

EF – Septuagesima SundayAve Maria Catholic Church, Jan. 28th, 2024**1 Cor. 9: 24-27; 10:1-5**

Brethren: do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus, I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them.

Mt. 20: 1-16

At that time, Jesus spoke to his disciples this parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ So, they went off. [And] he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ When it was evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’ When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage. So, when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? [Or] am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’ Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

Working in our Spiritual Life

Ave Maria Catholic Church, Sunday Jan. 28th, 2024. Fr. David M Vidal

In 1521, in his letter to Melanchthon, Luther wrote: *“Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly.”* These words can be summarized as *“Believe in God and sin boldly.”* However, is it truly the maxim of our spiritual life? A sort of *“believe in God and do not worry about your spiritual life, enjoy yourselves and be careless about what is good or evil; after all, your works don't matter.”* These words do not sound right because they are not true.

How important is our work in our spiritual life?

Spiritual life has many similarities to our physical life and the everyday activities we face.

Is it sufficient for a person who wants to be a great athlete to wish to be one? Would it be enough for someone who desires to be a wise doctor just to desire it? Can anyone with the simple desire to be anything: a nuclear engineer, a business person, a nurse, or a singer, be indeed one without doing anything? We all know that it is impossible. Things do not work in that way.

As we heard today in St. Paul's letter, athletes discipline themselves in every way to win the prize. Anyone would laugh at the person who dreams of being an Olympic gold medal winner but does not have a work ethic, does not exercise as he should, and does not discipline himself in everyday life. This is simply common sense.

The same thing happens in all human activities and careers. An effort is needed. Without discipline, very little is accomplished. Without discipline, greatness is ruled out. Without discipline, achievements are left to (quote, unquote) “luck.” However, is that the way our lives should be formed?

This is not the suggestion of St Paul, who, in today's reading, tells us that our efforts have great value and that it is worth it to discipline ourselves for a good cause. Even though having discipline in life is not easy, it is gratifying.

We all agree that our effort is required in all the activities we face in the world, but some people believe that spiritual activities are exempted from this common-sense reasoning. Perhaps they think so because they believe nothing proper to the natural order applies to supernatural spiritual activities. And that is simply false!

In today's reading, St. Paul likens natural and supernatural spiritual activities when he says: *“Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we, to win an imperishable one. Thus, I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were*

shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (1 Cor. 9: 24–27).

Echoing St. Paul's words, the Council of Trent teaches:

"If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or by the teaching of the Law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be condemned." (Session 6; can. 1).

It continues by saying, *"If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be condemned."* (Session 6: can. 9).

How is it possible to think that one should work hard for a perishable crown of leaves, but for an imperishable crown of glory, one should do nothing? What is the logic behind that reasoning? At least, that reasoning is not the Catholic reading of justification. Saint Augustine offers us the Catholic reading of justification when he says:

"But God made you without you. You didn't, after all, give any consent to God making you. How were you to consent, if you didn't yet exist? So, while he made you without you, he doesn't justify you without you. So he made you without your knowing it, he justifies you with your willing consent to it. Yet it's He that does the justifying..." (Augustine, Sermon 169.13)

Spiritual work is not an option, but a necessity. We must not shadowbox in our spiritual life, talking about God's love and his kingdom and doing nothing to be part of it. We must not shadowbox thinking that God is good and merciful (as indeed He is) and forget that He is also just. On the contrary, we must fight with a purpose: *"Drive our bodies and train them, for fear that, after having preached to others, we should be disqualified."*

The relation between works and merits.

Our work is required, and at the same time, we know that our good works are God's gifts. For that reason, St. Augustine teaches: *"When God crowns our merits, He crowns nothing else but His own gifts."* (Cum Deus coronat merita nostra, nihil aliud coronet quam munera sua, St. Augustine, Ep. 154, 16).

In today's gospel, we hear that some workers were hired during different times of the day; some worked from the very first hour, and some were hired almost at the end. The ones who worked more were expecting a different pay, much higher than the pay of those workers who came at the last hour. But that was not the thought of the landowner, and that is not the thought of God.

Being hired is already a gift; having a job is a gift, and having the strength, health, and ability to do the job is a gift, too. We can think about our gifts in life: which one of them comes to us without God willing it? What do we have that we have not received? How can we forget that *“All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”* (James 1:17). We should be grateful to God for what we have, starting with the gift of life both natural and supernatural, and for the abilities that He gives to us to work and answer to his call to be good and perfect.

How could it be possible to think that God is not generous? He himself took the heavy load of the work, sending his only Son, who worked for our justification with his passion, death, and resurrection. Then, he invites us to work with Him and promises us the Kingdom of Heaven, which surpasses every expectation and desire. How would it be possible to say that God is cheating us!

On the contrary, knowing that gifts are also responsibilities, we must work with all our heart, knowing that if more is given to us, more will be demanded. We should work with great enthusiasm because the reward we expect surpasses all expectations since *“Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, nor has entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1 Cor. 2: 9).

There is still so much to do, and we have not yet reached our goal. Trusting in God’s call to live a life of holiness, let us persevere in doing good. Amen.