

FROM THE SERVANT GENERAL
ON RUNNING THE RACE

November 30, 2008
First Sunday of Advent
CFC-FFL Family Day

My dear co-workers in Christ,

One way Paul describes the Christian life is likening it to a race, and we to athletes who participate in that race. As we today have our Family & Sports Day, it is appropriate to look to the deeper meaning of our coming together in this sports venue and in this celebration.

What is required of athletes in order to win? They need a sense of purpose, training, physical fitness, team support and endurance. For Christians to run the race of life well and to attain the ultimate prize, we need the same.

A sense of purpose

We must have our goal in mind, and doggedly and single-heartedly pursue it. Athletes run to win, to attain the gold, to stand out among the field. The goal is what motivates them, what makes them give their all.

It is the same way with the Christian life. We must look to the goal we are striving for. Thus it was for that great apostle Paul. “Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:13b-14).

For us, our ultimate goal is being with Jesus in eternal glory in heaven. That should be our singular pursuit. That should determine everything else we do in life. That is what should keep us straining forward, through the ups and downs of life, undeterred by difficulties and trials.

This is God’s upward calling. It is being raised up to imitation of Christ, to holiness unto the Lord, to perfection unto the Father. And it is ultimately being raised up to heaven, where God has already reserved a special place for us.

Training

To achieve their goal, athletes need to be trained. They not only look to the goal, but they need to know the best way to win the race. They need especially the wisdom of more experienced athletes and trainers. They need to look to what already works. They need to study the ways of top athletes who have gone before them.

It is the same way for the Christian life. Christians need to be trained in the ways of God. God needs to be able to show us how to live our Christian lives. This comes in the form of sound teaching and instruction. This comes from Jesus through our times of personal prayer, through the Bible which is the inspired word of God, through our leaders in community, through our pastors in the Church.

“The aim of this instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.” (1 Tm 1:5). We are to love as Jesus loves, with purity of intent towards all. Our consciences should be properly and well formed, according to the authentic teaching of God through His Church. Our faith is to be sound and sincere, lived out concretely in our day-to-day lives.

Physical fitness

Training is intended to keep athletes physically fit, for the race is rigorous and demanding. For Christians, we need not only keep physically fit, honoring our bodies that are temples of the Holy Spirit, but more especially we are to keep spiritually fit. We must be fit for the fight. This means that our goal must be to be holy as God is holy, so that we can become His fitting and worthy instruments in the world.

Paul was very deliberate. “Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it” (1 Cor 9:25a,26-27a). And if athletes train in this way for a human race, how much more Christians! The athletes “do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.” (1 Cor 9:25b). The winning athlete will have his one-time moment of glory, but we will share in God’s glory for all eternity.

Further, such training and keeping fit is throughout our lifetime. We must keep at it. We must be faithful every day to our prayer time and our Bible reading. We must be faithful to our life and mission in community. We must keep moving ahead on the path to holiness. We can never take our current spiritual standing with God for granted. Paul had this attitude, saying, “for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Cor 9:27b). Now that would be a tragedy.

Team support

Great athletes are not self-made persons. They cannot achieve their greatest potential without others helping them. An athlete needs his coach, trainer, teammates (as in a relay race), nutritionist, physical therapist, and his supporters cheering him on. For us Christians, this team support is provided by our community (parish and/or religious group).

It is Christian community that provides us the environment of training, support and growth. Here we undergo formation, are given fraternal correction, receive encouragement and inspiration. Here we have opportunities to serve which helps us to grow, and are enabled to move forward together in communal holiness.

And all share in victory or defeat. “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.” (1 Cor 12:27,26). We are all in this race together.

Endurance

The race is tough. The demand on physical bodies is extreme. The goal often seems so far away. Athletes can only finish the race if they endure, if they persevere, if they fight discouragement and fatigue, if they call upon that extra ounce of strength that is always within them.

It is the same with the Christian life. We must endure. We must persevere. “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22b). There will be disappointments coming even from brethren. There will be persecution from worldly secular powers. There will be oppression from the evil one. There will be crosses to carry.

How do we endure? We go back to what we started with: we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and the goal of salvation and eternal glory. So “let us persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” (Heb 12:1c-2a). And as we look to Jesus, we look to his holiness and righteousness, and to his telling us to follow him and walk in his ways. Thus we also “rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us” (Heb 12:1b). These are what weigh us down in our running the race.

And finally, we are to endure all and do so with joy, just like Jesus did. “For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb 12:2b). If we follow Jesus, that path leads us all the way to the cross. We are to embrace the cross of Christ. But that path also leads us beyond the cross, into the very throne room of God.

Running to win

And so my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I urge you, “Run so as to win.” (1 Cor 9:24b). Be not mediocre in your Christian life. Be not co-opted by the comforts of life. Be not distracted by the allures of the world. Do not give in to the demands of the flesh. Resist the temptations of the enemy. Be single-minded for God. Give your all and hold nothing back. And already rejoice in the victory that is at hand.

And so the race is before us. God has provided whatever we need to finish the race and win. Now it is up to us.

I pray that all of us can be able to say, with Paul: “I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.” (2 Tm 4:7-8).

See you all at the finish line!

God bless us all.

Your fellow runner in the race,

Frank Padilla