

St. Michael Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Woonsocket, RI
Homily on All Saints
Hebrews 11:33-12:2; St. Matthew 10:32-33, 37-38; 19:27-30

Today we celebrate the “great cloud of witnesses” that surround us, encouraging us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12: 1-2).

The race is the well-lived life, and St. Paul tells us that the prize is the joy that spurred Christ Himself (the very God-man) on, to sit at the right hand of the throne of God. For us that means to bask and grow eternally in beauty, love, and strength. To enjoy a life made perfect, where there is no suffering, no pain, no sorrow. The greatest triumphs and glories of this earthly life are but a shadow or hint of those awaiting those who “lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us” (Hebrews 1:1).

For some of us, this race seems to have gone on too long. The exertion required just to get us to this point has brought all manner of pain; we have, to use a running term, “hit the wall”. Our joints ache. Our minds cannot focus. We can hardly catch our breath. The subtle pull of depression and despondency pulls our focus away from our pace, away from the glory that awaits us at the finish, so that we know nothing but our suffering.

We are not the first to get so distracted, to be tempted by the pain life brings. St. Paul gives a list of some of the sufferings; “they were stoned, sawn in two, tempted, slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented”. So how did they survive? How can we survive a race that has gone on too long for our frail bodies and broken spirits to endure?

There is a phenomenon in racing known as the “second wind”, a strengthening euphoria that comes from nowhere. When it comes, all strength is instantly renewed and pain forgotten. The mind returns to its focus on making strong progress toward the finish line and the reward that awaits. The hopelessness of before is simply washed away. The experienced runner will “gut out” the hard times, knowing (or at least hoping) that this “second wind will come”.

For the Christian, the euphoric wind that strengthens the spirit and body is always available – we celebrated His coming last week on Pentecost. He is the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ, He will wash away our weariness. He will give us the strength to endure through difficulties. He is the Comforter who comforts and alleviates our pain, He is the Spirit of Truth that reminds us that this pain – though very real to us now – will be replaced by eternal joy in the hereafter if we just Trust in Him. He will abide in us and cleanse us from all our sin and suffering.

Does the race seem to have gone on too long? Has the pain drawn your attention away from the joy that awaits? Then renew yourself. Open your heart and let the Holy Spirit refresh and perfect you. The strength is not only enough to make it to the finish line, but to run strong. The promise is not just eternal glory, but a taste of it now. For that cloud of witnesses accomplished great things during the course of their races. They “subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouth of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of aliens.”

The same Spirit that strengthened and perfected that “great cloud of witnesses” is waiting to strengthen you. Open your heart to Him, pick up your knees, and run strong.