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**Developing our Physical, Mental and Spiritual Health**

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The Covid pandemic, which has taken the lives of over one million Americans, has also been detrimental to our mental and emotional health, generating increased stress and depression. In addition, it has deprived many believers of the spiritual nourishment of Sunday liturgy. With some return to normalcy, we now have an opportunity to reflect on how we can maintain and improve our physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

We commonly think of health as a *condition*, a state of well-being that can be disrupted by disease. We can also think of it in more dynamic terms as a *resource* for living well that enables us to handle stress, develop skills, realize aspirations, maintain relationships and manage adversity. As a resource, health can be developed and expanded by forming healthy habits and living a healthy lifestyle. We can enhance our sense of well-being by improving and coordinating our physical, emotional and spiritual health. As Christians, it is fitting to begin with our spiritual health as a valuable resource for achieving greater holistic health.

One way of growing spiritually is by going deeper within, becoming more conscious of the triune God who dwells in our hearts. The great spiritual masters have described this process in various ways. For example, the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), urges us to move from our false self, which we exhibit to others, to our true self made in the image and likeness of God. We become aware of our true self by meditating regularly with an emphasis on talking less and listening more to God speaking. Fidelity to this practice enables us to realize that we are not identified with any external reality: achievement or failure, intellectual capacity or body type, economic situation or social class. At the deepest level we are most truly a child of God, a friend of Jesus and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual writer, John Shea describes the practice of going within as seeing with “the first eye of the soul.” He offers this advice: overcome “chronic busyness” and preoccupation with external events; follow the traditional admonition “know thy self,” and live with greater mindfulness. Through the first eye we recognize that the kingdom of God exists within us, that we are divinized and participate in God’s life.

The other general way we grow spiritually is by appropriating and living the Christian tradition. It is important to recognize the intrinsic connection between spiritual experience and the Christian religion, especially since more people today say they are spiritual but not religious. Christianity is founded on the testimony of the original witnesses who in the midst of their grief and disappointment experienced the presence and power of the crucified and risen Christ. Christianity spread because the believers who experienced the abiding presence of Christ lived his law of love of neighbor in a way that enticed others to join them. Through the “second eye of the soul” we see the relevance of the Christians religion for living a healthy life in today’s world. Our journey inward prepares us to make the journey of life with greater awareness and dedication.

More specifically, we develop our spiritual life by identifying ourselves with Christ and following his example of loving God and neighbor. The Gospels present Jesus as a healer and exorcist. Mark, the earliest Gospel, tells us Jesus “healed many who were sick and drove out demons” (1:32:34). Matthew, who used Mark as his main source, reports ten of the miracles of Jesus, stressing his compassion for the needy who are restored to a state of well-being (8-9). Luke, also dependent on Mark, tells us Jesus “restored sight to many who were blind” (7:21), but then mentions only one example, Jesus curing a blind beggar and saying “your faith has saved you” (18:35-4). John’s Gospel, written in the 90s by followers of the Beloved Disciple, records seven progressively more remarkable “signs,” starting with changing water into wine at Cana (2:1-11) and concluding with the resuscitation of Lazarus (11:1-44). Furthermore, in John’s Gospel Jesus breaks the presumed connection between sin and sickness by insisting that a man was blind from birth not because he or his parents sinned, but, enigmatically, “to make visible the works of God” (9:1-3). All four Gospels attest to the historical fact that Jesus demonstrated remarkable healing power during his public ministry.

In his book *Jesus as Healer*, the late scripture scholar John Pilch distinguishes “disease” like diabetes, from “illness” a socio-cultural condition that involves loss of meaning. Likewise, he distinguishes “curing,” which involves removing or arresting the cause of a disease, from “healing,” which involves a restoration of meaning. Although the Gospels do not make these distinctions, the miracle storis suggest that Jesus has the power to heal us of illness and restore meaning to our lives.

Pilch argues that the Gospels present Jesus as a “folk healer,” who uses folk techniques, for example applying mud to the eyes of the blind man (John 9:6). Many of his miracles were a response to an individual’s faith, and he could not heal those who lacked faith (Mark 6:5). It is our faith in Christ that frees us to ask for his healing touch for ourselves and others.

