

**Homily for the 14th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Cycle A**

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when considering some of the greatest athletes of all time, names such as Wayne Gretzky, Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, and Jack Nicklaus come to mind as being among the best in their respective sports for their excellence and many accomplishments throughout their careers.

One name with which you might not be familiar, but is certainly deserving of mention, is a man by the name of Joey Chestnut. Joey Chestnut holds several world records in a rather unusual form of competition - competitive eating. Just this past Friday on the 4th of July, Joey claimed his 8th straight victory in the annual Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest in Coney Island, New York. He consumed 61 hot dogs with buns in ten minutes, 8 shy of the world record that he set last year at the same event. In addition to being a hot dog eating champion, he holds the title for eating deep fried asparagus, bratwurst, hard-boiled eggs, and horseshoe

sandwiches, just to name a few. It is also not well known that I once won a “slider” eating contest with my classmates when I was in law school, downing about a dozen White Castle hamburgers in about a minute and a half! But that’s a long way from 61 hot dogs!

Regardless of whether we consider competitive eating to be a sport or not, the records that Chestnut holds are noteworthy. We as human beings tend to be fascinated with the many ways in which other people are able to accomplish remarkable physical feats, both in sports and other types of activity. These great feats are inspiring to us as they demonstrate the nearly unlimited potential of the human person.

While these amazing displays of physical ability can be a source of fascination and entertainment to us, they should also serve as a warning. In a society that places so much value on that which is physical, whether it is with athletic ability, fitness, or our appearances, there is the very real danger of making these things an end in themselves. Excessive amounts of time, energy, and money are directed toward these perceived goods to the point that there is the risk having them consume our lives.

In our second reading to his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes of the danger of living lives that are exclusively focused on the flesh. He

reminds us of a sobering truth: “if you live according to the flesh, you will die” (Romans 8:13). None of the things that we do which are focused solely in the realm of the flesh can be taken with us when we die. At our judgment, the Lord is not going to ask us how fast we could run a mile, how much weight we could bench press, how trendy our wardrobe was, or how many hot dogs we were able to eat.

The way that we are called to live our lives is according to the Spirit. St. Paul counters his challenging reminder about the flesh to us by giving us words of great encouragement: “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). Now, we must not take this to mean that our bodies are bad and that we should not participate in the various activities that involve making use of those bodies. On the contrary, our faith reminds us that we should make sure that our priorities are in the correct order, placing the life of the Spirit above the life of the flesh. By keeping that proper ordering, our physical activities will be undertaken with an understanding that they are not ends in themselves, but rather means of using the talents that God has given us to the best of our ability and practicing various virtues which enable us to grow in holiness and be of greater service to our neighbor.

At the beginning of the World Cup soccer tournament in Brazil, Pope Francis offered a reflection which drives this point home. He said the following:

Sport is not only a form of entertainment but also -- and I would say above all -- an instrument to communicate values that promote the good of the human person and help in the construction of a more peaceful and fraternal society. We think of loyalty, perseverance, friendship, sharing and solidarity. In fact, many are the values and attitudes fostered by soccer which are revealed important not only in the field, but in all aspects of existence, concretely, in the building of peace. Sport is a school of peace, it teaches us to build peace.¹

The same can be said about many of our physical activities, that they serve as an instrument to communicate values and build up the Church. When we live by the Spirit, we evaluate those activities in light of our faith so that we participate in them with an eye toward how they will prepare us for eternal life, while at the same time abandoning those activities and attitudes which are contrary to our spiritual well-being.

As with living a life focused on the flesh, living a life focused on the Spirit is not always going to be an easy task. Like the athlete who trains

day in and day out to be at a level for peak performance, so too must we train in order to live the heroic level of holiness that the Lord calls each of us to follow. In the same address for the World Cup, the Holy Father said the following regarding this spiritual training:

If, for a person to improve, great and continuous “training” is necessary, how much greater effort must be invested to reach encounter and peace among individuals and “improved” peoples! It is so necessary to “train” much.²

Although this training in the life of the Spirit may be hard at times, Jesus offers us some encouraging and consoling words when we hear Him say in the Gospel: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). When we let ourselves be led by Him, we find great peace and move with greater ease. It is when we try to pull away from Him and head in our own direction that life becomes difficult and burdensome.

Gathered with us at this evening’s Mass is a group of fathers and sons who have just completed a pilgrimage during which they have had the opportunity to grow in their understanding of the importance of living

lives according to the Spirit, being led by the gentle yoke of Christ. The physical activities that they have engaged in together have been an opportunity for them to see how enjoying themselves can be a vehicle by which they learn to grow in holiness, keeping their focus on the goal that truly matters, getting to Heaven. It is inspiring to see fathers who have taken their vocation seriously as they strive to impart to their sons the values that will be of great value to them throughout their lives as they press on toward the goal of eternal life.

May their willingness to be true fathers to their sons be an inspiration to all parents, that they might seek to set an example for their children in word and deed that what is of greatest importance is living our Catholic faith day in and day out, not falling victim to the spirit of the world which directs us to a life focused solely on the flesh. May we all resist those temptations in our lives to follow that path which ultimately leads to death. Let us rather choose to be led by the Spirit along the way that can alone guarantee peace and joy not just in this life, but for all eternity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Video Address to FIFA World Cup 2014*, 13 June 2014.

² *Ibid.*