

**Homily for the Sports Faith International Mass  
Mundelein Seminary Residence Chapel  
Mundelein, Illinois**

**May 18, 2018**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate this Holy Mass in conjunction with the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Sports Faith Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony.

As we celebrate the virtues and achievements of the exemplary athletes, coaches and teams that will be honored this evening, it is fitting to tell a story about the world-renowned physicist, Albert Einstein, who was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When he came to Einstein and asked for his ticket, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his trouser pockets. It wasn't there. He looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it." Einstein nodded appreciatively. The

conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are; no problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one." Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you can relate to Einstein metaphorically, in that you cannot find your ticket and you have no idea where you are going in life. Or perhaps you could take this story one step further: perhaps you are not even sure who you are in relation to others and to the world.

Knowing who we are and where we are going is integrally linked to one of our deepest needs: the need to belong. We need to know where we belong, that is, we need somewhere where we feel accepted, included, wanted; somewhere where we fit in; somewhere where we know we are not alone. The need to belong is so much more than just a part of Abraham Maslow's well-known *Hierarchy of Needs*, it is at the core of who we are as human beings.

In fact, people often go to great lengths in order to belong: joining various organizations, participating in team sports, being involved in book clubs and other groups that focus on common interests. While all of these are good things, at times we seem to forget that it is not so much about where we belong; the most important thing is to whom we belong, and that is our Lord. If we take this to heart and allow it to shape who we are as Christian disciples, when we realize that we belong to Christ and He loves us more than we can even begin to comprehend, we must inevitably share that conviction with others whom we encounter in our lives.

The date for this Holy Mass for the Sports Faith Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony is intentionally chosen to be in close proximity to the Solemnity of Pentecost, which we celebrate this weekend, marking the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. It is the Holy Spirit who confers on the followers of Jesus the gifts they need to live a holy life of grace. The saints, people who knew what it meant to share the love of Christ with those around them, give us an example of how we must live so as to one day be saints as well.

For the past several weeks since Easter, I have administering the Sacrament of Confirmation almost every day and sometimes twice on

Sundays. It is in this Sacrament that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are received in their fullness as the *confirmandi* are fully initiated into the Church. One of the most popular saint's names chosen by the Confirmation candidates is that of Saint Sebastian, the patron saint of soldiers, athletes and those who desire a saintly death. When I see that a candidate has chosen the name Sebastian, I am fairly certain that this person is an athlete. So when the newly confirmed come up for pictures with me after Mass, I asked those who have chosen the name Sebastian if they are athletes, which is almost always the case. Perhaps some of you chose Saint Sebastian as your patron saint for this very reason.

While it is perfectly acceptable to pray for the intercession of a patron saint to help us in our athletic endeavors, we must remember that it was not athletic prowess that led to his canonization as a saint. Saint Sebastian never won the Super Bowl, the World Series or the Stanley Cup. Saint Sebastian is a saint because he shed his blood for Christ.

What we know about Saint Sebastian is that he joined the Roman Army in 283 AD, apparently to be of service to other Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans. Saint Sebastian distinguished himself and

for his excellent service, he was promoted to serve in the Praetorian Guard to protect Emperor Diocletian.

While serving as a Praetorian Guard, Marcus and Marcellian, twin brothers, were imprisoned for refusing to make public sacrifices to the Roman gods. The brothers were deacons of the Christian Church. During their imprisonment, their parents visited them to implore them to renounce Christianity. However, Saint Sebastian convinced both parents to convert to Christianity. Saint Sebastian also converted several other prominent individuals, including the local prefect. This led to his discovery and he was reported as a Christian to Emperor Diocletian in 286. The Emperor, who was already infamous for ordering the deaths of hundreds of Christians, scolded Sebastian and ordered him to be killed by having him tied to a stake on a training field and used as target practice.

