

Part of my vacation included a week in Paris with my brother John and his family, as well as a relative of ours from New Orleans, Father Fran Pistorius, a 67-year old Jesuit we don't get to see very often. One of John's daughters is starting her first job as a teacher and couldn't come because of meetings. But the other three and two of their friends were with us all week. So John, Becky, Father Fran and I did our best to keep up with five young women between the ages of 17 and 24 on the streets of Paris. It wasn't easy. Father Fran has respiratory issues. John is recovering nicely from the heart attack he had earlier this year. And while we were away my brother Tom was dealing with the news that he has prostate cancer. Whether it was the vision of youth around us or the process of aging within us, even though it was vacation, we walked for miles, and we ate a lot of salads.

Everybody knows we should pay more attention to nutrition and exercise. Many of those who do are people who formerly didn't. They have seen the light because of personal issues; they reform their own lives, and then they set out to reform the lives of everyone else around them. No one can tell you about the consequences of smoking like an ex-smoker. No one can talk effectively to kids about drugs like an ex-con and former addict. No one encourages you to exercise like someone who can show you their clothes before and after. If you have not taken care of your health, and if you suddenly face the consequences of your past actions, you may finally have the conviction to change for the better. And it may not have happened without the wakeup call.

The same is true of the spiritual life, and Saint Paul addresses this in his letter to the Romans. In the Old Testament, God selected the descendants of Abraham as his chosen people and promised them a messiah. In the time of Jesus, many Jews accepted him as their messiah; some did not. After the resurrection, many Gentiles started believing in Christ. Then their faith prompted more Jews to believe. Saint Paul describes this wakeup call as a cycle of disobedience, belief, and mercy. He addresses his Gentile readers with these words about their Jewish contemporaries: "Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy." The disobedience of individuals in each group ultimately led to their own conversion. Then Paul makes this remarkable statement: "God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all." Resistance to the gospel was part of God's plan, in order that God might show mercy on those who finally do turn toward Christ.

A lot of times we resist what is good for us – the gospel, exercise, nutrition, or advice. But sometimes our disobedience is part of God's plan to give us conviction when we do change for the better. Not everyone receives this grace, but many people do. Never give up on those who misbehave. It may be God's way of showing mercy, leading them through a difficult path to a place of conviction and faith.