

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time:

First Reading: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10

4 Then the officials said to the king, "This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." 5 King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." 6 So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

8 So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, 9 "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies."

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:1-4

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Gospel: Luke 12:49-53

49 "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Saint Luke, in chapters 9 – 19, narrates Jesus' journey toward suffering and death, with references to baptism and the coming fire of the Holy Spirit, symbolizing spiritual transformation and mission.

Remember, Remove, Run, Refocus: A Path to Holiness

Team Jesus is an analogy for the Church, emphasizing cooperation and unity in mission. God the Father is the team owner, Jesus is the manager, and the Holy Spirit animates the team. Team Jesus is the Church, a community of brothers and sisters, united in him, working together for a common goal. The Church functions as a team, where each member plays a vital role in fulfilling Christ's mission. After our playing days in the arena of this world are finished, having played well and *“run with perseverance the race”* that was set before us, we will join those who played before, becoming part of the Church Triumphant, the Communion of Saints, the *“great cloud of witnesses”* that surround the Church Militant.¹

The entire eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us of various heroes of faith, and what those particular biblical characters endured.² Knowing this helps us to understand what he means when he says at the beginning of chapter 12, that we are surrounded by *“a great cloud of witnesses”*. The author calls us to **remember** them and like them to **remove** distraction and sin from our lives, to **run** strong on the path of faith before us, and to constantly **refocus** our attention on Jesus.

Remember: I have been to the ruins of ancient Greek and Roman stadiums, and I could imagine them stacked and packed with spectators. Thousands of people in a great gathering, cheering on the competitors. At American Colleges we have even greater stadiums than those of ancient days, filled with upwards of 100,000 people cheering on their teams. Every school has its stories of great sportsmen and women, of students who went on to greater fame, the Hall of Famous living and dead Gators who we might call a cloud of witnesses. At UF we have the likes of Tim Tebow- Football, Mike Zunino- Baseball, Sarah Yohe- Soccer, Hazel Clarke Riley- Track and Field, Richard A. ‘Dick’ Pace- Baseball / Football / Basketball. As well, there have been notable graduates on other fields of play, Marco Rubio, Julie Donaldson, Howard Norton, Stephen Stills.

Thinking locally, our Church has been prayed in for almost 70 years. It has a sacred feel having been set apart as the place where human hearts and the heart of God meet in prayer. As we stand on these floors, sit in these pews, as we kneel, we do so not as the first but in communion with the thousands and thousands of souls that have praised, thanked, complained, whined, wondered, and wailed in prayer to God our Father. They are our local great cloud of witnesses, whose prayers are mixed with the very paint and mortar.

What takes place in the great arenas of professional sports is just a pale reflection of what takes place unseen in the spiritual realm, in our communion of saints who surround us.³ The heavenly stadium is filled with the ‘heroes of the faith’ mentioned in Hebrews, the Saints of these last two millennia, and countless others as well — people whose names will never show up in the history books or the official lives of the Saints, but who strove in their own way, to live by faith in the particular time and place that God planted them — people from throughout human history, all gathered together in eternity, watching and cheering those of us who have taken their former positions on the team roster here on the playing field of the great arena of our world.

The Greek word *nephos*, translated “clouds,” describes not only the clouds you see in the sky but has an additional meaning. In ancient, classical Greek times, the word “clouds” was used to describe *the highest seats in the bleachers of a stadium*.⁴ But the author of Hebrews doesn’t just say that there is a cloud of

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/268/>

² <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/hebrews/11>

³ <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/the-communion-of-saints>

⁴ This verse contains three remarkable expressions which stress the need to be faithful in spite of difficulties. The first is the “cloud of witnesses”, a reference to the multitude of holy people in the course of the history of Israel who stayed faithful to God (cf. 11:2, 4, 5, 39); they are a cloud, a huge number filling the sky. In classical literature one often finds an army advancing in battle array being compared with a storm forming in the sky. Also, the image of the cloud

witnesses, but that we are surrounded by it, it is great in size. In fact, to be surrounded means that the witnesses encircling us are piled high on every side. From this use of ancient Greek athletic terms, the Holy Spirit is emphasizing: *“You’re not alone! The grandstands of Heaven all the way up to the ‘clouds,’ the highest seats in the bleachers, are piled high with people who stood the test of time and eventually saw their faith manifested....”* This is a powerful image because it reminds us that our faith is a communion and with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and we have the greatest multitude cheering us on as we continue the race to the goal. For disciples of Christ who now make up the Church Militant, Team Jesus in the arena of the world, there are no spectators.

