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Monthly Spiritual Message

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OUR LIFE OF FAITH

Difficulties with stress

There are negative ways of coping with stress. Most common are overeating; excessive drinking or smoking or taking drugs; overworking; becoming unduly concerned about possessions; withdrawing from people, work and life generally; and showing an increasing negative or cynical attitude. These ways of coping are unhealthy because they neither resolve the stress nor improve the person's physical, emotional or spiritual well-being.

A constructive response to stress is necessary. The first step is to know and recognize the symptoms of stress.

If you are experiencing stress symptoms, try to identify their sources. This is not always an easy task, since many of these sources may have been part of your life for a long time, and may be subtle. But examine them, and try to correct whatever conditions or situations are producing negative tension.

Another constructive step is to respect the four areas in which a healthy life is lived: friendship, prayer, work, leisure. Do you have too many eggs in the one basket? Consider those areas as four baskets, and you have thirty eggs to place in them. Considering the way you actually live, how do you distribute those eggs? Then, how would you distribute them ideally?

Our over-commitment in time and energy to many activities is often rooted in a spiritual problem called, "the heresy of good works". The mistake is to forget the "gracious" dimension of Christian life. All life and all good results are ultimately the gift of God, not ultimately the result of our activities. Instead of being at peace, a peace we can share, our life becomes stressful, and fragmented.

Idealism and perfectionism can also create difficulties in the spiritual life. A person can focus so exclusively on the ideal totally satisfying result, not accepting his own weaknesses or those of others, that he himself comes to feel inadequate and a failure. He loses confidence in the genuineness of his own spirituality. He may fail to see that the reality of his own life is as much the stuff of his genuine spiritual life as is his reaching for the ideal. What is central to all spiritual life is the sense of God's love for us and readiness to do God's will.

Regular spiritual direction is also important. This does not mean that you must find a priest and take up his time for an hour or so once a week or month. But a monthly reconciliation with some simple spiritual direction is possible.

In addition, if you can't share your spiritual life with your spouse, find a fellow believer of strong faith, solid theology, and common sense, and talk on a regular basis about your spiritual efforts. You don't take orders from this person, or turn your life over to him or

her. He is a sounding board or guide with whom you test the movements of the Spirit in your life. Better still, if you can accompany each other in living a genuine Christian life.

A spiritual life fed on reading, reflection, and prayer is the basis for accepting in faith the stress in our life which is unavoidable, and doing so in a positive way.

We need at times to reassess our priorities and begin personal renewal of our spiritual life at its source, that is, personal contact with the Spirit of God.

Stress occurs when our behaviour contradicts our values. An annual retreat should not be a luxury, but it has to be more than a time to chat with old friends. It gives us the opportunity to evaluate and rearrange the activities of our life so that they are in harmony with our real values.

Many of us cannot find (or at least justify) enough time to spend in solitude and prayer. But regular time each day for prayer, meditation and spiritual reading is necessary for a Christ-centred life.

Much of the stress we experience arises from a lack of reflection on our own life, and also a lack of prayerful review when we try to understand the facts of life as it is, our disappointments, and our anxieties in terms of the gospel: "Take up your cross daily and follow me".

To some extent, stress is part of the cost of discipleship. Accepting it in a spirit of self-sacrifice is a genuine Christ-like dying to self.

There is a kind of stress that is simply the price of fidelity to gospel life in Twenty-first Century society. The Good News cut across the prevailing culture in Jesus' times and does so today.

Stress clearly identified, and sometimes further seen as unavoidable and as the cost of authentic service of the gospel, can be courageously accepted and becomes creative and redemptive.

Here is where our spiritual life of faith gives to stress its positive meaning and value. We accept the invitation to enter more deeply into that dying and rising of the Lord that is the source of new life for the individual and the community.

In our own emptying of selfishness, we find God the Son who became flesh, suffered, and is always most present to us on the level of our own weakness, frailty and hurt.

God the Father of Jesus Christ is revealed where there is pain, brokenness and suffering, even where there is human stress. Jesus revealed to us that God himself is humble, crucified love.

The attitude we take towards an adverse situation is critical. This is true not just for the psychic level but for the spiritual life as well. Suffering borne without love leads to resentment. With love it is vital and life-giving.

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Regional Assistants are requested to distribute this Monthly Message to all local Assistants of our Order in the Regional Fraternity.