

"Always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." (Ephesians 5:20)

"Infirmity" is a severe taskmaster in the art of acquiring grace, and one of its most effective tools is restriction of physical movement. To the degree a person suffers illness and infirmity, proportionately grows a sense of being "cut off"—from wellness, wholeness, and the normal rhythm of life. For many, physical curtailment exacts an equally devastating emotional toll, especially on those who evaluate their worth and define themselves by their levels of activity. With self-worth contingent on performance, Infirmity brings us to our knees.

My recent slip-and-fall—resulting in surgery and a merciless full-extension leg brace—clearly and powerfully brought this point home. I was never so angry with myself, and my anger stemmed from my dismay about my own carelessness, which disrupted my normal routine in ways that I would have never expected.

This temporary disruption, however, provided me the opportunity to ask myself some uncomfortable questions. Does my level of activity define me? More pointedly, does it conveniently hide from me the demons that God sees in my heart, my subconscious, and wishes to deliver me from? Does it provide me with necessary distractions, helping me avoid facing those "lurking dragons in the chambers of my heart" that I'd rather not see eye-to-eye and fight hand-to-hand?

A recent article in *The New York Times* laments the new technology that affects the ability of our young people to focus—to read an entire book or to do homework. Techno multi-tasking—Facebook, multiple conversations via Twitter or email, video games, and listening to music, all at the same time—is rewiring brains. The article noted that one high school junior sent and received an average of 7,000 texts a month! A researcher quoted in the article commented: "Their brains are rewarded for not staying on task but for jumping to the next thing...The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently." (*New York Times*, "Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction," Matt Richtel, p. 1, November 21, 2010)

The article stunned my conscious: I haven't needed new technology to avoid spiritual focus. Hyperactivity has worked just fine for me. Wrongly, I have trained myself to believe that action gives me life, and that without external movement—doing and performing—I am useless. My busyness has excused a poor and weak prayer life and has allowed me to avoid quiet, silence, and stillness. But God calls me to be still, to "go into my chamber and close the door," (Matt 6: 5–7), wherein He lives and speaks. Why do I continue to avoid Him, even while doing things in His Name? (Matt 7: 21–24)

By God's grace, I've had wonderful companions during my recuperation—the daily readings from Scripture, the Psalms, and a book titled, *Let God*, by François de Salignac de La Mothe Fenelon, the Archbishop of Cambrai, France, (17th-century). Some of you may be familiar with his writings. This little book is so simply written, but hard to hear, because Fenelon's words penetrate the heart:

I am amazed at the power that comes to us through suffering; we are worth nothing without the cross. I look back on the experience with deep appreciation, and am ashamed that I bore it with so much bitterness. Every cross He gives us is for our profit. Whatever spiritual knowledge or feelings we may have, they are all a delusion if they do not lead us to the real and constant practice of dying to self....The great Physician who sees in us what we cannot see, knows exactly where to place the knife. He cuts away that which we are most reluctant to give up....He wants you to live abundantly, but this can only be accomplished by allowing Him to cut into that fleshly part of you which is still stubbornly clinging to life. He might even test your faith with restrictions and trials of all kinds.

Thanksgiving is just days away, and we will have the chance to give thanks to God for all his bounty. Father John Meyendorff, our seminary dean of blessed memory, was noted for saying that of all the American holidays, only Thanksgiving Day approximates and reflects our Orthodox faith: after all, we are eucharistic beings, creatures wired to give thanks!

But we are remiss in giving thanks only for blessings that feed our physical wellbeing. We are to give thanks to God for all things, including difficult, challenge circumstances that shake our security and make us vulnerable to Infirmity's knife. Such gifts, when they lead us to reflect on our "spiritual manner of living" (as the prayer before Scriptural reading suggests), provide us with grace and a place at the Lord's Table, where there is eternal thanksgiving.

To be continued...

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