“Practice isn’t the thing you do once you’re good. It’s the thing you do that makes you good.”—Malcolm Gladwell

“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”—Rumi

"The only limits are, as always, those of vision."—James Broughton

Do you see what this means—...It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

...God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. ...God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God’s holy best. At the time, discipline isn’t much fun. It always feels like it’s going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it’s the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.

So don’t sit around on your hands! No more dragging your feet! Clear the path for long-distance runners so no one will trip and fall, so no one will step in a hole and sprain an ankle. Help each other out. And run for it!—Hebrews 12 (The Message)

Questions for discussion:

➢ In general, when you encounter barriers in your life, how do you respond? Is this similar to or different from how you respond to spiritual barriers/sin?
➢ When you think of the concept of “sin,” what thoughts/feelings comes to mind? What connotations does this concept have for you?
➢ In your pursuit of spiritual fitness, what kinds of barriers have you encountered? Disappointment? Discouragement? Comparing yourself to people who seem “more holy?” Spiritual apathy?
➢ Imagine that you were a workout coach working with someone who encountered those same barriers? What would you say to your client?
➢ Have you ever considered that God is like a workout coach, who wants you to succeed and is encouraging break through barriers? How does this concept sit with you?
➢ What tools/strategies might you use to help keep yourself spiritually motivated rather than getting sidelined when you encounter barriers?

For further prayer & action:

• Spend some time reflecting on the graces you named a few weeks ago (or the goals you set for Lent). Really let yourself remember the feeling and/or desire you had about pursuing that grace: why you were excited, and what you wanted to get out of your spiritual exercise. Once you have recalled all this, ask yourself what is getting in the way of you achieving your goal. Don’t judge yourself or get discouraged. Simply ask God for clarity about what is getting in the way, and then ask for the grace to start practicing/pursuing that goal once more.
• Spend some time praying through Hebrews 12 (above). Read these words slowly; really let them sink in. Notice any feelings (positive or negative) that this passage stirs up.
Ignatian Winter Workout Group, Week 3—Breaking Down Barriers

Featured prayer practice of the week: Third Addition

“A step or two before the place where I have to contemplate or meditate, I will [consider] how God our Lord is looking at me” (Third Addition).

Pope Francis, in a 2013 speech to religious educators, invited his audience to receive God’s loving gaze. He writes, “…do you let yourself be looked at by the Lord? [May we let] ourselves be gazed upon by the Lord. He looks at us, and this is itself a way of praying.”¹ Author Loretta Pehanich took his advice and spent some time in prayer imagining that God was contemplating her. She describes her experience:

I picture myself before God, like a child self-dressed for school standing before a loving parent. “Just let me look at you,” the parent says.

I stand a little taller, enjoying that smiling gaze, knowing I am the center of attention. True, my outfit is mismatched, and there’s mud on my knee and a tear in my sleeve. But God overlooks all these things, seeing only with joy the beloved child who eagerly looks back into a loving face. “Turn around.”

I pirouette, allowing myself to be studied, and God smiles. I stand looking into that face, and Divine Mercy looks lovingly at me.

I have a drawing in my hand, and I offer it for God’s approval. I’ve made a picture of my life’s plan, with all its decisions and expectations. I’ve scribbled in where I will do this or that. I picture it like a hopeful kindergartener’s rudimentary artistic effort. God accepts it, looks at it, and laughs. “It’s beautiful.”

Again, I find God gazing upon me. And I return the gaze.

Suddenly worry sneaks in. I wonder if I am going to get my picture back. What if God shreds it?! I gaze at God, not saying a word, but the anxiety shows on my face, I am sure. I sense the Almighty saying, ”Trust me.”

I relax a little, but I can tell I have not surrendered that drawing. Will God hang it on the heavenly refrigerator? Will God show it proudly to every visitor to the house? “Isn’t this precious?” I can imagine God saying, pointing to my picture.

I return to the image of God and me looking at one another. God stares at me a little longer with love. I find myself letting out a deep breath. I didn’t realize that I was holding on to it. I exhale loudly.

I stay still, allowing my Creator, my Redeemer and Sanctifier to hold me in a long, loving look.²

Famed Jesuit retreat director Anthony De Mello, SJ writes, “Behold God beholding you... and smiling.” Take some time this week to practice this simple prayer. Imagine God looking at you in love. As uncomfortable as this might feel, allow yourself to receive God’s loving gaze. If you struggle with this, stay with it. Consider repeating the phrase, “Receive the loving gaze of God,” slowly and calmly, allowing this truth to sink in. Each time you pray, spend a few moments reminding yourself of how God sees you.