

Get Yourself Spiritually Fit



Christopher News Notes

SPORTS AND PHYSICAL EXERCISE ARE NOT JUST HEALTHY FOR OUR BODIES. They are also very popular pastimes in our modern culture. While sports can be thrilling, we can't forget to also work on our spiritual muscles, to strengthen and deepen our relationship with God and build up the strength to deal with the challenges that we will inevitably face in life.

So how do we build up these spiritual muscles? Wouldn't it be great if there was a workout for our souls?

Well, lucky for us, one popular saint in the 1530s came up with just such a regime!

“St. Ignatius Loyola began writing about the emotions that took hold of him—feelings of gratitude and anguish, consolation and sadness—while encountering the scriptures. Those meditations eventually became the Spiritual Exercises,” says *Jesuit.org*. “[It] is a compilation of meditations, prayers, and other contemplative practices.”

The exercises are sorted into four sections, or weeks, and can help people “find God in all things.” The first week focuses on building an awareness and experience of God’s boundless love for us. The second teaches us how to be disciples. The third week involves meditating on the Last Supper and Christ’s passion. The last week looks at Jesus’ resurrection and how we can “walk with the risen Christ and set out to love and serve Him in concrete ways in our lives in the world.”

One of St. Ignatius’ best-known prayers defines his philosophy: “O my God, teach me to be generous, to serve You as You deserve to be served, to give without counting the cost, to fight without fear of being wounded, to work without seeking rest, and to spend myself without expecting any reward but the knowledge that I am doing Your holy will.”

Margery Eagan learned the benefits of the Spiritual Exercises firsthand by taking a months-long course in them with several other people. She documented her story for the website *Crux*.

Eagan came to realize that her attraction to the Spiritual Exercises stemmed from getting together with others to “talk about the presence and action of God in their lives—how they feel and believe it’s real...I look around the room. I hear the child-care worker, the nurse, the academic dean, the lawyer, the retired financier, the young man doing prison ministry, the young Jesuits from all around the world. These are serious Catholics talking... about the movement of the spirit.”

That follows along with Father Timothy Gallagher’s paraphrasing of St. Ignatius in the book *The Discernment of Spirits*: “In coming to a decision,

Check Your Spiritual Health

Mary Lou Carney offers a few tips on how to check on your spiritual health in a blog post from *Guideposts* magazine.

1. **A spiritually healthy person has a definite goal.** In the Bible, Abraham’s goal was to reach the land God had in store for him. Paul’s goal was to reach the whole known world for Christ. What is *your* goal for this month? This day? Think big—God will help you!
2. **A spiritually healthy person is realistically humble.** Paul, probably the greatest saint of all time, called himself “less than the least of all saints” (Ephesians 3:8). He reminds us not to feel self-important with the question “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). St. Teresa of Calcutta called herself “a pencil in the hand of God.”
3. **A spiritually healthy person is confident.** “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).
4. **A spiritually healthy person is optimistic.** They believe God is on their side and all will be well. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

only one thing is really important—to seek and to find how God is calling me at this time of my life. ...God has created me out of love, and my salvation is found in my living out a return of that love. All my choices, then, must be consistent with this given direction in my life.”

The Lessons of Rudy

If you want to see an all-American, feel-good story, try one of the most popular sports films of all time: *Rudy*. Based on the life of Daniel Ruettiger, Rudy is a kid from the Midwest. He isn’t the smartest kid, nor the biggest, and he’s often picked on by his older brothers for his (lack of) height and brawn.

Rudy does, however, play for his high school football team. Like most Catholic high school boys growing up during the 1960s, he dreamed of playing college football for the Notre Dame Fighting Irish. But his grades weren’t even good enough to get him into junior college, much less the most popular university in the nation. His dream doesn’t falter, though. He scrimps and saves his money.

Finally, a kind priest, impressed by his zeal, finagles Rudy’s entrance into Holy Cross, a smaller college

located across the lake from Notre Dame. After four grueling semesters, Rudy finally gets accepted as a transfer student to Notre Dame and tries out for the team as a walk-on player. Despite his lack of talent, the coaches are impressed by his spirit, so they begrudgingly allow him on to their third string.

For another two years, Rudy is basically a walking tackling dummy with no playing time. But right before their last game, Rudy’s teammates petition the coaches to let Rudy dress for the last game of his senior year. The coaches yield, and as the final seconds of the clock tick down, Rudy completes a sack. In jubilation, his teammates carry him off the field. Since then, no other Notre Dame player has been carried off the field.

The movie *Rudy* is popular for a host of reasons—but it’s not just about a football play. It’s about how determination and discipline can help you create a life, even when the odds seem insurmountable. Is it any different in the spiritual life? Well, of course, we don’t “earn” heaven by prowess or strength—but when we are faced with trials, temptations, evil or sadness, the discipline of our spiritual life gives us the strength to face them with courage and with firmness of mind.

Discipline is also important when it comes to maintaining our prayer lives. Oftentimes, it is easy to skip morning or night prayer because we are tired or forgetful. But if we've built up our spiritual muscles, our resilience, our ability to sacrifice comfort for a greater good—then we will be more prone to rise to the challenges of the spiritual life. Remember, our lives are not just purely physical—we are built of mind, body, and spirit!

The Heart of Spiritual Training

Reading about strengthening your spiritual muscles is no substitute for actually doing something about it. As author Gary Jansen noted during a *Christopher Closeup* interview about his book *Life Everlasting: Catholic Devotions and Mysteries for the Everyday Seeker*, "You could read tons of books, but that doesn't mean you'll ever know anything more about God unless you have this personal experience along the way."

Jansen made a few poignant points about the head and the heart. First, he said, when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, the Gospel doesn't tell us that she "thought" about becoming the Mother of God. The Gospel says she "pondered these things in her heart."

"In tradition, ancient people used to believe that the heart was the center of the intellect," Jansen explained. "When a fetus is developing, the first thing to develop is the heart. That happens about 14 days after conception. Another 14 days after that, that's when the brain starts. So the heart is

sending information that creates the brain...We can over-intellectualize our faith. But having these opportunities to put the mind at ease through the power of devotion—which is through the power of heartfelt prayer and meditation—can revolutionize the way that you experience God."

So how do we build upon this "power of devotion" to "revolutionize" our relationship with God? Jansen noted that you need to make the conscious and intentional decision (the brain) to deepen your relationship (the heart) with God—and to do the work necessary (the body). He compared the process to weightlifting. Someone who has never lifted weights before isn't going to start off by bench pressing 400 pounds. They would need to start with 10 or 20 pounds and gradually build up.

The same approach works with building your spiritual muscles. Jansen said, "Adding a little prayer into your life every day, setting aside just a few minutes, gives you the opportunity." It's not unusual to step into a gym and see trainers coaching their clients through reps (repeated activities)—lunges, or squats, or leg lifts. Well, 'reps' definitely have a place in our prayer life, too!

"Repeat the name of Jesus throughout the day and allow the supernatural power of Jesus' name, the love that is embedded in that name, what that name represents, to be on your lips throughout the day," Jansen recommended. "When you're standing in line at the grocery store, repeat the name of Jesus over and over. It's like thought substitution. Instead of worrying about stuff, repeat Jesus' name. It leads to a shifting of consciousness and makes you aware that Jesus is important to me, so let me focus on Him for a few seconds. In time, this almost becomes like second nature."

So take time to build your spiritual muscles whenever you have the opportunity. That strength will come in handy during many times of your life.



"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

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"If a man is to live, he must be all alive, body, soul, mind, heart, spirit."

—THOMAS MERTON