

Kneel as you are able

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [August 23, 2011](#) issue



Kneelers at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. [Attribution Some rights reserved](#) by [rebekah.grmela](#).

Unless you're Pentecostal, you've probably never ran or jumped or worked up a sweat in church. But whatever your tradition, there is such a thing as churchly calisthenics. One such exercise is noted regularly in my church's worship bulletin: "Kneel as able."

In a way, it's a strange instruction—entirely unlike anything Jack LaLanne or Richard Simmons or a marine drill sergeant would exhort. Kneeling is no athletic feat, not even of a minor sort. But it's a necessary word of direction (and word of permission, since it's implicit that you don't have to kneel if you are unable).

The sensibleness of "kneel as able" was brought home to me in a recent service, which included the veneration of the cross. While I held a small, three-foot cross, the congregants came forward to kneel before it and honor Christ's sacrifice. Matters proceeded ordinarily until one man, just into his seventies, stepped forward. He knelt on one knee, grasped the heel of the cross and bowed his forehead against it. Then he straightened and started to stand, but stayed planted on his knee. He churned his bent elbows, making a flying motion, but was still stuck in the kneeling position. I glimpsed a look of surprise and panic appearing in his eyes.

Then I offered my hand. What he needed, of course, was something to hold on to. With gentle assistance he rose back onto his feet. Later he thanked me for the

assist, and he remarked that this was the first time he had had such a difficulty. He had reached an age and a bodily state in which he could no longer spring upright from a kneeling position. "I can get down just fine," he said. "It's the getting back up that's now a challenge."

"Kneel as able" is written for people like this man, since kneeling is no simple or comfortable matter for the elderly or the disabled. But in another way, "kneel as able" is written for all of us, young and old, full-bodied or not. After all, kneeling is a vulnerable and humbling position, and pride can disable kneeling as effectively as a bum knee or a bad back.

All this suggests to me three characteristics of churchly calisthenics. First, the calisthenics of worship are foremost about God's grace. It is God's grace that enables any of us to humble ourselves, and it is God's grace that lifts us back up from our humbled position. Without grace and its acceptance, none of us would have the mind or energy to kneel in humility, to bow our heads in prayer, to stand in adoration. Without faith and hope in grace, we would never achieve the joy that raises us back up off our knees. We kneel by grace and we stand tall by grace, and grace alone.

Second, churchly calisthenics enlist both the body and the spirit. Of course, you can pray while lying supine or in any bodily position, but it's no accident that we so often dispose our bodies in particular ways when we pray. Kneeling is an innately vulnerable and humbling position. If I want to induce a submissive, respectful spirit, kneeling helps.

Similarly, standing with hands open and arms outstretched puts me in a mood of celebration and reception. It helps my spirit receive God's gifts and to do so readily and with gratitude. We are incarnate creatures, and we worship best or most fully by involving both body and spirit.

Finally, the calisthenics of worship are cooperative, not competitive. A track or football coach would frown if athletes boosted one another in doing jumping jacks or pulled one another aloft as they did pushups. But the stretching exercises of the church are only enhanced when we assist one another. We are all and together one body, the apostle Paul teaches, and the body is whole and coordinated only with cooperation.

How appropriate it is at communion that married couples (and others) give one another a hand when they rise from their kneeling positions. Such cooperative assistance is a reminder that we would be lost without God's grace found in and through one another. Christian worship is a communal activity, through and through.

In the end, I have only one nit to pick with the instruction "kneel as able." It might more accurately read "kneel as enabled." Then it would be clear that we all have a responsibility for one another in our worship, and that every one of us depends in all our actions on God's active love and care. Such is the first and most basic lesson of churchly calisthenics.