Throughout Christian history, believers have thought of Christ as the “Divine Physician.” For example, Augustine compared ordinary physicians, who are limited and make mistakes, to Christ, the “Infallible Physician,” who knows human existence and has unlimited power. Eastern theologians referred to Christ as the “Physician of Humanity,” who gave us the Eucharist, the “medicine of immortality.” In the modern western world, the physician image of Christ lost favor, but now might be a good time to retrieve it as we face so many challenges to a heathy life.

In maintaining and improving our physical health, Christ, the Word made Flesh, instructs us in the fundamental goodness of the human body. This tradition goes back to the book of Genesis, where God created males and females and declared his work “very good.” In our official Creeds, we profess belief not in the immortality of the soul, but in the resurrection of the body. As Christians, we have a moral obligation to avoid the extremes of idolizing our bodies and abusing them.

In meeting our obligation to respect and care for our bodies we find helpful advice from the Mayo Clinic:

Get enough sleep. A CDC study found that over a third of American adults do not get enough sleep on a regular basis. (seven to eight hours a night). Set a regular time to get to bed and get up. Stop screen time at least an hour before retiring. If you cannot fall asleep within about 20 minutes, go to another room and do light reading or listen to relaxing music until you get sleepy.

Get regular exercise. About 80% of Americans, young and old, do not get enough. Try to get at least a half hour of vigorous exercise each day. Every little bit helps. Older adults should include muscle building and balance exercises. Pick an exercise that you can do most days despite weather and time limitations. Walking is good.

Eat a healthy diet. About two-thirds of Americans are overweight. The American Psychological Association makes these suggestions. Eat regular meals and do not skip meals. Practice mindful eating by paying attention to whether you are really hungry and what emotions accompany overeating and snacking. Do not think in terms of being on or off a diet; instead develop healthy eating habits and strive for progress not perfection. Do not use eating as a way of dealing with stress, boredom and other negative emotions.

In managing the Covid pandemic, we are extremely fortunate to have safe and effective vaccines. The problem is about one-third of our population is not fully vaccinated, making it more difficult to control the pandemic. This “vaccine hesitancy” stems from multiple causes: mistrust of science, resistance to mandates, fear of needles, and political loyalties. Many of us know that reasoned arguments against this hesitancy are not working. Pope Francis has argued that getting vaccinated is a “moral obligation” and an “act of love,” which respects the health of people around the world. He also criticized the “politization of vaccinations and the spread of misinformation.” The pope has demonstrated great pastoral wisdom in presenting vaccination as an act of love, since love of family has already motivated many relational individuals to get the shots and has a better chance than reasoned argument to reach the holdouts.

The pandemic has not only affected us physically but has also caused a significant increase in emotional stress, leading to greater anxiety and depression, as much as 25% worldwide according to one study. As we try to deal with this problem, we can count on the support of the Divine Physician, who himself experienced a wide range of human emotions: from joy in his Father’s love (John 15:10-11) to a sense of abandonment on the cross (Matt 27:46), from anger at the money changers in the Temple (John 2:13-16) to exhaustion from the demands of ministry (Mark 6:31).

With this assurance, we can consider advice from medical professionals. Keep a regular daily routine of meals, exercise, sleep and work. Limit exposure to bad news and conspiracy theories. Focus on positive thoughts and make a list of blessings. Keep problems in perspective and set reasonable goals for each day. Avoid destructive coping methods such as smoking, over eating and excessive drinking. Talk about troublesome emotions with a friend, confidant or counselor. Draw guidance and strength from your belief system, which for Christians might mean meditating on gospel passages that portray Christ’s emotional responses and healing power.

We have seen important points worth remembering and pondering. Health is a dynamic resource that can be deepened and expanded. Growing spiritually requires that we set aside time for regular prayer and meditation; that we realize our essential dignity as children of God; that we rely on the healing power of Christ; that we find nourishment in the Eucharistic liturgy; and that we practice love of neighbor in our daily lives. Guided by our belief in the essential goodness of our body, we should try to get enough sleep, to exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet. Imitating Christ, we can develop healthy habits that help us mobilize our emotions for doing good. Finally, we should thank God for the gift of health and use this resource wisely.