

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 20, 2019  
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

The race was almost over. Most of the students had crossed the finish line.

This happened at a recent cross country race. You know what cross country it – you run long distances on trails, on fields, in the woods.

The race starts, and eventually someone crosses the finish line first. Then others. Eventually the final runner completes the race.

The cross country team from St. Mary's Catholic School was running in this recent cross country race. Most of the students had finished. They were resting on the ground, talking about the day's events.

Then, someone noticed that there was still one runner who had not finished the race. That runner came around the corner. He was several hundred yards from the finish line. This final runner seemed to be struggling to finish the race.

Then, it happened. His teammates from St. Mary's School got up. They ran toward him. They surrounded him. And they all started running toward the finish line – together. As they ran, they shouted encouragement. "You can do it!"

And he did. He crossed the finish line, with his team surrounding him.

How do I know this? Well, a parent sent me a video of the team, accompanying the final runner across the finish line. In his email, this parent said, "If anyone ever asks me to define team spirit, I'm simply going to show them this video."

A great moment. But you know, it did not have to turn out this way! The other members of the St. Mary's team could have reacted differently as their teammate struggled toward the finish line.

For instance:

- + they could have ignored him, focusing rather on their accomplishments that day. They could have ignored him.
- + Or, they could have mocked him. They could have yelled at him, "Here comes slow poke."

They could have mocked him.

+ they could have yelled some words of encouragement from their comfortable seats on the grass. “Run. You can do it.” They could have yelled in his direction.

But instead – they got up and ran in his direction. They surrounded him with encouragement. They accompanied him across the line. Together.

In today’s first reading, Moses needs help. He is tired, weary, struggling. The army of Amalek was attacking Israel. Moses stood on a nearby hill. As long as he kept his hands raised up, in the gesture of a blessing, the army of Israel was winning the battle.

But if Moses got tired and lowered his hands to rest, Israel’s army started to lose.

Nearby were two Israelites named Aaron and Hur. As Moses struggled, they could have done several things.

+ They could have ignored him.

+ they could have mocked him and said, “Look how weak Moses is! We told him he should join Gold’s Gym. What a loser.”

+ They could have stood at a distance and encouraged Moses, “Hold your hands up!”

But instead, they got up from where they were, they walked over to where Moses was, and they stood by him. All day. If he got tired, they held his hands up in the air for him. When he lost his strength, they gave him their strength. They stood beside him, as long as he needed.

In today’s Gospel reading, we meet a woman who needs help. Apparently there is no one around to help her. This woman is a widow. All alone, she has to go to the judge to plead for justice.

In the culture of that era, males had control, men exercised power. In many ways, if a woman had no male relative, she was powerless. A woman without a male advocate had little hope for justice. And in this case, Jesus even says that the judge is corrupt.

Many of her neighbors would consider this woman to be the last and the least, the most unimportant person around. No one stands by her side. No one comes to uphold her, encourage her, run the race with her. She has no one else to be her voice. So she has to learn how to be her own advocate, by her persistence.

I wonder – how many people feel like this woman today? How many people in our world experience isolation and injustice? How many people are convinced that they don’t have a voice, and that no one even notices that they are struggling just to make it through the day?

And - what do we do if we see someone like that? Do we ignore them? Blame them? Yell a brief word to them? Or are we willing to get up, go to where they are, and accompany them across the finish line?

Who are the people who face injustice on a daily basis?

+ I think about the unborn. They literally have no voice. They cannot speak on their own behalf, demanding simply the right to be born. They have no voice – except ours. How does our culture respond to these unborn children? Many ignore them. Others mock the idea that they are even human. Some, who call themselves pro-life, will say an occasional word.

But a priest friend of mine told me about a pro-life ministry he recently encountered. The message of this ministry is simple. To any woman facing an unexpected pregnancy, this ministry says, “we will walk this journey with you. If you need food, we will be there. If you need pre-natal care, we will drive you there and make sure it happens. If you need a place to live, we will open doors for you. And after your baby is born, we will keep walking with you and your baby, no matter what that takes.

It’s easy to shout at each other about abortion. But this ministry is giving people a chance to stand up, go to where the struggling mother is, and accompany her every step of the way.

+ I think about immigrants. The United States is a shining beacon of opportunity, and many want to come here. I think we can all agree that our immigration system needs to be repaired. In the meantime, lives are getting broken, families torn apart. We can ignore it. Or sit back and play the blame game. But I have chosen to offer personal financial support to a Catholic ministry near the border which seeks to keep families together. The nuns teach English to the immigrants. They teach citizenship classes, and connect people with job training services. Weary human travelers find there a group of Christians who will walk the journey with them.

+ A pastor in Southwest Virginia started a caregivers’ prayer group at his parish. He was aware of the exhausting reality that caregivers face, often silently. What is it like to care for an elderly spouse who has dementia? What is it like to be a mom whose child has autism? What is it like to live with a family member who has mental health issues? How exhausting is that? And how often to these caregivers feel ignored, unnoticed, with no one to help them.

So this group gets together every other week. They talk about how things are going. They pray for each other. One participant said to the pastor, “I feel like Moses, and the members of this group are the ones who hold up my hands and get me through another day.”

From your vantage point, look around this week. Who is struggling to keep up? Who has grown weary, worn, sad? Who might not make it across the line? Do you know someone who feels voiceless, with no one to speak up on their behalf?

You could *ignore* them. You could *blame* them. You could *shout* to them.

Or you could get up, go to where they are, and accompany them toward the goal.

If you do, you will discover how Christ Jesus is always there for you, lifting up your hands, giving you strength, speaking words of encouragement to you. In your race, you are never alone. Christ Jesus has already met you where you are, and is with you every step of the way.

With his help to strengthen you, run toward someone this week. And even if no one is there to take a video of what you do, don't worry. Your Father in heaven will see... and your Father in heaven will rejoice.

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