

I'm sure many of us watched at least some of the Olympic Games over the last couple of weeks. Like many of you, I was particularly delighted by folks like Katie Ledecky and Simone Biles, who gave us wonderful examples of power and modesty by sharing the importance of their Catholic faith as they competed and won by extraordinary margins.¹

At the same time, it was also a little disconcerting to see how many nations and athletes chose to use performance-enhancing drugs to try to win, as if fraudulent victories would somehow be equivalent to the triumphs deserved by honest effort. Not much modesty at work there, seems to me – they appeared to be more like the guy we heard about in the gospel who wanted the best seat at dinner. Everyone has to agree that you competed and won fairly before you're invited to come up higher than the rest of us, stand on that podium, and get your medal.

Those two observations about the Olympics illustrate the enduring power of the message about modesty we heard in today's Scriptures. Jesus teaches us to avoid arrogance for a very good reason. Psalm 138 tell us what it is: "The LORD is on high, but cares for the lowly; the haughty he knows from afar." Wouldn't we prefer to be known by God up close and intimately rather than from afar? Jesus is telling us that God would like to cherish us like that, and that modesty's the ticket.

Like its first cousin humility, all modesty requires is that we honestly acknowledge with joy and gratitude that our talents are truly gifts from God. Neither arrogance nor groveling .have anything to do with modesty.

¹ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/these-two-game-changing-olympians-are-serious-catholics-76883/>, August 11, 2016

Some of you might remember the great Olympic weightlifter Vasily Alexeyev who got that exactly right. Back in 1970, he was the first man ever to lift 500 pounds, and remained undefeated in every competition he entered from 1970 through 1978. When asked by a reporter if he would say he was the strongest man in the world he replied, “No, I would not say that. It would not be modest. But you – you can say that.”

Modesty’s not just for sports champions. For example, someone else who understands that very well is Jack Bogle, the legendary head, now retired, of the Vanguard Group, the amazing non-profit investment firm with over \$3 trillion in assets, clients in 80 countries and the lowest average fees in the investment industry.

Jack, too, knows that strength and success are not incompatible with modesty. He mentioned in an interview² a while ago that one way he kept his grip on modesty was by keeping a copy of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias* on his desk. He said that the poem reminded him, in his own words to himself about Vanguard, “...play down the arrogance, pal. What you’ve built will not last forever.” Let’s read the poem together, and you’ll probably see pretty easily how it helped him remain modest, and how it fits in with Scripture. It goes like this:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: `Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear --
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

² <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20150714-the-secret-weapon-of-ceos>, August 11, 2016

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

Jack told the interviewer that the poem helped him balance the competing interests involved in growing a company. “People matter,” Jack said, “and caring about the human beings with whom we serve – and whom we serve – must be the foundation of any institution worth its salt. I’m guessing that Ozymandias wasn’t much into caring – except about himself and his works.” To me, the greatest testimony to Jack’s modesty is that he cheerfully exchanged e-mails with me, a perfect nobody all the way down at the low end of the dinner table, to corroborate the story and expand on what he’d meant.

The stories and poem point to the deepest message contained in Scripture. Absolutely everything that we have and are is a gift of God, to be embraced and expressed as fully as we can, without pretense or ostentation, shared in service of our neighbor. A life lived like that is a life of love, and no one has to be an Olympian or a financial giant to succeed at it. Indeed, Katie Ledecy’s coach says she’s “remarkably unremarkable.”³

You and I may be pretty remarkably unremarkable at some level too, but through the strength of the life of God that’s available to us in the Eucharist, each of us can live modest lives of love and service that will, even before we cross life’s finish line, result in God calling us to come up higher, close to his heart, and receive love’s reward, which if the truth be told, is far more precious than any gold medals or investment returns will ever be, and whose glory will never fade.

³ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/these-two-game-changing-olympians-are-serious-catholics-76883/>, August 11, 2016