

**Sports Faith International Hall of Fame Mass**

**Saint Mary's Catholic Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois**

**June 3, 2017**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good for us to be here to celebrate this Mass on the Vigil of Pentecost Sunday, in which we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. This day is known as the “birthday” of the Church. After His resurrection and Ascension into heaven, Our Lord sent his living Spirit to be our life.

I am here along with those involved in a group known as Sports Faith International, which is dedicated to contributing to positive cultural change by showcasing the virtues and achievements of exemplary athletes, coaches and teams. Our Sports Faith Hall of Fame Induction Ceremonies after Mass will honor the achievements of faith-filled members of the sporting community. It is most fitting that we begin this celebration with this most perfect form of thanksgiving, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, giving thanks to our Lord for the many blessings that He bestows upon us.

For us athletes, thirst is a familiar experience. As a matter of fact, as a marathon runner and hockey goalie, for me, being thirsty is part of the reality of participating in sports, especially endurance sports. I imagine that many of you have also experienced this and, like me, do your best to stay hydrated while you are exercising or participating in a sporting event.

In the Gospel reading that we heard just a few moments ago (John 7:37-39), we hear our Lord tell His disciples, "let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink." It should be obvious to us that our Lord was not speaking to the disciples about a physical thirst that could be quenched by water; rather, He was speaking of spiritual thirst. While the sensations or feelings caused by spiritual thirst are quite different than those caused by physical thirst, it is no less a very real part of our daily lives as it was of His disciples.

On a physical level, when we are thirsty, it is an automatic response for us to want something to quench that thirst, so we look for something to drink. So too on a spiritual level should we always look for ways to quench the thirst that we experience in our lives of faith. Just as athletes prefer different things to quench their thirst, whether it is water or Gatorade or another sports drink, they all accomplish the same goal of no longer being

thirsty. As our Lord's disciples, we also have many different means of quenching our spiritual thirst, whether it is daily Mass, the rosary, devotions to the Saints, or another means of quenching our spiritual thirst, these are all directed toward the same goal, that of sustaining us in our lives of faith. Ultimately, Jesus says, our spiritual thirst is quenched by the Holy Spirit. Whoever believes in Jesus will have the Holy Spirit flowing within him like "rivers of flowing water."

Just as we can draw parallels between physical thirst and spiritual thirst, a very clear parallel can also be drawn between sports and our spiritual lives: physical fitness and spiritual fitness. When you want to focus on your physical fitness in order to get better at a sport, get in shape, or even simply to improve your overall health, you have to put in the work to achieve your goal. In our spiritual lives, we also have to put in the work to increase our spiritual fitness and achieve our spiritual goals.

Throughout the existence of the Church, sports have been used time and time again as a metaphor for the development of one's spiritual life. Whether we see it in our sacred scriptures with Saint Paul's comparing our lives to running a race in order to win the reward of eternal life or whether

we see it in the lives or writings of the saints, the fact is that sports have been central to the Christian experience throughout time.

In an address to athletes, Saint John Paul II articulated this relationship between sports and the development of our lives of faith in the following way:

“Sport, as you well know, is an activity that involves more than the movement of the body; it demands use of intelligence and the disciplining of the will. It reveals, in other words, the wonderful structure of the human person created by God as a spiritual being, a unity of body and spirit. Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall that moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of His creative work.”<sup>1</sup>

In this very poignant statement, we see the central way that participation in sports relates to our lives of faith and how sports can even be a catalyst in the development of our spiritual lives. Just as sports require athletes to use not only their physical abilities but also intelligence and discipline, so does the development of our spiritual lives require the use of these as well. Many times, in our spiritual lives we are required to

discipline our wills in order to do what God expects of us or even calls us to do as His disciples living in the world today.

Similar to how we set goals in sports or in fitness in order to see results, so too should we set goals in our spiritual life. I would recommend that, as in sports, we start with small goals aimed, as Saint John Paul II suggests, at disciplining our will in order to develop our lives of faith. Whether it is for the good of others in doing charitable acts or committing to spending time in prayer each day or participating in daily Mass, these small ways in which we give of ourselves to God and others will in time develop into a vibrant spiritual life.

However as we know that, while starting with small goals may seem manageable, we are human and we at times stumble, so let us recognize our reliance on God's grace even in small things and ask for His help in finding ways to quench our spiritual thirst and so develop our spiritual lives.

Soon Jesus will come into our hearts in this Holy Eucharist. May His Holy Spirit constantly stream within us like "rivers of flowing water."

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Address to participants of Athletic Championship, "Be examples of human virtues," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly English Edition, n. 36, September 7, 1987, p. 5.