

COLUMNISTS

Keep your eyes on the finish line

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 6:60-69. (R1) Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18. (R2) Ephesians 5:21-32.

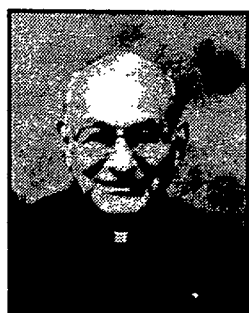
As our Lord began filling in the details of his kingdom, fewer were willing to follow him. One by one they drifted away. The crucial choice centered on faith in the eucharistic presence of our Lord. When he demanded this faith, many disciples broke away and would not remain in his company. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you want to leave me too?"

Guess who answered: Jesus Peter. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" he asked. "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe ... that you are God's holy one."

Good old Peter. Impetuous. Excitable. Sometimes speaking before his mind was fully in gear. But he was committed to Jesus — no momentary commitment, good only when things were going his way.

Certainly he got discouraged. After the crucifixion, he was ready to go back to his fishing nets. But in the long run, his commitment to Jesus never failed. Our faith must be like his.

For life is a marathon. The obstacles are many, and being Catholic doesn't mean that our road will be smooth. We get cancer, have heart attacks, strokes, diabetes. We watch family members suffer.



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

We lose our jobs. We grieve the loss of a loved one. At such times we need faith, like Peter, for the long term.

It is important to know that life is a marathon. Most of us would consider Paul Newman as gifted. He has enjoyed a superb career as an actor, and proved extremely capable at his hobby of auto racing. Some people are just born with ability. Right? Not according to Newman.

When he talks about his successes, he describes early failures and lulls of hard work. He says of himself, "I don't have a gift for anything. I've only had a gift of pursuit." That is a gift the Gospel recommends to all of us: the gift of pursuit.

The great secret in life is not how we begin, but how we finish. The crowds started out with Jesus until he posed the test of the Eucharist, then they left him.

Theatrical producer Arthur Hopkins used to receive dozens of manuscripts for plays. Before he would read any script, he always asked, "How is your second act?" He realized that many new playwrights had a wonderful first act, but allowed the drama to fade and the plot to drift in the later parts of the play. There is always a second act, though, and it must be just as impressive as the first.

We might ask ourselves, "How is our second act?" When the enthusiasm fades, when the passion cools, when the numbers drop off, can we maintain our intensity? Can we go on as Jesus did? As the Twelve? That's the mark of a champion.

As Olympic champion Jesse Owens once put it, "There is something that can happen to every athlete, every human being — it's the instinct to slack off, to give in to the pain, to give less than your best — the instinct to hope to win through luck or your opponents not doing their best, instead of going to the limit and past your limit, where victory is always to be found. Defeating those negative instincts that are out to defeat us is the difference between winning and losing, and we face that battle every day of our lives."

It's not how you start, but where you finish. Faith is a race, but more it is a finish. To Timothy, Paul could boast: "I have

competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. The crown awaits me." Such is God's promise to us about finishing the race: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rv 2:10).

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, August 25

1 Thessalonians 1:2-5, 8-10;

Matthew 23:13-22

Tuesday, August 26

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8;

Matthew 23:23-26

Wednesday, August 27

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13;

Matthew 23:27-32

Thursday, August 28

1 Thessalonians 3:7-13;

Matthew 24:42-51

Friday, August 29

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8;

Mark 6:17-29

Saturday, August 30

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12;

Matthew 25:14-30

Prudent person assesses the situation

It is not enough to know what is right and what is wrong. One must also be able to apply this knowledge to actual, concrete situations. For that, the virtue of prudence is essential.

St. Thomas Aquinas referred to prudence as the "rudder virtue," the one that "steers" the others. Without it, we are like someone adrift in a boat, tossed by the wind, the waves, and the current.

Unfortunately, the virtue of prudence has too often been confused with caution. Thus, the "prudent" person is one who never "rocks the boat," and is especially careful to avoid offending those in a position to advance or thwart one's interests.

The word that comes closest to functioning as a synonym for prudence is "discernment." The prudent person is one who can "size up" a situation and decide, or discern, what is the wisest and most moral course of action to take. Accordingly, prudence doesn't answer the question, "What is the right thing in principle to do?" Rather, "What is the right thing for me (or for us) to do in this situation?"

The prudent person fully examines a situation and seeks advice from others. (Reaching out to others for counsel before



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

acting is one of the classic marks of a prudent person.) Judgment is made in the light of this examination and advice, and then a decision is rendered.

The exercise of prudence presupposes that the person knows the relevant moral principles, has a fund of experience from which to draw, has the ability to make the best use of the experience, and has a capacity to learn from others.

The prudent person can also recognize the implications of a given situation and of a line of action to be taken. The prudent person has the vision and foresight to anticipate and plan to surmount obstacles.

In the final analysis, the prudent person has the ability to take every relevant

factor and circumstance into account and then to make a moral decision for action in light of it all. In its fully Christian sense, the virtue of prudence is closely linked with the discernment of spirits. To be a Christian, after all, is to live in communion with the Spirit of God, to be open to that Spirit and receptive to its inspiration.

But what the Holy Spirit is "inspiring" is not always clear. Indeed, if "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18), neither has anyone ever seen the Spirit. We can only infer the Spirit's presence from what we do see and experience. We rely for the most part upon "reasons of the heart."

The discernment of the Spirit is both an individual and a communal process. Both dimensions depend on prayer, of course, but there is also a need for open discussion and the free exchange of ideas in a climate of truthfulness and mutual respect. When the community in this case, the church, fails to encourage or even allow for a free and open discussion of difficult and often controversial issues, the discernment process cannot work.

As a result, the problem festers and grows worse. Somewhere down the road, the church will confront it again, but

probably in far more virulent form. (The Protestant Reformation is one historic case in point.)

But even if the church were always to encourage free and open discussion, the discernment of the Spirit would still be difficult and challenging.

As noted earlier, no one has ever seen the Spirit. Moreover, we tend always to rationalize in our own favor. Although we can never be absolutely certain that we have responded properly to the Spirit, there are certain negative criteria by which obviously false responses can be exposed.

The response is erroneous if none of the classic "fruits of the Holy Spirit" are present, e.g., love, joy, peace, generosity (Galatians 5:22-23); if the response is inconsistent with the moral tradition of the church; if the response works against rather than for the unity of the church; and if the response has been imposed from on high, without free and informed reflection.

Prudent people know how to "steer," but are not themselves "steered" except by the Holy Spirit.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Women Needed for Hormone Therapy Research

As they search for the combinations of hormone replacement therapy that are both safe and effective, the Reproductive Endocrinology Unit and Menopause Center at the University of Rochester Medical Center seek women to participate in a study.

Volunteers must be healthy, post-menopausal women between the ages of 40 and 65. After a physical examination, women will be randomized to one of 8 treatment groups and receive various combinations of an FDA-approved estrogen and/or progestin, or placebo.

During this one-year study, volunteers are seen every three months. Benefits to volunteers include free Pap smears and lab tests, free mammogram, and possible relief of menopausal symptoms based on the medication(s) they receive. Compensation of \$450 is available. Women who have had a hysterectomy are not eligible.

Women interested in participating can call Wanda Rivers at 275-7891.



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