



Fitness Training

by Jonathan Aitken

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FITNESS? You might think the phrase a rather ridiculous oxymoron, extending the image of muscular Christianity to the jogging track. But two recent items in my mail from opposite ends of the denominational spectrum have given me a fresh curiosity about this concept. The first came from the renowned Catholic writer and convert maker Father C.J. McCloskey, who on the business card he enclosed calls himself a “Spiritual Fitness Trainer.” The second was a new book with the title *Spiritual Fitness*. It is authored by a leading British evangelical, the Rev. Graham Tomlin, who was my tutor when I studied theology at Oxford. As McCloskey and Tomlin are two of the most effective evangelists it has been my privilege to meet, it seemed worth exploring the subject that has inspired them.

C.J. McCloskey is best known for having helped many well-known Washingtonians convert to Catholicism, among them Sen. Sam Brownback, Robert Bork, Robert Novak, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, and Alfred Regnery, publisher of *TAS*. I first met C.J. seven years ago when he was director of the Catholic Information Center in D.C. In its chapel I attended the mass he celebrated in August 2001 on the occasion of Al Regnery’s admission to the Catholic Church. C.J.’s homily was so powerful that it moved

me to tears, as it did a then agnostic acquaintance in the next-door pew. Seven years on I still cherish the memory of that address, which managed to combine a vision of holiness with the realism of earthliness. The latter dimension may have come from C.J.’s background before he was called to the priesthood. He was a Wall Street trader with Merrill Lynch and Citibank. So he knows all about the roller-coaster ride of markets, which even at today’s levels of volatility are small beer compared to the uncertainties of eternity.

McCloskey’s vocation is the leading of individual souls to committed faith. Inevitably, he has his critics among those who regard the making of converts as equivalent to black magic. “Father John is the subject of much wariness in some quarters,” wrote one commentator, “a secretive figure working the corridors of power sowing the seeds of medieval intrigue.” Higher quarters may give McCloskey’s work a more enthusiastic welcome. In the Catholic Church there is no more respected duty than the delicate task of guiding a lost or searching spirit into a right relationship with God. To call this process instruction can be misleading, for that word somehow evokes technical manuals, classrooms, and collective teaching. McCloskey’s conversions are one-on-one tutorials that appeal to heart and head, often involving a jour-

ney through pain, penitence, love, joy, and peace. A potential convert needs to be fit in order to travel on such a challenging climb, which is why McCloskey's tongue-in-cheek self-description as a "Spiritual Fitness Trainer" is not far off the mark.

The New Testament uses the imagery of training as a guide for growth in the spiritual life. "Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value but godliness has value for all things holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (I Timothy 4:7-8).

"Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever" (I Corinthians 9:24-25).

These two Pauline exhortations use the Greek word for training, *gymnazo*, from which we get *gymnasium*. But unlike most gyms, which offer a quick fix by helping to tone up our muscles and lose a few pounds, true spiritual fitness is for the long haul to death and beyond. So expert trainers like McCloskey and Tomlin work at deeper levels than just the preparation of converts. They know that human souls are made over to God not by a single act of conversion, but by the long unremitting effort that conversion begins.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS unremitting effort and sustained discipline in a spiritual journey is increasingly recognized by good churches in all denominations. Graham Tomlin is the principal of St. Paul's Theological Centre in London, an offshoot of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), Britain's most successful evangelical church with a worldwide reach. As HTB has been pejoratively derided as "the Mecca of happy-clappies," critics might suspect it takes a soft sell/quick fix/easy believism line in its theological publications. Not so in *Spiritual Fitness*. Tomlin devotes many fascinating pages of his book to the rigorous training prescribed by the early church for its catechumens, or students for baptism. He quotes with approval sages like Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoret of Cyrillus, and Augustine of Hippo. In their writings there are many comparisons between Christian preparation for the struggle against sin and athletic preparations for the games and wrestling contests.

Spiritual fitness, it seems, was in vogue at least 15 centuries before McCloskey and Tomlin started putting it on their business cards and book titles.

Across the millennia there are recurrent reminders of this. For example, Theodoret of Cyrillus, a fifth-century bishop who referred to the most promising members of his flock as "athletes and gymnasts,"

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even seems to have a C.J. McCloskey on his staff. He is described by Theodoret as "the divine Eusebius of Telada, the gymnastic trainer of all these contests offered to God."

The last three words emphasize the key difference between physical and spiritual fitness. The first is motivated by self-centeredness, the second by God-centeredness. Those who are getting themselves spiritually fit need to learn to think of themselves not as secular liberal societies tell them they are—independent, autonomous consumers, voters, earners, taxpayers—but rather as the Bible tells them they ought to be: created, beloved sinners, redeemed and called to bear witness together in the church to the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ.

Teaching others to train for such a level of spiritual fitness is an extraordinary vocation. The rewards for it are poor in this life, at least in comparison to the fortunes made by football or basketball coaches. But the Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill may have made a good celestial prediction when she wrote in her book *The Ways of the Spirit*, "If in the next life we could feel sure of being met by even one soul who said to us, 'Through you, God found me,' I think that would be sufficient for our beatitude." On that basis halos will surely be awaiting all good spiritual trainers, among them C.J. McCloskey and Graham Tomlin. ❁

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