

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time “What Is Our Faith Made Of?”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Like many of you, I enjoy watching pre-season football. It is an opportunity to watch the next generation of football players chase their dreams of becoming professional athletes. This is not an easy thing to accomplish as we all know. The sacrifices these guys make are mind boggling to say the least. They spend hours each day working out. They follow specific diets. Everything I do not like to do! They give every ounce of every day to be at the elite status they find themselves...all for a chance to play professional football. Even with all that work, it is sad that most of them will not succeed in their goal. However, even with the disappointment that comes with being cut from the roster, being at least in contention for it in the pre-season must be a consolation for these guys at some point in life.

Of course, not all of us can play for the NFL. We all nevertheless have goals that we strive for. What motivates us? How intense are we with attaining our goals? What are we willing to sacrifice to make them? The Gospel reading begins with Jesus’ remarkable exclamation, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!” Like any serious athlete, Jesus has a goal to accomplish, and he is serious about accomplishing that goal. The intensity Jesus is demonstrating is like the kind of intensity you can see on the face of an athlete right before a game begins. Jesus is the Son of God who has been sent by the Father to save us from the power of sin and death. This is no small endeavor, to say the least. He is ready to go, he is in position, and he is ready to accomplish what he has set out to do no matter how much suffering he was going to endure.

I think this gives us an opportunity to reflect on the moments in our lives when we felt that same kind of intensity about accomplishing something. It could have been a sport that we competed heavily in during our younger days. It could have been a business deal of a lifetime that you have worked on for months or years. Perhaps it was the intensity that grips the soul prior to finally gaining the courage to propose to your future spouse. There are many moments in our lives that we all have felt the intensity of the moment, where there was no small degree of anguish until we have completed our mission.

This brings us to the second part of our Gospel reading that can be a bit disturbing to us. Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three...” Why does Jesus say this? There are a couple reasons I think and the first one has to do with the fact that proclaiming Jesus’ divinity was illegal in Jesus’ day through the first several centuries. It was a capital offence to be a Christian in Jerusalem but also

throughout the Roman Empire because the emperor also claimed to be divine, and he didn't like the competition. In those days, telling a family member that you were now a Christian would have put the whole family in danger.

Meanwhile, as much as we would like to believe this kind of thing only happened long ago, there are still areas of the world where this kind of persecution still happens today. Think of the intensity of the faith of Christians in places like Owo, Nigeria, where last June dozens of Catholics were gunned down by terrorists for attending Mass at St. Francis Catholic Church. The next week the faithful returned and packed the church for the funeral. They would not be kept away. When we think of places where it is dangerous to be a Christian, like places in Africa, the Middle East and in Asia, and we can rightly ask ourselves, "What is my faith made of"? We all have the goal in life to be a good Christian, of loving God and our neighbor, and to be a good Catholic. How intense and enthusiastic are we of achieving that goal to the best of our ability?

I find it painfully ironic that there so many Catholics in dangerous areas of the world who are literally risking their lives just by coming to Sunday Mass while here in the United States, and many places in Europe, so many people are abandoning religion altogether. Parents work hard at passing on the faith to their children. It is a gift that often gets rejected and can be a cause of a great deal of pain and anguish in the hearts of parents. Houses get divided, three against two, two against three. Trust me, I understand that a great deal of blame rests squarely on the shoulders of how bishops and priests have at times failed egregiously in being good shepherds, to say the least. I am grateful for Pope Francis' Synod on Synodality because I hope we bishops hear loud and clear how we can better serve our church. For a record, I have a list myself. However, when you see the witness of Catholics in dangerous places around the world and compare their faith with what we see in our culture. That should give us pause before we cast all the blame on bishops and priests. The good news is, from my experience at St. Vincent de Paul and my journeys up and down I-5, the Catholic Church is young in Western Washington and growing thanks to our Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, Vietnamese, Filipinos, and African Communities. Their intensity, enthusiasm, and family values give me great faith in the future.

I mention all this because I really think some Catholic households do not do a good enough job of telling our story, our personal story of why Jesus is important to us, how a relationship with Jesus helps to guide us through life. Some of us do this very well with the intensity and enthusiasm we see in the Gospel, however, many of us can be lukewarm and mediocre when it comes to sharing our faith journey with others, even those we love the most. When we are asked about our personal story of what our relationship with Jesus looks like, do we rise to the challenge and share from the heart with sincerity and love or do find ourselves not caring as much as we should? It is an important question for us to consider.

Brass tacks, when you think of how much a professional athlete goes through each day to accomplish their goals, what greater goal is there than eternal life with God? What would happen if we put more intensity and enthusiasm into that? How do we begin? Perhaps the author of Hebrews in our Second Reading gives us a good starting point. He says, “let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.”