

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Before I say anything else, let me say THANK YOU! I stand before you with a full and grateful heart for your prayers and cards and greetings and for your delicious meals that obviously kept me well fed. Now, if I may, I would like to share with you something of my journey.**

**The past two months have been among the most challenging of my life. There has been a lot of pain and emptiness; boredom and anxiety; fear and self-pity. Then, these words of the Lord, spoken to St. Paul, then to me, changed all that: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”**

**St. Paul tells us in this 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians that, though he was a man given to an “abundance of revelations” which gave him insights into the mind of God that few have ever been granted, he suffered “a thorn in the flesh” that kept him from being too conceited. We don’t know what his “thorn in the flesh” consisted in, but it was so painful or distressing to Paul that he begged God to free him from it. That’s when the Lord told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”**

**Paul understood and could boast gladly of his weakness “in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me”. It was after acknowledging and accepting his “thorn in the flesh” that Paul became the greatest influence in the New Testament Church. He was a man with a lofty intellect trained by one of the most respected rabbis in history, the Rabbi Gamaliel. No one in the early church was as well educated as he. Paul was a Harvard man in the company of rednecks. 14 of the 27 books in the New Testament have traditionally been attributed to St. Paul, and approximately half of the Acts of the Apostles speak of his life and works.**

**With such greatness, it’s easy to see that pride, arrogance, and conceit could easily have effected St. Paul, but his “thorn in the flesh”, his weakness, served as a continual reminder to him of his humanity and his limitations. And he boasted of them, “in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.**

**In reflecting on this passage from 2 Corinthians, I began to rethink my situation. I had to suffer the humiliation after surgery of needing help to wash and dress myself. I couldn’t do anything for myself. I was totally immobilized. Then, when I began physical therapy all I could concentrate on was the intense pain that followed each session.**

Soon, I realized the one thing I could do was pray. While that sounds noble, the fact of the matter was that I started to pray out of sheer boredom and frustration. Interestingly I didn't start praying that God would relieve my pain and frustration. I started praying in thanksgiving for the love of my family and the kindness and solicitude and the effectiveness of our parish staff who was keeping the parish going in my absence. Then I prayed for the priests who were replacing me. I prayed for those who sent me cards and prepared meals for me. I prayed for those I knew who were sick and I prayed for those who died and their families who were mourning their loss. Finally, I took out the directory of all the members of our parish and started praying for each family. This commitment to prayer is one I have never experienced before in my life. I had plenty of time. I had no distractions. This time of disability has been a time to re-unite with the Lord on your behalf. So, with St. Paul, I can boast of my weakness, "in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me," on your behalf.

My prayer also led me to a keen awareness of how much God loves me and all the love that surrounds me. Rather than feeling humiliated in needing others to wash and dress me, I appreciated the love with which they did it. I recognized the love that so many expressed for me in prayers and cards and e-mails and meals and visits. How grateful I am for so much love.

I know that I am not the only one here who with St. Paul has been humbled by a "thorn in the flesh", a weakness. Please consider that your weakness, your affliction, is an opportunity for God to demonstrate His power in your life. Don't despise your thorn. Hold it up as a trophy of God's sufficient grace at work in your life. What a beautiful witness it would be of God's power in you, if in the midst of sickness or loss or pain of any kind you are still able to maintain your ability to praise God.

I experienced that just this past Friday afternoon in Walmart of all places. I stopped in to pick up a few things. As I was walking down an aisle, after picking up treats for my dog, on my way to get some coffee, a young man, a complete stranger, who looked to be no more than 16 or 17, asked me what happened to me. I explained that I had surgery to repair a torn rotator cuff. He asked, "What's that?" I explained that there had been torn tendons that hold the shoulder in place that had to be repaired. He said, "Well, I don't know anything about tendons, but if they're torn, I know someone who can mend them." Then, he asked me my name. I said, "Victor".

Then he asked, "Victor, I believe in a God who can fix anything that's torn or broken. Can I pray for you?" "Surely!" I said. Then he laid a hand on my shoulder, looking intently into my eyes and prayed, "Father God, in Jesus' Name, You can do all things. I believe and pray that you can heal and mend whatever is broken in Victor. Therefore, I pray you to right now heal his shoulder and make it whole in Jesus' Name. Amen."

Then, this very skinny, very normal kid (not at all nerdy) ordered me to try to raise my arm. I did. He asked, "Are you able to raise it higher than before." I said, "Not really". He said, well even Jesus prayed twice over the blind man. Then he laid his hand on my shoulder, looked more intently into my eyes and prayed again, "Father God, all that you do is good. Again, I ask you in Jesus' Name to come upon Victor with your healing power and make him whole, heal his shoulder, that he may rejoice in You, Amen." Then he said, "Try it now," and again I tried to raise my arm. He asked, "Was that a little better?" I said, in truth, "It is a little less painful." He said, "That's good. God's healing touch will continue and he started to walk away.

I asked, "What is your name?" He said, "Michael". I said, "Michael, thank you for your prayers and beautiful faith. Please continue to pray for me and I will pray for you." He said, "Thanks!" and walked away.

Never in my 71 years of life have I experienced such beautiful faith in one so young. In young Michael's faith, I saw with my own eyes, Christ's power made perfect because of my weakness.

Therefore, I encourage you to join St. Paul and myself in being "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ, for when we are weak, then we are strong"-strong in prayer, strong in faith, strong in love, strong in giving praise and glory to the God who saves us.