



Every man needs to be tried and tested, and pushed to expand his limits. We need to be challenged like every runner challenge his muscles in training, for only by training and pushing himself, does a runner have the potential to cross the finish line. No victor in a race ever reached his destination, without first meeting challenges.

How easy it is to wrap ourselves constantly in “cotton wool” from every challenge; to treat challenges only as difficulties and problems to be avoided at all costs. Man can so easily be controlled by his attitudes to challenges, and become a slave to his artificially learned helplessness. In the late 20th century, a study was done on learned helplessness in mice, to see how the ability to confront challenges could be developed. In this experiment, one mouse was allowed to live in a cage set up like an adventure paradise; with ropes, hills, climbing bars, and all sorts of contraptions to challenge this little fellow. On the contrary, another mouse was given a simple cage to live in, and was then taken multiple times a day and held tightly, preventing him from moving. The more this second mouse tried to escape while being held, the more he was made to stay firmly in place. After several sessions, this mouse gave up struggling, and just lay still in the moments he was held. After this process had gone on for some time, both mice were taken, and separately dropped into the middle of a bath full of water, with a little rope at one side. The first mouse, who had been living in a challenging environment, immediately swam to the side of the bath and climbed up the rope. On the other hand, the second mouse, who had learned not to struggle in challenging moments, behaved differently. When he was dropped into the water, he froze, making a few slight kicks, before sinking to the bottom of the bath. He had learned to see challenging moments as moments of difficulty, which could not be overcome. He had literally been made helpless to solve his own problems.

Now what can we learn from this? I am not saying that one needs to be a good swimmer to meet challenges, or that we need to surround ourselves with an “adventure paradise” of constant challenges either. Here, it is more about my attitude to challenges, and what my thoughts are when I am asked to go the “extra mile” outside of my comfort zone and likes. Man is not meant to swaddle himself in constant protection all the days of his life; to freeze and sink in the bathtub of his problems. We are creatures loved by God, and we are called by him to take up our cross every day. Young, old, small, or grownup,

every man is called to the challenge of being a saint. We can see this call to sainthood as a challenge, and “run the race” of our lives, pushing ourselves to the “finish line” in the words of Saint Paul. Or, on the other hand, we can run from sacrifice, and treat everything I do as a difficulty to be avoided. The only problem with the second option is that we are already inside the bathtub, and if we freely choose not to take up our cross, to not “fight the good fight”, we are going to eventually, like that second mouse, run into trouble. God has lovingly given us the free will to choose or not to choose to live our lives with him as our savior, and we are given much more than a rope at the side of a tub to help us. We have lifeboats, buoys, inflatable rafts, and a million other resources at our fingertips. These are the Church, the Eucharist, Confession, spiritual direction, and so on. The most beautiful part of all is that we are not alone in the sea of our problems, as the mice in that experiment were. Jesus is right at our side every step of the way. Now, that is one more reason why difficulties are but challenges; challenges, which are overcome, united to Christ.

A Note on Challenges

When considering challenges, it is important to note not only the universal call to sainthood, but also the personal and collective limitations of every man. You will remember the mice mentioned above were not compelled to walk through fire, or swim with their legs tied together, or any other physically impossible exploit. Rather, both were presented with challenges that they could feasibly complete. In this same way, man has his own limitations, both collectively as a species, as well as personally as an individual. Every man carries and bears challenges very differently to other men, which is why the crosses our Lord gives to each man are personal crosses, which only that individual can carry. Therefore, in meeting the challenges set before us, we are not only “fighting the good fight” of becoming saints, but we are becoming the exact saint Jesus is calling us to be. **The call to holiness is not just for every man, but it is a personal call**, which our Lord asks each of his children in a way that only they can individually answer.

A Challenging Thought

Why not take a moment at the end of each day to see how I have carried my cross throughout my day, and how I can better unite my challenges to Christ in the day to come. Did I run from the crosses which came my way today, or try to “swim” using only my own strength? Or rather, did I let Christ guide me in the “currents” of my day; trusting totally in him to provide me with everything I could ever need...

“The greatest honor God can bestow upon a soul is not to give it great things, but to ask of it great things. Jesus treats you as a privileged child. It is His wish you should begin your mission even now, and save souls through the Cross. Was it not by suffering and death that He ransomed the world?”

– Saint Therese of Lisieux