My Sisters and Brothers in Christ

So many of us are conscious of our weight and how to win the battle of the bulge. This is quite ironic when a large proportion of the world goes to bed hungry.

For physical health, some favour a five-a-day fruit and vegetable diet which is self-explanatory. Some practitioners promote a five-a-day mental health program – being physically active, connecting with others socially, taking time to be aware of our surroundings, learning something new and giving time and service to our neighbours and to the community.

In today’s Gospel we become aware of Jesus healing the leper and restoring him to the community, and its connection to Jesus’ healing us of the leprosy of sin and ignorance by dying on the Cross and rising again. Could we come up with a similar five-a-day routine for our spiritual health?

Now is an appropriate time to try and do this, because this week we enter the Season of Lent on Ash Wednesday.

Fr Bill Bausch in his book “The Story Revealed” itemises his five-a-day spiritual routine designed to bring us closer to God, just as a physical and mental health routine can bring us closer to good health.

His five-a-day spiritual workout includes: to pray, to read the Word of God; time for silence and contemplation; sharing with others; and living more simply so that others may simply live.

To do this with a supportive group of like-minded people helps a lot. If we are serious about our spiritual progress, we can be helped by connecting with others from time-to-time for mutual support. We do this quite naturally for physical exercise with others; we also join book reading clubs to encourage us to read: so why not, for example, join a Lenten group this year in your parish undertaking our Lenten Program “Arise.” In doing the program you will encounter prayer, reading the Word of God, time for silence and contemplation and sharing with others. It can be a great spiritual workout.

You may also like to go on a day or weekend retreat together. Talk about a great opportunity for spiritual replenishment! And we are so blessed in our Diocese with an abundance of retreat centres that most Dioceses in Australia would only dream of. You can do that at St Mary’s Towers Retreat Centre Douglas Park; Jamberoo Abbey; the Hermitage Mittagong; Mount Carmel Retreat Centre Varroville; Hartzer Park Retreat Centre Bowral; or at one of the beautiful natural venues on the coast or in the mountains.

If you can get to daily Mass one or two days a week, that’s a great avenue of prayer, of listening to the Word of God and receiving the graces of the Eucharist together as a community. For those busy workers who cannot make a weekday Mass, why not just text, email or Facebook each other,
encouraging one another by sharing a prayer, favourite quote or scripture passage.

While connecting with others like this is a great spiritual exercise, never forget the importance of silence. So, after you have shared with each other, why not turn off the mobile phone or TV or iPad for a time of silence and prayer or reading the Scriptures or a spiritual book to lift our minds and hearts to God.

Think of all those times we spend waiting at traffic lights or in the checkout queue. These can be moments to turn our thoughts and prayers to God. Quite often, I will turn off my radio in the car when I am driving to spend some time in conversation with God. The conversation can be about trivial matters like, such as what I am doing that day, what I need help with, or how I can improve on what I did yesterday. But God loves that kind of real conversation and close relationship. I also find that the Rosary and the Angelus are good travelling companions.

And in doing this we will begin to fulfil the final element of our spiritual routine, that is, living more simply, as it removes us from unnecessary distractions such as the media's obsessive worship of celebrities and we start to recognise the Spirit of God in people who are sick, suffering or depressed fellow travellers on our journey and want to bring some hope into their lives. Then we cannot fail to value the dignity of every person no matter what they look like, if we have taken the time to fast from the commercials hawking the perfect body and confusing our needs with our greeds.

Before we admit our own sins and weaknesses to Jesus Christ, we have to first meet him in prayer and silence and learn that he loves us more than we could ever imagine and that he accepts us warts and all.

All of this requires a holy discipline, a mindset that sees as Jesus sees; a spiritual routine that helps us overcome our selfishness and greed, to recognise the lies we tell ourselves and others, to be aware of our anger and rage, our indecent thoughts and desires and our insensitivity to the needs of others.

Can I live the simple life that will free me up to be spiritually alive to Jesus, who saved and redeemed me by dying on the Cross? Can I be extra sensitive to the needs of others and more compassionate and forgiving? Can I make more space in my life for goodness and sharing?

Our annual Project Compassion appeal is but one way to share what we have from the sacrifices we make to enable people in developing nations to help themselves. The theme this year is “Food for Life.” Food is essential for all life, yet many of the world’s poorest people do not have food security. That means they live from day-to-day, uncertain of how to afford or how to access their next meal. The Project Compassion appeal aims to help the world’s poorest people establish sustainable food, walking with them as they free themselves from the burden of food insecurity and helping them develop new and improved income streams for a better future.

Just as we are keen to promote our physical health, this five-a-day spiritual routine of prayer, holy reading, silence, sharing with others and living more simply can promote our spiritual health by giving us insight into the value of our faith to our lives, providing a spiritual context for living and finding peace of mind and heart.

May this Lent help you and me grow spiritually fit so we can reflect something of God’s presence and the light of Christ in our broken world.

Have a blessed Lent and Easter.

Most Rev Peter W Ingham DD
Bishop of Wollongong