

**Homily for the Mass at the Sports Faith International
Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony
Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time - Cycle A
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Church of Saint Mary, Lake Forest, Illinois

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in the world of sports, the most exceptional performances, whether individual or as a team, are given the description of being perfect. An example of individual perfection can be found in baseball. A pitcher who pitches a complete game victory without allowing any of the opposing players to reach base has pitched a perfect game. Such a feat has only been accomplished 23 times in the history of Major League Baseball. An example of team perfection can be found in the undefeated season of the 1972 Miami Dolphins, a feat that has never been replicated in the history of the National Football League. Sometimes perfection can be found on a smaller scale, such as a goalie in ice hockey who stops every shot during a game, or a basketball player who makes all of the shots that he attempts in a single game.

Admittedly, the examples given vary in regularity and difficulty, and there are sometimes other factors which can contribute to achieving that

perfection, such as the poor performance of an opponent. At the same time, though, there is still a sense that such accomplishments are significant and, for the most part, the result of a very high level of performance by the individual or team, such that it is considered by observers as a perfect demonstration of ability.

With that perspective, we can reflect on the words that we hear in today's Gospel. Jesus has reached the conclusion of the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, a section which is focused on living the Law in its fullest sense, rooted not just in external observances, but grounded internally in love. He concludes His teaching by telling His disciples: "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). This perfection is achieved by living this law of love in imitation of God who is love (1 John 4:16).

The examples from sports given serve only as an analogy to the perfection to which Jesus calls all of His disciples. As rare as some feats of perfection are in sports, it is more than rare, but indeed impossible, for us to achieve a perfection in this life that is equal to that of our heavenly Father. There are, however, some helpful parallels from sports that can

help us to see what the Lord is asking of us and how it is that we can advance along that path of perfection in love.

A first point to consider is that we need to make sure that we have the proper outlook on the situation. Take, for example, a batter in baseball. Nearly every time the batter steps into the box, he wants to get a hit. He would ideally like to have a perfect batting average. He knows, however, that he will not always be successful and that if he can at least be a .300 hitter, he is doing well. His awareness that he will never reach perfection does not discourage him from working harder to improve each and every day as a hitter.

The same applies to perfection in the spiritual life. We know that we will never achieve the level of perfection that our heavenly Father has. We should not, however, just give up because it is impossible. Like athletes who knows they will likely never reach perfection, we too must not be discouraged but continue to apply ourselves so as to improve each and every day, moving closer to that ideal of perfect holiness. Unlike sports, which cannot guarantee that one will reach perfection, we have the assurance that if we persevere in striving to live a life of holiness according

to the Law of love, we will reach the perfection asked of us when we enter into the glory of Heaven as saints.

Another point of comparison is how one reaches the level of perfection. In sports, athletes demonstrate a remarkable amount of discipline and effort in order to achieve the highest levels of performance. It is not uncommon for a person training for the Olympics to train several hours a day for several years on end in order to make the Olympic team and compete for a gold medal. In addition to the exercise, they pay attention to their sleep and their diet so as to attain peak results. In other words, they take of their bodies in such a way that their entire life revolves around their goal to be successful.

In the spiritual life, we are invited to take a similar path. Saint Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians, which we heard in our second reading, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16). He was speaking to the community, telling them that God dwells in them, but also in each of us individually. We should respect our own bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. By honoring the integrity of our bodies and souls, we honor the Holy Spirit and we grow in holiness.

There are countless examples of saints in the history of the Church who kept their attention fixed on the one goal that truly matters, entrance into eternal life into Heaven. Their entire lives revolved around achieving this goal. Although their spiritual exercises of prayer were indeed important and central to their lives, as with an athlete, every other aspect of their day was focused on living the call to holiness. This includes practicing the virtues in their daily life, whether in their work or in their interactions with others. Some of those virtues include charity toward their neighbor, temperance in food and drink, and industriousness in their daily duties, just to name a few. Holiness was a way of life, as it should be for each of us who desire to take seriously the call of the Lord to be perfect as He is perfect.

Unlike with sports, though, the goal that we set our sights on is not one that we can attain by mere discipline and hard work. Much of the success of athletes depends on themselves. In our growing in holiness and perfection, the work is primarily God's. As Jesus reminds His disciples when speaking about the vine and the branches in John's Gospel, He tells us: "without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This does not mean that we are called to be passive. Rather, it is an encouragement to place all of

our trust in God and to commit ourselves to cooperate with His grace which will give us the assistance that we need to grow in holiness each and every day. We must have the same humility that marked the life of St. Paul who confidently proclaimed: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 RSV).

In many ways, the underlying drive for perfection and the commitment to achieve it that is found in the world of sports is at the heart of the spiritual life as well. The great challenge lies in directing those passions toward a supernatural end. In sports, the thrill of competition, the joy of achieving excellence, and the hope of victory motivate us to do what it takes to succeed. If these things which, as our faith reminds us, are passing away, how much more should we be motivated by the promise of a good which will not pass away, but will remain for all of eternity? This is the true call to perfection, and it is something that is within the reach of each and every individual. All of us are called to it, and God will provide the grace necessary to achieve it.

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist today, which is a foretaste of the reward that awaits us in Heaven, may our hearts be stirred to put the goal of Heaven as our first priority. May our desires for worldly success

and achievement never distract us from living the law of love in our daily lives as we strive to grow in holiness under the loving guidance of our heavenly Father. Let us be confident that, by submitting ourselves to His gentle yoke, He will draw us closer and closer to Him until we finally achieve that holy goal of perfection as saints in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus invites us into this spiritual closeness when He says, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

(Song by Israel Houghton)

Who am I that You are mindful of me?
That You hear me
When I call?

Is it true that You are thinking of me?
How You love me
It's amazing
* * *

I am a friend of God
I am a friend of God
I am a friend of God
He calls me friend
* * *

God Almighty
Lord of glory
You have called me friend

May God give us this grace. Amen.