

8th Sunday of the Year - Cycle A
Sports Faith Hall of Fame Mass at Halas Hall, Lake Forest, Illinois
February 27, 2011

† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Since being installed as Bishop of Springfield in Illinois last June, when I visit parishes the number one question that I am asked is, "Are you a Cubs fan or a Cards fan?" My answer, of course, as one who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, is, "Neither, I am a White Sox fan!" I am also still a Bears fan, so it is good to be here today at Halas Hall. Actually, the Bears got their start in Decatur before George Halas moved the team to Chicago, and since Decatur is in the Diocese of Springfield, it is fitting for us in Springfield to be Bears fans!

This past week I was on vacation in Florida: warm weather and sunshine. Now it's back to gray skies and snow. While on vacation I watched all the DVD's of the Star Wars movies in order. I had seen them all before, but never in the chronological sequence of Star Wars I through Star Wars VI. The first Star Wars movie that came out in 1977 was actually episode four, followed by five and six. Then many years later they went

back and did episodes one, two and three as “prequels.” What becomes apparent in watching them in order from one to six is the clear thread that runs through them all from start to finish, which could be summed up as, “The Redemption of Anakin Skywalker.” Anakin appears in Star Wars I as a young boy described as possibly being the “Chosen One.” These hopes are dashed when he betrays the Jedi Knights and goes over to the “Dark Side” to become Darth Vader in service of the evil Empire. In subsequent episodes his total surrender to evil is portrayed and made evident by his malicious cruelty not only in torturing and killing his opponents but also in murdering innocent women and children. Despite his wretched and evil perversity, his son Luke never gives up on his father. Luke says repeatedly about his father in Star Wars VI, “I see some good in him.” Luke’s faith in his father is vindicated when Anakin Skywalker renounces his Darth Vader *persona* and saves his son’s life and his own soul by killing the evil Emperor. How about that for a Christian message of faith and redemption?

In between the innocent beginning and the happy ending is the struggle of good versus evil and how the Jedi Knights confront evil by use of “The Force.” Many of the best lessons in this regard are taught by the elderly and diminutive Jedi Master, Yoda. At the beginning of Anakin

Skywalker's training as a Jedi Knight, Yoda says to him at the Jedi Council, *"Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you."* Before Anakin Skywalker goes over the dark side, Yoda tells him, *"Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed that is. Train yourself to let go of all that you fear to lose."*

Yoda is describing what the great mystics would call "detachment." Through detachment one learns to let go of all that we fear to lose, whether that be power, riches, glory, winning, success, good health or even life on earth. In place of all these, we put our hope and our trust in God.

Yoda was the mentor with wise sayings among the Jedi Knights. In the sports world, I've always enjoyed the witticisms of Yogi, not Yoda, but Yogi Berra. One of my favorite quotes sayings from Yogi Berra is this: *"Ninety-eight percent of the game is half mental."* Of course, the math doesn't add up, but the hyperbole makes a point about the predominance of the mental aspects of the game.

During this past year I've served as goalie coach for the Sacred Heart-Griffin High School Cyclones Hockey Club in Springfield, Illinois. As a player and even more so as a coach, I have come to see the mental aspects of the game as paramount, and I've emphasized these all season more than

the technical or mechanical parts of the game. Goalies styles are often very idiosyncratic. The unorthodox style of Dominick Hasek contrasted sharply with the disciplined movements of Martin Brodeur. Yet both are considered two of the greatest goalies ever to have played the game. A goalie coach would be making a mistake to try to convert the style of one to that of the other. So my focus as a coach is to focus on what's going on in a player's mind and heart.

This past Wednesday our SHG Cyclones Hockey Club played in the championship playoff game of the Lincoln Land High School Hockey League. Since the game was rescheduled for the middle of the week when I would be out of town, I wrote out my locker room message and asked one of the other coaches to read it. This is what I said:

“Sorry I can't be with you today. I'm thinking of you and praying for your success in your championship playoff game tonight. I've been talking about CONFIDENCE since the beginning of the season. Remember, CONFIDENCE means “with faith.” You need to have faith in yourself and in the talents that God has given you. You have shown throughout the season that you have what it takes to succeed when you put your mind to it. So put all negative thoughts out of your mind. Keep a cool head and

don't let your emotions get away from you. No matter what happens tonight, bring a touch of class to your game. Remember the quote I gave you last time: 'When you lose, say little; when you win, say less.' Your actions will speak louder than your words. Putting the puck in their net, keeping it out of ours, and putting a 'W' on the board is all we need to say. BE CONFIDENT! God bless you! Coach Paprocki."

In addition, I wrote a prayer that the captain of the hockey team read before the team took the ice:

"Almighty God, we praise you for the gifts you have given us. We praise you for giving us the ability to play this great game of hockey. We thank you for the opportunity to play in this championship playoff game. Give us your blessings to have confidence in ourselves and to have faith in the talents that you have given us. Help us to play to the best of our ability, keep us safe and strong, and free from all injury and harm. May our efforts tonight bring you glory. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen."

I also sent a text message to our goalie. If you're expecting me to share that with you, sorry, but I'm not giving away our goalie trade secrets!

We won the game 4-3. I am convinced that the key to winning the cup was our players' mental attitude and confidence in their God-given talents and abilities.

Our Mass today is being celebrated here in Halas Hall in conjunction with the Sports Faith Hall of Fame. Our Eucharist is a prayer of thanks for the talented players, coaches and team officials who have demonstrated and lived out their Catholic faith in the world of sports. One of the applicants for an award wrote this in his application:

"I am a member of LIFE youth group at [my Catholic parish], I am an usher at the teen mass, I have arranged a mass and blessing for [our] team. I read my bible and pray every day. I encourage my friends in their catholic faith and others in their Christian faith. I am an example to my friends of a focused student athlete and have made a commitment to living chastely. I do not date now because I am not old enough to get married. At the request of the adult leader for middle school faith team, I am speaking to 7th and 8th grade students in February at our Church about living their Catholic faith well and to encourage them that their [faith] provides hope for them in their life challenges. I am focused on living for the glory of God and want the achievements in my athletic career to give glory to God. As

Jesus says, 'Apart From Me you can do nothing.' My 9th grade catechism teacher told me she cried after seeing me point to heaven in thanks for God following my victory . . . at the State High School meet." This athlete's words give us a taste of the caliber of people that we will honor today.

As our Scripture readings remind us today, we need to keep our priorities straight. We need to train ourselves to let go of what we fear to lose but which in the grand scheme of things are really not all that important. Our main focus, our attachment, our goal, our purpose and the prize the we hope to win when we cross the finish line is life with Jesus Christ in His Kingdom, and it is communion with Christ that we are now privileged to receive in this Eucharist. May God give us this grace. Amen.

I'd like to close with a song by a Canadian group called Nickelback. The name of the song is, "Gotta Be Somebody." On their face, the lyrics of the refrain sound like the typical teenager longing to meet a girlfriend or boyfriend, but I invite you to hear these lyrics in reference to our longing for God. Many of the great mystic saints prayed in this way, looking at their relationship with God as one between lovers or even spouses. Ultimately only God can fulfill these deepest longings of our heart.

Nobody wants to be the last one there

And everyone wants to feel like someone cares

Someone to love with my life in their hands

There's gotta be somebody for me, oh

Nobody wants to go it on their own

And everyone wants to know they're not alone

There's somebody else that feels the same somewhere

There's gotta be somebody for me out there

Nobody wants to be the last one there

Cause everyone wants to feel like someone cares

There's somebody else that feels the same somewhere

There's gotta be somebody for me out there