

St. Paul on Becoming Saints

When I began my research on this essay about a month ago, I was focused elsewhere. Then two things happened that riveted my attention in a different direction. I was powerfully moved by something I read during adoration about holiness. Then the Olympics began. Once again, I'm reminded of the adage: "Man proposes, but God disposes." It was one of those subtle heavenly nudges that's a reminder of who is in control. It's not me; and it's not us.

The amazing achievements of the gold medal winners, particularly the multiple winners, were truly amazing. Obviously, they are uniquely gifted – even genetically superior. In addition their achievements represented years of rigorous training that required many personal sacrifices including working through injuries. Their expressions of joy when victory was finally achieved proclaimed, "It was worth it!"

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul uses the example of athletes to discuss his apostolate and the goal of the Christian life:

"I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more... To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. Do you know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Cor 9:19, 22-25).

If St. Paul was alive today, I suspect he would compare the commitment of the gold medal winners to Christians striving for the "imperishable" reward – eternal happiness. I think it's important to reflect that Paul's point of comparison is not on the few who win the crown in a race, but the tough discipline required to be a winner. Using himself as an example, he added:

"Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:26-27).

It's important to reflect at this juncture, that St. Paul does not consider his miraculous conversion and his lofty mission as a guarantee of salvation that exempts him from the daily struggle of living a faithful Christian life. Quite the contrary! He warns about the presumption that leads to over confidence:

"Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

What also jumps out in this passage is St. Paul's use of the plural pronoun "we" when he says, "but we an imperishable [crown]" (1 Cor 9:25). Can it be that the saint was inspired to challenge all Christians to become winners, that is, genuine saints? Or is the gold medal in the spiritual life only realistically obtainable by the spiritually gifted the prodigies? If the latter is the reality, the rest of us could only hope to become spectators in the heavenly Olympics. We would then be destined to slug status, merely filling the role of expendable pawns in the great contest between St. Michael and the devil. Certainly not!

God calls each person to spiritual greatness, but not necessarily to accomplish great things in a worldly sense. Here is precisely where we learn a valuable lesson from our Blessed Mother. She lived out her earthly existence in humble obscurity. The angel Gabriel addressed her as “full of grace,” but she sees herself as God’s slave girl. Mary’s life challenges us to examine holiness, the only thing in this life that truly matters, from a different perspective than the values of this world. Real holiness is rooted less in what we do, but profoundly in what we become. Sanctity consists in Jesus growing in us while we die to ourselves and to creatures.

So unlike the gold medal winners at the Olympic games who are all genetically gifted, no one begins with an innate superiority in the spiritual life. We all start out on a level playing field. No one is genetically superior. Actually, we are all inept, quite helpless. That reality is, however, only one side of the equation. St. Paul revealed the equalizer when he wrote:

“I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

The Apostle understood that when he surrendered to Jesus, Jesus made up for his deficiencies. He was filled with Jesus’ strength. Therefore, he could boast about his trials and his ineptitude:

“For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

Paul was a saint because Jesus carried him. The same is true in our own lives. Our helplessness, our past sinfulness, our present ineptitude are utterly unimportant. Only Christ operating in us matters. Does that mean that natural gifts are meaningless? Absolutely, unless they are infused with grace and even then it’s the grace that matters - not our wonderful qualities or the lack of them. This is a very important idea, because many people feel intimidated by those who seem more naturally gifted and which they were more like them. To better understand this idea, let’s consider St. Paul.

Paul was naturally gifted. He had a superior intellect and a highly trained mind. He had great leadership abilities. He possessed great determination and zeal. Without Jesus they were worthless. His great learning and intellect didn’t lead him to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. He misused his leadership skills to murder Stephen and began the first persecution of Christians. His determination and zeal ignored the warning of his great mentor Gamaliel, and as a result he fulfilled his prophecy:

“Men of Israel, take care what you do with these men... So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God” (Acts 5:35, 38-39).

Jesus uses our natural gifts, which all come from him, but he never needs them. Grace and our surrender to it make the difference in the success of every life.

The saints were holy because they surrendered to Jesus who filled them with his love, mercy, kindness, patience, courage, determination, and strength. This is an invitation that is open to everyone. When we accept it, Jesus will bear us up with his love taking us places beyond our

capacity and imagination. Only he can accomplish things in us and through us that are otherwise impossible. John the Baptist understood this truth completely:

“He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30).

The saints reveled in their smallness. They realized Jesus gets the glory, and they continually freefell into his arms. Jesus always outperforms our greatest expectations, if we will trust in him. The saints made Jesus the purpose of their life, happy to allow him to direct their journey in life much like an infant is content in his mother’s arms. When troubles arose they said to Jesus, “I trust in you.” When they felt abandoned, alone or experience great grief, they gave it to Jesus: “Jesus, I trust in you.” Then the little acts of the day, unimportant in themselves, took on a new meaning because they gave them to Jesus. This is how Jesus changes us and uses us to change others. This is how families, communities, and the world can be changed. So in the end we can say with St. Paul:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Then our day takes on a new meaning and a new excitement when it is lived with Jesus:

“Jesus, I trust in you.”

One last thought. What about those skeptical feelings that make us think, “Let’s be real! The saints are saints because Jesus gave them a superabundance of grace, which he doesn’t give to me.” That may be the reality, but the evaluation is faulty. It’s not that Jesus is generous to them, but stingy to others. Jesus is eager to pour in us a continual stream of superabundance of grace, IF we will continually surrender to the graces he sends us. We need to surrender to him like a helpless child. So it’s our lack of responding to grace that holds us back. God can only give us the graces we can handle. So let our cry and action be:

“Jesus, I trust in you,” and maybe we should add, “Help me to trust you more.”

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