

Nineteenth Sunday of ordinary time homily

The often repeated phrase, “throw in the towel”, is likely familiar to you. It originated in the world of boxing, a one-time popular sporting event in our country. What does the phrase mean? It is an admission of defeat. After the boxer is bloodied and battered in the contest, his handlers indicate surrender by throwing a towel in the ring. The fight soon ends. The valiant boxer can no longer continue.

Consider, also, the phrase, “raise the white flag”. Internationally recognized as a symbol of surrender on the battlefield. Once the flag is raised, there is an immediate ceasefire. It is a time for mercy.

In today’s first reading from the Old Testament’s First Book of Kings, Elijah, the messenger of God, appears to be at the end of his rope. Today, we might say he is “burned out”. Everything that he has done seems to have been done in vain. Discouragement overwhelms him. So downcast is he that he wants to resign his mission.

In other words, he wants to throw in the towel!

He has been faithful which Israel has not. Elijah himself is alone and isolated and in danger for his life. The wicked queen Jezebel, who earlier had slaughtered the prophets of Israel, save one, Elijah, wants the one remaining prophet dead. She uses the military apparatus of the state against him. The prophet flees for his life. Spiritually and psychologically, he has hit a wall. And then he prayed for death.

“He prayed for death”, saying: This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:5). His resignation is found unacceptable to God. He insists that he carry on and not lose heart. God promises to assist him in his work. The prophet listened and obeyed.

The prophet is fed mysterious bread that restored his strength and allowed him to go to the mountain of God, Horeb. This heavenly food prefigures the bread of Life in today’s gospel reading. Jesus refers to himself as the living bread come down from heaven, and that he who eats this bread will live forever. The “bread’ is our daily sustenance on our journey to the promised land, heaven.

As Catholics, we must reach out for Our Eucharistic Lord. Bishop Robert Barron, a prominent Catholic Evangelist, shared his memories of chaotic outdoor masses in Rome, which often attracted huge crowds. When the priests branched out to distribute Holy Communion, the people shouted out for the priests to give them the bread of God. Such enthusiasm for the sacrament is sadly lacking today.

At a time when public figures are under close scrutiny and are often severely judged, it is worth noting that the prophets were men of flesh and blood, and had many shortcomings. God’s chosen messengers were often deeply flawed and in continual need of God’s assistance.

In addition, the life of the Church is a daily trial. God remains close to those who do not despair of him.

Finally, we must never “throw in the towel”. Quitting is not an option for a disciple of Jesus. It is true that in the recent past many have indeed walked away, perhaps permanently, from the Church, but we, the faithful, are called to remain steadfast in our faith and not let the sins of others distract us from our mission to witness to Christ.

My hope is that many of you remember a key scene in the Academy award winning motion picture, “Rocky”. Having taken a terrible beating at the hands of the champion, Apollo Creed, Rocky’s manger, Mick, is prepared to “throw in the towel”. “Not so fast”, says the challenger. “If you stop the fight, cries Rocky, “I will kill you”.

By not quitting, rocky showed true grit, and earned the admiration of those who witnessed the climax of the fight in the movie theater.

Lord, give us strength to carry on.