

# Praying in adverse times

By [Michael Kelly SJ](#) | [Australia](#)

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"I do what Ignatius Loyola always encourages us all to do: come to the Creator God from exactly where you are physically, emotionally, temperamentally"

One of the things to test your faith in God is enduring a 100% change in the direction of your life – where every expectation you've had not only isn't realized but the complete reversal of your expectations prevails.

Everyone in the world right now is having some experience of such a reversal of circumstances and expectations because of the [constraints](#) placed on us all by the COVID-19 virus. For some it has meant restricted access and controlled engagement. For others, it has meant virtual or actual imprisonment for a period.

Such experiences have plenty of parallels in the lives of many people and their progress and impact is well documented. Three major "reversal" events are known to trigger suicidal impulses and sometimes suicidal events – losing a job, death of an intimate life partner, losing a cherished home base.

All of these losses mean the fixed points of a life and its predictable steps and sequences just evaporate and life drives a person back to ground zero.

I've just had one of those experiences and all its subsequent afflictions – the loss of any sense of the physical control of my life, sharp mood swings and washes of depression as the frustration of failure to achieve what I want to achieve when I want to achieve it becomes all too apparent.

The inability to do things that had been second nature before my reversal of fortunes is both humiliating and arresting. And it has had a major impact on how I pray and what I look to God for.

What was my "reversal of fortunes" made up of? The amputation of my left leg at the knee. The effect of the operation in June 2020 came as a complete surprise to me. It was triggered by an aneurism behind my knee that had been completely asymptomatic over the two years the surgeon thinks it may have been there.

There was no pain, no obvious indicator till a cramp like pain in the calf, which X rays revealed to be an aneurism. It caused a blockage to the blood flow up and down below the knee.

But, of course, that was only the start. Once my amputation was done, the extensive, energy-consuming and painfully slow process of rehabilitation began.

I have made progress – the provision of a prosthetic leg, physio that allows me to walk on crutches and mustering the courage to start driving again: these are some of the elements of rehabilitation essential to discovering how I can develop a free and independent life again.

Frequently each day the question occurs: but why even bother? It's just too hard. So why even start at something that just seems an insurmountable obstacle to the restoration of life as I knew it?

## **The grace to accept what is unfolding as a gift**

In the best traditions of the prayer life that has been my own for 50 years, I do what Ignatius Loyola always encourages us all to do: come to the Creator God from exactly where you are. Ignatius teaches that there is no other place to start the approach to God away from where you are – physically, emotionally, temperamentally.

That's been my point of departure – the helpless desperation I feel about where this "reversal of fortunes" has left me: on my knees (metaphorically rather than literally because I've lost one knee!).

The school of prayer I follow fostered by Ignatius Loyola and filled out in the Spiritual Exercises is a spirituality that suggests that God's hand can be found in mood swings. Enduring a significant amputation does nothing if not feed the cycle of sharp mood swings.

And what can God do for me in my stricken and desperate situation? God cannot bring back my knee and leg. My amputated leg is gone and won't grow back again. Usually, a release from hospital means something has been fixed or cured and the damage done requiring an operation can be healed and life and functions restored.

Not so for an amputation. What's been cut off is gone for the rest of life's trip.

What is really going on in me and any other amputee faced with the challenge of accepting what's happened to them is closer to the experience of people grieving for a lost family member than anything else. I'm not going to get better in the way someone recovers from pneumonia or an operation to remove your appendix.

My leg will not grow back. I may not get worse because whatever was lethal – a leg that would become gangrenous and imperil my life – has been removed. I may become more independent and mobile. But my freedom of movement will always be conditional.

My spiritual challenge is to receive the grace to accept what is unfolding as a gift and the most recent emblem of God's fidelity. How is that possible when you actually hate what this "reversal of fortunes" has delivered?

Every day the invitation comes to surrender into the hands of God's mercy even as it appears that God's mercy is NOT delivering the relief much sought after. It is the experience of abandoning and of abandonment.

Abandonment: the fear of isolation and loneliness as the solitary path is followed, as my life takes me through doors that I must go through by myself.

Abandoning: the self-emptying and surrender into the hands of the living God, confident that God's gracious mercy is actually the only sure thing to call on in the swirl of turbulent emotions.

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