

## Fr. Gerard's column 9/25/22

*But you, man of God, pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. **Compete well for the faith.***

This Sunday at our 10:00 a.m. Family Mass, we will have an opportunity to recognize and congratulate the players and coaches of Massapequa Coast who competed in this year's Little League World Series tournament. Most of the team are parishioners enrolled in our Faith Formation program and CYO sports. It was exciting to see some of our own competing on a national level and we are most certainly proud of their efforts. They represent the many young people in our community and parish who are competing on fields, gymnasiums, and in dance competitions. It doesn't matter if we are spectators or participants, being engaged in competition is exciting and perhaps very much an innate part of our human nature. In one of his many campaign speeches, the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy accurately reflected, *"The lessons of competition are lessons for life."* It would seem, however, that Saint Paul expressed these sentiments first when he instructs Saint Timothy to **"Compete well for the faith."** We do this, he says, when we pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. The question for us is, **"Am I competing well?" "Am I excited and inspired by those who are actively engaged in the competition of faith?"**

We can't answer these questions without also acknowledging there is a lot of competition for the time, energy, and sincerity that we may dedicate to our faith. The ordinary demands of family life, jobs, school, sports, the arts, and illness are just some of the examples of that which competes with our faith life. The caustic and antagonistic nature of our culture also competes with our efforts to act with faith, love, patience, and gentleness. A competitive spirit is, therefore, necessary to both the inspiration and practice of the faith.

Back in 2018 Harvard University released a study on the association of religious upbringing with the subsequent health and well-being of adolescence and young adults. The study's research showed the following:

- Those who attended religious services at least once a week as children or teens were 18 percent more likely to report being happier in their twenties than those who never attended services.
- The researchers also found that kids who went to church were 33 percent less likely to use drugs in their twenties, were less likely to have sex at an earlier age, and less likely to have a sexually transmitted infection.
- In addition, people who prayed daily at church or on their own reported greater life satisfaction, were better able to process emotions, and were more forgiving.
- Finally, almost 30 percent of kids raised in church were more likely to do volunteer work.

Competing well for the faith is worth it in this life and certainly for our eternal salvation. In the same way that Saint Paul encourages Saint Timothy, we need to encourage each other to compete well and seize the opportunities that will make us better, stronger, and more fulfilled in our faith.

This week I have been reflecting on the remaining effects of the global pandemic. I wonder if it has caused many of us to stop competing for the faith or decreased our efforts to prioritize a successful relationship with the Lord and the church. The continued efforts of our school, faith formation program, outreach to youth, parish social ministries, Knights of Columbus, Family Mass, prayer groups and so much more are commendable and evidence of the seeds of faith being nurtured. Perhaps though we are in a moment that needs some encouragement. I hope the examples of those who engage in earthly competition inspires us. I pray that every person in this parish community not only feels welcome on our "team" but keeps cheering on our team.

Most importantly, I call all of us to the centrality of the celebration of the sacraments - most especially Sunday Eucharist. I recall a conversation I once had with parents of a young family. They shared that despite all the things they did to give their children a good life, clothes, toys, trips, sports, and artistic events, they struggled for happiness in their family life. These parents came to a realization and said, *"we have to go to church more than we are."* If you recognize your family or yourself as an individual in this family's story, I ask you to **join the competition**. All of us must encourage others to "join our team." We want our brothers and sisters to know the joy of the competition of faith and we fulfill our own mandate to compete, by being the missionary disciples we are called to be.

**ENGAGING IN SILENCE** – As a continuation of the competition analogy, I ask you to recall the power of silence. Before the cheers of the crowd, the successful athlete or performer will necessarily seek a time of silence and introspection in their preparations. In the silence, they set aside the noise and prepare themselves to be fully engaged in the competition or performance. When you come to mass this week, you will notice a change in how we begin mass. Rather than making announcements, the Leader of Song will welcome us, call us to silence and then call us to prayer and worship. It may take some time to adjust to engaging in silent preparation for mass, but in the end it will better prepare us to encounter the Lord at Holy Mass, who sends us forth to compete well in the practice of faith amidst the challenges of the week ahead.

Peace,

