

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

So the Games of the 31st Olympiad are soon coming to an end in Rio de Janeiro. Perhaps many of you have been watching them from time to time on TV. Honestly, I've been a pretty big Olympics junkie ever since 1992 with the Albertville and Barcelona games. Even our first reading today seems to allude to this world-wide gathering as God Himself speaks through the Prophet Isaiah, "I come to gather nations of every language". Reality is, that passage has nothing to do with the Olympics, but speaks to it, huh? But as awesome as the Olympics are, imagine what it would be like to have people of every nation gathered before God to love and worship Him? Well, we do – it's called the Catholic Church. But imagine if TV networks and host cities and societies would invest as much money and effort in gathering around God as they do the Olympics!

One of the things I like best about the Olympics are the human interest stories – those stories that tell us about the background and many times the heroic efforts of different athletes. One that I came across just happens to be from our own state of Pennsylvania – and Catholic to boot. Ironically, he's from Nazareth, which was right down the road from where I grew up in Allentown. His name is Joe Kovacs, who – spoiler alert – won the silver medal in the men's shot put.

Joe, who is a member of the Knights of Columbus, saw his father pass away when he was only 7; and his grandmother, his mom's mom, died the very next day. Well, as you can imagine, that experience brought Joe and his mother very close together. "The whole time growing up", Joe recalls in an interview, "she was juggling a bunch of different roles, and she was always there for me." In fact, he said, when "I was in high school, she became my track coach. I went to a small Catholic school – Bethlehem Catholic High School – and we didn't have a track or a facility. I started track just to stay in shape for football, which was my primary love and sport at the time. My mom came to practice and realized we didn't really have a coach for shot put and discus. Because she knew some things about throwing, having been district champion back in her day, she helped me out. She found a coach who knew a lot, and we'd drive down to Harrisburg every Sunday after church and meet with him. I'd practice, and my mom would learn with me, which really brought us together and helped me a lot in the sport." Pretty amazing. That makes his silver medal all the more meaningful, huh?

How did Joe do it? In his own words: "I've lost way more than I've ever won...but I was always the one working the hardest." In other words, not everything in life is going to be fun. Many times it's hard work. And doesn't our second reading today speak to this truth: the one "whom the Lord loves, he disciplines... At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it." In other words, discipline is necessary.

Would a coach really be doing an athlete training for the Olympics justice in the long run, if he or she said to the trainee, “Go ahead and eat that Big Mac and skip training the next week”? No. Similarly, parents with their children – are they doing their children justice in the long run if they try to be buddies or friends with them instead of teaching them hard lessons, like personal responsibility, hard work, and sacrifice? Again, nope. Well, then similarly in our relationship with God too. If we think that the spiritual life in this world is all about happiness, and peace, and joy – then we have another thing coming.

A big part of our lives as Christians is discipline. If being a faithful Catholic were so easy, we’d have people lining up left and right. But instead, we have God’s commandments and the teachings of the Church, carrying our crosses in life, and things like the obligation of attending Sunday Mass, fasting and abstaining from meat during Lent, regular prayer, etc. It takes discipline to be a Christian, and it’s not always fun!

Interestingly enough, the word ‘discipline’ comes from the same root as the word ‘disciple’. So you really can’t be a disciple of Jesus without accepting the discipline that comes along with it – just like you can’t be an Olympic athlete if you’re not going willing to get up at the crack of dawn and train week after week until after the sun sets.

And even more interestingly, both the words ‘discipline’ and ‘disciple’ come from the same Latin word, ‘disciplina’, which means “teaching” or “learning”. In other words, if we’re not open to this teaching or learning the truth that in order to be a disciple we must be open to discipline, then we can’t be disciples!

My friends, this is the narrow gate Jesus speaks about in the Gospel today. If it were so easy to be Olympians, more people would be doing it; similarly, with being faithful Catholics. Do not be fooled into thinking that it's easy to be saved. It is simple, but it's not easy. And this is made very clear, again in our Gospel today, where we just heard someone ask Jesus, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" To which Jesus responds, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough." Fortunately, though, the strength we each need comes from God alone. So may He renew us in that strength today as we receive Him in the holy Eucharist. God bless you.