

Take my breath away: Skiing, mountains and Christ

It is customary for priests, after the major solemnity and celebrations of Christmas, to take a short break — to exhale and go away from the parish and rest a bit after the “liturgical marathon.”

This year a priest friend of mine invited me to visit the Colorado Rockies to see the gorgeous mountains and go skiing down a few of them. The mountains and terrain are always amazing to behold, but are particularly breathtaking in the winter, as they are “snow-capped” and shining bright.

What I found “breathtaking” in a different way was the peak of Copper Mountain, a ski resort with a peak altitude of 12,313 feet above sea level. As one living in the comparatively tiny “Catoctin Mountains” near my parishes in Thurmont and Emmitsburg, I wasn’t quite prepared for the difference.

After riding the ski lift up a steep, snowy, blustery, gigantic hill, I prayed as I departed the lift. I hadn’t been skiing in over 10 years, and that was back on the East Coast.

We were there Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend during what I was later told was an attendance record, and I was short of breath and suddenly quite nervous with many other seemingly competent and confident skiers surrounding us. Noticing this, my friend — an avid skier — said to “go slow.” He would follow me, and he would watch me on the way down.

Things were going great for the first 59 seconds or so. I remembered to go wide, “snowplow” and keep my head up. But then I started to struggle. We were actually going down an intermediate “blue” slope, and suddenly the small moguls in front of me looked not like molehills but actual mountains themselves, jeering at me cruelly. Not handling the speed well and the steepness of the run, I fell.

I didn’t hurt anything, praise God, except perhaps my athletic pride, but then I found myself with two other dilemmas. One, I legitimately was having a hard time

breathing, and two, I couldn't get up! It was like my legs were as jelly in the moment.

As a gift from the Lord in his providence and for my quick growth in humility, two ski patrol ladies came to check on me after my buddy arrived.

"Sir," they asked, "are you OK? Do you have asthma? Have you skied before?"

"Yes... no... yes," I gasped, all the while explaining that I hadn't skied in awhile and was struggling with the high altitude.

Suddenly remembering the Denver Broncos football games on TV and the visiting teams' players sucking on the oxygen masks on the sidelines made complete sense!

So after helping me up, and suggesting that I ride the Gondola down the hill and staying on the "green" — i.e. easy-peasy, beginner — slopes, I humbly took their advice, and met my friend at the bottom. I was somewhat recovered, and we went in to get lunch.

As I was reflecting on this, as often happens, I think of the spiritual nature of it all. The mountains are like our Christian lives. On our own pilgrimages, we seek to ascend the "mountain of Christ," as the Carmelite saints would often say.

I thought about my fall and our own human "fall" through Adam and Eve and the struggle of daily fighting against original sin and our own sins, and "getting up" and rising amidst them.

And I also thought of the two ladies who came to my rescue, and of Jesus, who came to us to rescue us and save us from sin and the consequences of it, death and eternity separated from God.

And then I also considered my good priest friend and skiing buddy, who patiently waited with me, gave me simple instructions and remained with me all of that day. This, I quietly thought, is like the abiding presence of Christ with us in our day to day lives. No matter how many times we may fall or mess up, Jesus is always right there to patiently lift us up, encourage us and give us new strength with his grace and his mercy! I remembered the Lord's word to St. Paul, one of my favorite and

most consoling Bible verses: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

The happy ending of this story is that after lunch, with this aforementioned grace and support, I was determined. I was determined not to dwell on the “fall” and not give into my fears and discouraging thoughts. I wanted to ascend the mount again. Wisely staying on the easier runs, I was able to ski down well the rest of the day, getting better and faster on each run — even amidst the many other skiers zipping past me. I fell only once more, right at the very end of the day. By the end, I was quite tired, yet I actually thoroughly enjoyed it!

The mountains, the moguls, the trees, the icy spots, the steep descent and other obstacles and challenges in our lives we may find most daunting and at times maybe even frightening. But they serve to remind us that as we make our journey down our own giant mountains, Christ is ever present to joyfully and patiently accompany us and make us better, stronger and more virtuous through them. With him every challenge is conquerable. We have nothing to fear with him at our side. And this is a most beautiful truth: a divinely breathtaking run.