

My high school football coach, like most coaches, had coaching wisdom distilled down into tight epigrams he constantly quoted to us. One his favorites was, “The best way to get in shape is to never get out of shape.” Coach was a big proponent of year-round workouts. I was not.

I have a clear memory from the August before my senior year. I had suddenly realized three days before football two-a-day practices were to begin that maybe I needed to get in shape – and that I needed new football cleats. I bought a pair the next day and had to break them in. So, I thought I would start jogging hard and far – wearing the new cleats, to break them in, killing two birds with one stone. Maybe two days of getting in shape would be better than none. But not really. It was too late. My clear memory is of jogging down the right-of-way in Newport Hills on a horribly hot day, in these stiff shoes thinking, “I should never have gotten out of shape. I should have been doing this all year. Coach was right.”

We're back in Ordinary Time after the end of Christmas season last week. This transition is what made me think of my old Coach and my failure to stay in shape. The Church seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter, are wonderful times, filled with spiritual challenges, high points and graces – but we spend most of our lives in Ordinary Time. And if we don't practice the faith well then, we certainly won't become saints by living out the festive seasons.

We can think of the Liturgical Year as a football season. Lent is like the grueling two-a-day drills every August that really hurt but prepare us for the fun – the games (think of the games as Easter and Christmas). Outside those high points – but necessary for them -- are the off-season workouts (which I never did). So, given that history, I can relate to the mindset that puts off the spiritual exercises the Church recommends for all followers of Jesus. Most of us spend periods of our lives – most of them – like that teenage me in August trying to make up for lost time with God, but not getting very far.

So, what are your ordinary, daily spiritual exercises? I mean, be honest – not what you have promised to do daily, but what you actually do. Think of me as your spirituality Coach. The need for year-round, daily prayer practices is behind my constant push for 20 minutes a day of silent, solitary prayer with Jesus. Daily mass, if possible, is wonderful. And there are so many other ways to stay in spiritual shape, daily scripture reading, daily rosary, etc.

But today I want to suggest a different practice that everyone could integrate into life without too much effort. I've been going deeper into the Divine Mercy Devotion these past months. For those who aren't familiar with this, St. Faustina, a Polish nun of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dying in 1938, was a visionary and mystic (St. John Paul II canonized her about 20 years ago). Jesus appeared to her many times and asked for the Church and world to turn to Him for His mercy. People weren't making use of all the mercy he wanted to give the

world. If you have heard of the Divine Mercy Chaplet or Divine Mercy Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, these are part of this set of devotions.

Well, another thing Jesus asked St. Faustina to tell the world about is the Hour of Mercy. This is 3:00 PM, the hour Jesus died on the cross. He told Faustina, “As often as you hear the clock strike the third hour, immerse yourself completely in my mercy, adoring and glorifying it . . . it was the hour of grace for the whole world.” (Diary 1572).

Practicing this Hour of Mercy simply means that every day at 3:00 we turn our attention to the Passion of Jesus on the Cross and meditate on it to whatever degree our duties allow, even if it’s only for a brief moment. Jesus wants us to ask for mercy for ourselves and others at that time.

Here think back to today’s Gospel. John the Baptist sees Jesus walking by and tells his disciples, “Behold (or, look at) the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” What does that mean? The Lamb of God takes us back to the first Passover in Egypt when the

Hebrew People sacrificed lambs and put their blood on their doorways to ward off the angel of death sweeping through the land killing the first born of the Egyptians. That is what Jesus did on the Cross. Like the Passover Lamb, His blood was shed and covered us, warding off eternal death. But the Passover lambs were only foreshadowing Him. Jesus was the true sacrifice. Think about at mass, just before communion, when the priest shows the people the consecrated host, Jesus truly present, offered on the altar. The priest echoes John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God!” – who literally takes away the sins of the world. Think about Jesus’ sacrifice for us at that moment.

But that only happens at mass – and many of you can’t come to mass daily. Remember, we need daily exercises to stay in shape spiritually. Throughout Ordinary Time we need to make use of such practices to keep Jesus present in our souls.

Therefore, what about this? Most of you have smart phones. Why not program your phones to notify you every day at 3:00 PM with a

simple ring and the message, “It’s the Hour of Mercy?” And then remember what that ring signifies, what happened at 3:00. At that moment briefly picture Jesus on the cross. Thank Him. Ask for His mercy, flowing from the cross, for yourself and for others you know. It would only take a minute.

The best way to get in shape is never to get out of shape. If I had spent the off-season working out and getting stronger, I would have been a very different player in the games. Similarly, the best way to become holy is to work at it every day. Set your phones, watches, whatever. Let us call to mind and prayer Jesus and His sacrifice every day. Let us constantly seek to “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”