**20th Sunday in O.T. 2025**

The 1995 Rugby World Cup was hosted by South Africa. It was the first major sporting event in the country post-apartheid, and was celebrated in a powerful film, released in 2009, called, “Invictus”. The film tells the inspiring, but true story, of how Nelson Mandela, the newly elected president, faced the enormous challenge of bridging the racial and cultural divides that threatened to tear South Africa apart. He realised that to break down barriers, the different communities in the country, had to find common ground. Recognising the symbolic power of sport, Mandela persuaded the Springboks rugby team captain, François Pienaar, to share in his vision. In a moving scene in the film, Mandela asks Pienaar, “How do we inspire ourselves to greatness when nothing less will do?” Their leadership enabled the Springboks to find the motivation and inspiration to achieve excellence, and, in so doing, rallied the whole nation behind the team. That year South Africa did indeed win the Rugby World Cup.

The late Pope Francis once told a large gathering of young people, “following Jesus requires a good dose of courage” *(Krakow 2016)*. He went on to say, “The times we live in require only active players on the field, and there is no room for those who sit on the bench.” Biblical authors were keenly aware of the place of sport in their culture. St. Paul, in particular, drew on sporting imagery – for example, when writing to his young disciple, Timothy, he says, *“I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith” (2Tim.4:7).* Elsewhere, he writes, *“You also must run to win. Every athletic goes into strict training. They do it to win.....for my part, I am no aimless runner” (1Cor.9:24-27).*

In today's second reading, taken from the Letter to the Hebrews, the author would have us see ourselves as participants in a long-distance race, surrounded by a great crowd urging us on to victory. We are exhorted, *“to keep running steadily in the race we have started”.*

The great crowd which surrounds us are, of course, the saints, who cheer us on, pray us on, will us on, that we might do as they have done - *“run the race to the finish.”* There is an African proverb which goes, “When you run alone, you run fast. When you run together, you run far!” In our pilgrimage of faith, we are not on our own. That is why, for us Catholics, key concepts are, family, community, parish, Church - we are part of a great movement, all going in the same direction, towards God, enthusiastically urging one another on. As St. Paul says, *“(we) are not aimless runners”!*

Continuing with the metaphor of Christian life as a long-distance race, the author of the letter to the Hebrews, makes three important observations if we are to *“race to the finish”.* First, just as athletes cannot carry any extra weight, if they are to be successful, neither can we Christians carry baggage that holds us back. The author of the Letter advises; *“we too, then, should throw off everything that hinders us.....”* He is referring to *"the sin that clings so easily"*. How easy it is to be weighed down by resentments, disordered appetites, envy, foolish ambitions and desires. These, we know, we just need to throw off! This, of course, is the purpose of that God-given sacrament we call Confession. The truth is, whether we like it or not, we just cannot do without it!

The second observation made in the letter is this – in a long-distance race, if athletes run to fast, to early, in no time, they will “hit the wall”, and will be unable to finish. Setting the right pace is also important in Christian living – today’s second reading advises, *“keep running steadily in the race we have started”.* It is also poor pacing if we only to pray when we need something, or to respond to the needy when we feel guilty! Spiritual binges are the road to nowhere! They don't make us more holy! Rather, living a committed, but balanced, Christian life today, tomorrow, and the day-after that, day-in-day-out, builds up the virtue of holiness. “*Running steadily in the race we have started”* defines what we mean by the practice of the faith.

Finally, the letter observes, that if we are taking part in a race, we must follow the given course - departing from that course leads to disqualification. Jesus has set out the route for Christian living - he ran the course before us, our task is to follow in his steps. We read in the letter to the Hebrews, *"let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith."*

Just as great sportsmen and women become icons for young aspiring athletes, Jesus is our “icon”, our inspiration; because while enduring the pain of cross, he never once shifted his eye from the finishing line - *“Jesus, leads us in our faith....think of the way he stood up to opposition....then you will not give up for want of courage”*. “Following Jesus does indeed require a good dose of courage”, but then, who wants to be an *"aimless runner"*?

*“Lord,*

*keep our eyes fixed on Jesus,*

*and give us the strength in time of trial*

*to run the race that lies before us.”* **Amen.**