



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

*Homily*

[*Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15, 31a; Psalm 78; Ephesians 4:17, 20-24; John 6:24-35*]

A great deal of the world's attention is focused these days on the Tokyo Olympics. As the competition unfolds, close watch is kept on a country's medal count. Athletes are there to win, and the competition is entirely directed towards earning the coveted gold medal.

Whenever we gather for mass, our gaze falls upon a "gold medal", if you will, that far surpasses in worth those that are handed out in Olympic competition. I speak of the "prize" referred to in the Gospel passage this morning as the Bread of Life, what we also call the Eucharist. While the medals handed out in Tokyo grant a share in earthly glory that lasts but for a time, the medal which is the Eucharist carries a participation, even now, in the heavenly glory that endures for eternity.

The biblical texts offered to us this morning direct our attention to this wondrous gift of the Eucharist. Further consideration of the analogy with the Olympic games can help deepen our appreciation of the wonder of this great mystery of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus.

As I watch the competitions in Tokyo, I cannot but marvel at the dedication of the athletes. They have endured intense, all-consuming training for many years to get to this point, all in the hope of earning that medal. It would be a great shock, then, if at an awards ceremony the gold medal were handed out not to the winner of a competition but to a spectator who just happened to be present. This would be to give the prize to someone who in no way deserved it.

That is precisely what happens whenever we come to mass. The gift of the Eucharist is granted to us who are entirely undeserving. Jesus gives himself in the Eucharist freely, not on the basis of any merit on our part but solely because of his great love for us. Now this does not mean that there is nothing expected of us to prepare for this medal or bear it afterwards. The "training" we are expected to undergo is what the Bible calls repentance. St. Paul is crystal clear: we are to put away anything in our lives inconsistent with the Gospel, a task we often find to be a very strenuous workout, indeed. Furthermore, we carry the undeserved Eucharistic prize "around our necks", as it were, by always striving with the grace it bestows to live "in righteousness and holiness," as Paul says.

Consider, too, how, at the Olympics, attention is focused upon the winners. They are the ones who attract media commentary, are talked about at the water cooler, and to whom companies run for sponsorships. Seldom do we hear about those who did not win a medal. When we come before the Lord at mass to receive him in the Eucharist, his loving attention embraces us all without exception. He knows the hunger within each of us to be loved, to be noticed, to count. In the heart of our Lord Jesus, everyone

matters. He nourishes us with this assurance in the gift of himself as the Bread of Life, which fully satisfies the deepest hungers of the human heart.

If an Olympic winner suddenly ceases to perform well or is caught doping, the attention of the world turns very negative, membership on the team is lost, and offers of sponsorship dry up. At those inevitable moments in our lives of moral failing, Jesus does not kick us off the squad or ask us to return the medal; he forgives us with his ever-ready mercy and thus enables us to carry on as a vital member of his team.

One particular feature I've noticed in these 2021 summer Olympics is the decision of some top athletes to withdraw from competition for reasons of mental health. Obviously, I do not know the particular details of individual cases. I would not be surprised to learn, though, that the steady pressure of high expectations was a determining factor in the decision no longer to compete.

This makes me wonder about the expectations with which we are all living. There is a growing prevalence of mental health issues in our day. Intense stress is spoken of with great frequency. How much of this is due to expectations, often unrealistic, placed upon us by family or employers, or that we take upon ourselves as we measure our lives against illusory images of success and happiness? Here we are helped by the example of the Israelites wandering in the desert. The emptiness of the wilderness banished from their minds all expectation of self-reliance. The gift of manna from heaven showed clearly that they could only rely on the love and providence of God. Now, the true Bread from Heaven, Jesus Christ, wants us to embrace the same lesson. There is no need for worry or stress. He can provide for us in ways we could never imagine possible, and wants to do so. By feeding us with himself in the Eucharist, we have all we need and can be at peace.

I will never win an Olympic medal. That may come as a shock to you, I know, but it is true. Perhaps it is true for you as well. Our joy comes from the realization that a medal has been won for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He places his medal upon us each time we receive him in the Eucharist. No earthly endeavour could ever gain such a prize.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith  
St. Joseph's Basilica  
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