternal life. But it begs the question as to whether we are as spiritually fit as we should be?

As a further example, are we as physically fit as we should be? I know I'm not. I used to be, but those days are long gone. When I was teaching and coaching sports in Zambia, I would play a full game of football with the students most afternoons, at altitude and in the African heat. I also coached (and played) volleyball, tennis, and badminton. I was fit, weighed ten-and-a-half stone but I was only in my early twenties. In my thirties I was in the heat of Saudi Arabia working in sports and recreation management, playing a little football and volleyball, and jogging and swimming for fitness. Even as a student at Ushaw I was still playing volleyball (and swimming) and giving lads half my age a run for their money, but once I was ordained and in a parish I became noticeably less active, less lean and less young!

But St Paul makes a good point. Those whose profession is sport or athletics have got to maintain a regular training regimen, a good diet and a healthy lifestyle. The pace and the physicality of modern sport demand no less. The rewards, of course, can make it all worthwhile for top-flight professional sportsmen and women, but they need to because it can be an all-too-brief career. While some may enjoy fame and fortune, others can be left with little more than the long-term consequences of repeated injuries and of pushing their bodies too hard for too long.

We all know regular exercise is good for us and many have both the time and opportunity to pursue it. Others, however, have the intention but it never actually translates into activity. It requires determination, discipline and getting into the habit, and it becomes all too easy to keep putting it off until tomorrow. We need the incentive, something to finally persuade us that the time is long overdue - stepping onto the scales, a visit to our doctor, a heart scare in a friend - something that finally gets our attention and makes us realise that our health is too precious (whether to ourselves or to our family) to sit idly by letting time take its toll.

Whatever we can say with regard to our physical health and well-being, surely the same is true, and more besides, with regard to our spiritual lives and, again, that was the point St Paul was making. We did RE in school the same as we did PE, but just as we never gave up physical exercise when we left school, no more should we have

given up spiritual exercise. Trying to claim that we learned everything we ever needed to know about our faith when we were in school would be like trying to make the same claim about everything else in life which, of course, would be ridiculous. So how can we best ensure that we are as spiritually fit and active as we should be? What constitutes the *strict training* to which St Paul called the Christians of Corinth? Do we know what that involves but, like keeping physically in shape, lack the discipline, the determination and the habit? The incentive is our salvation.

- As we did as children with our limited catechism knowledge, are we still going to Mass out of obligation and to avoid mortal sin? If so, that's a pretty sad reason for celebrating the eucharist which should be, as the catechism says, the source and summit of our Christian lives. Could we get to Mass more frequently than we do at present?
- How regularly do we take advantage of the sacrament of reconciliation in order to ensure that our relationship with God and our neighbour is all that it should be?
- How is our prayer life? – not necessarily in terms of the quality of our prayer though that is important, but, perhaps, in terms of how much time we make for God in our day.
- Have we ever considered going on a retreat? If we have been on one, how long ago was it?
- When was the last time we spent time reading the word of God in scripture? Do we read spiritual writings as regularly as we read other books? – how else can we fresh and renew our spiritual knowledge and perspective. Have we read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?
- When was the last time we attended adult formation talks or presentations in the parish? If there was the opportunity but we decided against it, why was that?
- How involved are we in the practical, spiritual and liturgical life of our parish? If we aren't, why is that? Our faith community is where our spirituality is nourished or should be, and if that isn't our experience then maybe our involvement might be a positive contribution both for the parish and for ourselves.

We can't make sudden and excessive demands of an untrained body. Someone who lives a fairly sedentary lifestyle suddenly having to sprint to catch a bus is likely to end up in an ambulance instead. An aching back for a week can be the price we pay for an overly ambitious afternoon in the garden. We go for a brisk walk in the country and end up in bed the next day not even able to walk round the house. The same is true of our spiritual condition. If our spiritual exercise is limited to Sunday Mass and sporadic prayer time, then we may not be as spiritually fit as we think we are, or as we should be. We may feel everything is OK, but we'll only find out for sure when something happens to test that fitness or when we one day stand before God to be judged on our fitness.

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