Archers riddled his body with arrows. Believed to be dead, the archers left his body for retrieval and burial. He was recovered by Irene of Rome, whose Christian husband was a servant to Diocletian and also martyred. Irene discovered that Sebastian was still living and she hid him and nursed him back to health.

Once well, Sebastian went in search of Diocletian to surprise him. He managed to catch Diocletian by a stairwell and proceeded to criticize him loudly and publically for his persecution of the Christians. Diocletian, surprised that Sebastian was still alive, was immediately taken aback, but recovered his composure. This time, he would not permit Sebastian to escape with his life. He ordered his former guard to be beaten to death with clubs, then thrown into the sewers. His body was recovered by a Christian woman, named Lucina, and she secretly buried him in the catacombs beneath Rome. Nearly 80 years after his death, around 367, his remains were moved to a basilica in Rome, built by Pope Damasus I. In artwork, Saint Sebastian is depicted with arrows shot into his body, often tied to a post or a tree.<sup>2</sup>

The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian demonstrates his total dedication to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us, even to the point of shedding his blood for the faith. By imitating his example even by our small sacrifices and mortifications of everyday life, it is then that we open ourselves to the grace of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ as His disciples in today's world.

I would venture to say that there are many people in your lives who have served as models of discipleship as you have grown up. It is very likely that your parents, your first teachers, have sought to follow the direction of the Holy Spirit in loving and guiding you throughout the course of your life. Additionally, your coaches, teachers, priests and others entrusted with your care and development have helped you to achieve not only athletic accomplishments, but also to grow in virtue, integrity and faith.

Just as in the time of Saint Sebastian, world around us does not always follow the call of our Lord to be His disciples. In fact, there will be many voices around you that will encourage you to follow a way of life that promotes one's self over the good of others and entices you to indulge your personal pleasures over focusing on the happiness that comes from having a right relationship with God, which leads to the goal of eternal life in Heaven.

The teachings and practices of our Catholic faith give us the tools necessary to distinguish between the many voices calling out for you to follow. This formation in your faith, if used properly, will assist you in discerning the path to take in the many situations you will experience and

the decisions you will make in the years ahead. By living your life according to the teachings of our Lord, using the talents given to you by God our Creator, and utilizing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in all that you think and say and do, you will come to experience what Christ promises when He says: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

This abundance of life that Christ promises is one that far exceeds anything this world may offer to you. Even though you may find fleeting pleasure in worldly things, they are just that, fleeting; they will not last. Whereas the peace and joy and love that comes from following our Lord will far exceed the things of this world and will remain for eternity in Heaven, the only goal which really matters for us as Christians.

As those of you who have heard me preach before, I have made it my custom to sing a song in my homily at Confirmation Masses and other special occasions. Our Sports Faith Hall of Fame Induction Mass is certainly a special occasion that calls for a song. Over the years I have used a number of Linkin Park songs because I thought they effectively captured and expressed the pain experienced by so many people, especially

teenagers and young adults. One such song is called *Somewhere I Belong* and the refrain goes like this:

**Somewhere I Belong – Linkin Park**

*I wanna heal, I wanna feel, what I thought was never real*

*I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long.*

*I wanna heal, I wanna feel, like I'm close to something real.*

*I wanna find something I've wanted all along*

*Somewhere I belong.*

I chose to sing this song because we all want to be healed of our pains and find that somewhere we belong. Our Lord invites you to enter into a personal relationship with Him. He will heal you of all your pains and welcome you to a place where you definitely belong, if you put your faith and trust in Him and stay close to His loving community, the Catholic Church.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.stltoday.com/suburban-journals/illinois/patti-amsden-rev-billy-graham-s-new-suit/article\\_0ee93adf-8ecb-5d7b-9997-3eaca972c842.html](http://www.stltoday.com/suburban-journals/illinois/patti-amsden-rev-billy-graham-s-new-suit/article_0ee93adf-8ecb-5d7b-9997-3eaca972c842.html)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=103](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=103)