

## 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

Two marathon runners, who in the interest of charity shall remain nameless, gained a little extra fame and notoriety some months back, but not for the right reasons. They were busted in the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington DC in 2006. They appeared to have finished seventh and eighth; unfortunately, they appeared to have done so by shaving about 6 miles off the marathon—that's nearly a quarter of the whole thing—with the help of either a shortcut they found, or through the courtesy of the Washington Metro system. Either way, they weren't very good cheaters (missed a checkpoint, you really need to scope these things out first if you're going to cheat). As it happens, cheating is not uncommon in marathons: people have been known to grab a ride, hop a train, find a shorter route, and even have a younger, faster ringer come in to run part of the race for them. As a result, organizers have now come up with a chip that all the runners would have to wear, and which they would have to turn in at the end so that they could get the ribbons which declare that they participated and that they finished. And that chip would automatically let the organizers know whether or not each of the runners passed each of the checkpoints along the way, or if they got by with a little help from their friends, and perhaps the cab company. The overwhelming great majority of those running in marathons are in it truly to compete: with each other, against their own previous times; many more just want to prove to themselves that they can finish. But some are not interested in the competition, but in the glory at the end: the medal, the ribbon, the photo op, the recognition. There are those who can say "I competed well," but there are plenty who are content to say "well, I competed."

As he neared the end of his ministry, indeed near the end of his earthly journey, Paul wrote to Timothy: "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith." Paul had competed well. There were no shortcuts evident in the race he ran. He didn't look for easy outs; he didn't back away from proclaiming the Gospel when they came at him with threats of imprisonment, threats of beatings, threats of death. If his friends abandoned him for his new-found faith, so be it; if he was ridiculed for having given up so much in order to follow Christ, well, that was a small price to pay for eternity in the kingdom. In his letter to Timothy, Paul—who never took his faith for granted—knew that his end was imminent, but also that he had finished the race. He accomplished what God had set before him to achieve. This wasn't presumption of Paul's part, because he still knew that he had not justified himself with his own efforts, he knew that Jesus alone can justify us; Paul, on his part, simply served Jesus as best he could, knowing that Jesus saves. Paul kept the faith; he never "set it aside" for a time to get ahead in his job, never kept it in the back room so that it wouldn't challenge others, never stuck it in a drawer somewhere with the promise to it later. He not only kept the faith, he clutched it, clutched it and held it close and tight; and he did so, because it was simply too valuable a gift to risk losing at all.

When it comes to the Christian faith, it is easy to be in the race. Most of us are baptized as infants, and while the Church needs the promise of the parents or godparents that the child baptized will be raised in the faith, we're anxious to bestow baptism for the child's sake, and the parents don't have to be, quote unquote, "perfect Catholics"—we hope that they are at least sincere. But there's no way for us to guarantee their sincerity. Same with adults: they have to make a profession of faith, but only they can know how sincere they are. The fact is, that it's easy to claim to be Catholic, but to do nothing with it. The baptismal registry, even the current parish roster, is chock full of names of people who, we have sad reason to believe, have basically dropped out of this race. It's easy to join the marathon; not so easy to finish, and not so easy always to truly complete. There are many who have every intention of being Catholic in the waning moments of their lives, but along the way look for the shortcuts, look for the cab to hop into to carry them along instead of having to run; but just being the race is not the same as crossing the finish line, and crossing the finish line is not the same thing as completing the race. "Sort of" being Christian is like "sort of" completing a marathon. And there are a lot of ways for us to just hop into that cab, thinking that we've cleverly found a way to be in the race but not put so much effort into it: Hit-or-miss Mass attendance, excusing ourselves with the flimsiest of excuses. Getting to confession maybe once a year, maybe once every couple of years, and even then not owning up to all the sins that ought to be confessed. No daily prayer, no volunteer work, no striving for justice, no giving of ourselves. But, well, I competed. Sort of.

Cheating is displayed in our actions, but it begins in our thoughts; and the thought that leads to the action is, "I don't care what I achieve, I care about how I appear." But we should only want to *achieve* our salvation, with God's grace; I can't think of what could be more worthless than the mere appearance of living in God's grace without the reality of it. Truly running the race isn't to just cross the finish line: it involves challenging ourselves to give it our best effort, our best time—to prove to ourselves that we can do it, not convince the world around us that we can, whether we can or not. And so in the same way, we should challenge ourselves in this race to the kingdom which we call the life of faith. If there are ways to "cheat," then there are also ways to excel, and not to just settle for the least acceptable effort which will gain us the prize, but to have a great experience along the way, to really know Catholicism and to live it fully. Here in Lincoln, daily Masses are offered throughout the day; confession times are also very abundant. We're blessed to have the Pink Sisters Eucharistic Chapel, with exposition of the Blessed Sacrament from early in the morning to well into the evening. And in a few weeks, we're going to be having a Light of the World retreat here at Saint Mary's parish. The retreat does a couple of things: first of all, offers instruction, especially geared towards those who have been Catholic all their lives but who have perhaps never received, or have received very little, adult instructions in Catholicism, and if you think you learned all you need to know in CCD or even in Catholic High School, you have seriously underestimated the reservoir of knowledge that the Church has to offer. The next thing the retreat provides is witness: the opportunity to listen to other Catholics

share their faith journey, and you'd be surprised how many of them have gone through periods of lukewarm ness, times when they fell into the temptation of taking a shortcut but still thinking it to be part of the race. And almost everyone who makes one of these Light of the World retreats also comes to a deeper understanding of the depth of God's love, because the Holy Spirit is active during the retreat, and when the Spirit is moving people, God's love is not only known, it is felt.

In the Gospel passage this weekend, Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee was in the race, but thought that he had found a shortcut, in his case, self-justification: play by the rules, follow the law to a tee, and who needs God then, really? The tax collector say that there is only one way to the Father, and there are no shortcuts: the way to the Father is through Jesus, and God would happily sustain the Pharisee in life's marathon if he only admitted that he needed God's grace, and his help, and his mercy. The tax collector, on the other hand, was ready to really enter the race, by asking for God's mercy, repenting of his past misdeeds, and changing his life so that he could keep what he had gained. We should look around and see what ways we can challenge ourselves to run the race and run it well: we *can* cheat, and gain nothing, stumble along and gain something, or challenge ourselves and push ourselves, and gain much. I encourage you to consider the daily Masses, the Eucharistic Adoration at the Pink Sister's, and especially the Light of the World retreat as ways to forge ahead in the life of grace. May none of us settle for just showing up for the competition and saying "well, I competed" but may we rather, like Saint Paul, push ourselves towards the finish line, so that we,too, can look back and say that we competed well.

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