



The Ultimate Race Devotion

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

When the Olympic torch arrives at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Maracanã Stadium will live out another chapter in its 65-year history of hosting sporting events and concerts. The Opening Ceremony to the Games of the XXXI Olympiad will display a spectacle the seven designing architects could scarcely have imagined in 1950. Having been rebuilt several times, the stadium has most recently been renovated for the Olympics; its colors of the seating and match field now displaying the colors of the Brazilian flag. The stadium continues to find new life with a new purpose.

The apostle Paul knew something of finding a new life with a new purpose. His life as a pursuer and persecutor of new Christians certainly had purpose, but it was not God's purpose. With the same grace with which God has called each of us, our loving Lord called Paul to a new purpose. Paul was turned from an avid persecutor of the followers of Christ to dedicating his energies to spreading the love of his newly found Savior.

Paul likened the life of a Christian to a runner. Like the Olympic runner, the life of a follower of Christ requires several things:

1. Just as a runner commits him/herself to training, the Christian commits to training in God's Word.
2. A runner does all within their power to throw off any extra baggage. A runner throws off old destructive habits, useless physical weight, and poor attitudes. So it is with Christ's followers. What runner would intentionally weigh herself down? Instead of receiving God's forgiveness, don't we allow past guilt to do the same with us? We cling to old habits rather than develop newer more useful ones. What joy is ours that God our heavenly Father takes our sins off of us and places them on His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who takes them to the cross of Calvary to pay for them once and for all through His bitter suffering and death, and His glorious resurrection.
3. An Olympian, or any athlete for that matter, is encouraged by their teammates. So we, too, are encouraged and inspired by the great cloud of witnesses who have already finished the race and are cheering us on. The writer of Hebrews places us among them!
4. The runner must stay on track – both in training and in the race. Just as a runner cannot head off into the stadium or the grass, the Christian must stay the course and not head into the world and its values and philosophies.

5. Great patience is required to train muscles or retrain after an injury. Christians experience injuries every day in the form of our own self-destructive behaviors. God in His mercy forgives those behaviors and acts to better them. We grow impatient for God to act, but are assured that He acts in His own time.

6. How does He act in our life as a runner especially in those times when we may feel like quitting? He offers to come to us daily in His Word to forgive our sins as He continues to sanctify us each moment of each day. He also comes to us in the blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion to give to us and assure us, without a doubt, of our forgiveness, life and salvation as He strengthens us for the next phase of the race. As we daily struggle and fail, His Word daily returns us to the sanctifying waters of Baptism that set us aside as His children and put us on the path of life in the first place.

7. A runner must finish the race to place in the competition. We are not in competition with other Christians but rather are encouraged by them, and are an encouragement to them, to finish. Keeping our eyes on the goal, we maintain, indeed grow, in our commitment to stay the course by keeping our eyes on the originator and completer of our faith. We do so by remaining strong in His Word.

We are in the arena of the world; our race has started! The Church's witnesses of the ages are watching and encouraging. So we press on for the prize of our high calling in Christ confident that in Christ our stumbles and falls and detours (sins) are paid for through His precious blood spilled for us on the cross and His triumphant resurrection that glorious Easter morning. He lived perfectly, died and rose while we were still sinners (Romans 5). What a blessing is ours through Holy Spirit given and nourished faith to know that when we do not live up to what the Law requires of all people, we can confess our sins and receive the Gospel that makes alive that which was dead!

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