You and I, we are on the playing field of the great arena, and up in the stands are all the saints, the ones who have been perfected in love — more than we could ever number. They aren’t judging us, there are no callous call outs, no insults, having been perfected in the purifying fire of God’s love, when we mess up and misplay, they understand how very hard it can be to make the plays every day. From the perspective of heaven, they realize even more clearly than do we, that we really are all connected, that this race we’re competing in is more of a relay than a solo race, and that in a certain sense, the race isn’t over until everybody who takes up Jesus invitation to join the team, has been brought into the great cloud of witnesses. And some of the most important plays that the great crowd of witnesses up in the stands are rooting for us to make are those that take place AFTER we have stumbled and fallen.

With the imagery of the Greek and Roman athletic games and stadiums in our minds, I want to continue our use of the analogy of the mission minded Church alive in Christ as like a championship minded sports team. It might be helpful for you if, in addition to reflecting on this homily, that you complete our breaking open of the living Word of God by also reading the full homily on Team Jesus from the [14th Sunday of Ordinary Time](#), as review. As I mentioned, there are four important aspects, from the second reading, of Christian discipleship for the members of Team Jesus; **‘remember’, ‘remove’, ‘run’, and ‘refocus’**. Let’s move on to the second.

Remove : *“I have come to set the world on fire”*, said Jesus, and 2000 years later here we are, part of the fire and surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Just as they did before us, we must strive to overcome sinful temptations and any ordering of priorities. Remove *“every weight and the sin that clings so closely”*. Christians are urged to rid themselves of burdens and sin, which cling / distract from faith. This is an especially poignant exhortation in our modern age of social media. Our priority must be God and the excellence which God calls us to embrace, eliminating obstacles to reaching our goal. We are called to submit to this purifying fire of God, which is not destructive but cleansing and illuminating, symbolizing God's presence and transformative power. It leads to full conversion and liberation despite the pain it can involve. No pain, no gain as they say!⁵

The members of the mystical Body of Christ the Church, Team Jesus, those who have joined the great cloud of witnesses and those of us here now, have always needed the ever-present purifying fire of God begun by Jesus. A blazing crucible through which holiness is forged. A fire of faith that continues to burn in us fueled by God's Word. It is a world changing, soul saving, life transforming fire.

suggests that these witnesses are high up, near the sun, a sign of their spiritual stature. They are “witnesses”, that is, active spectators of the combat in which Christians are involved. This evokes the idea of spectators at the Games who follow the events from the stands, applauding, shouting and gesticulating. [The Letter to the Hebrews](#). The Navarre Bible (Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers, 2005), 129–130.

⁵ The ancient Greek poet [Hesiod](#) (c. 750-650 BC) expresses this idea in *Works and Days* where he wrote: ...But before the road of Excellence the immortal gods have placed sweat. And the way to it is long and steep and rough at first. But when one arrives at the summit, then it is easy, even though remaining difficult.^{[6][7][8][9]} The ancient Greek playwright [Sophocles](#) (5th Century BC) expresses this idea in the play *Electra* (line 945).^{[7][10][11]} This line is translated as: "nothing truly succeeds without pain",^[12] "nothing succeeds without toil",^[13] "there is no success without hard work",^[14] and "Without labour nothing prospers (well)."^[15] A form of this expression is found in the beginning of the second century, written in *The Ethics of the Fathers* 5:23 (known in Hebrew as [Pirkei Avot](#)), which quotes Ben Hei as saying, "According to the pain is the reward."^{[16][17]} This is interpreted to be a spiritual lesson; without the pain in doing what God commands, there is no spiritual gain.

Each member of Team Jesus must take personal responsibility for their role in the mission. Individual accountability is essential for understanding the impact of contributions to the team's success and the cost of our failure to reach the limits of our natural abilities so as to more fully recognize the need for grace to perfect nature, and more deeply desire that grace whereby we become supernaturally able to realize the mission goals through individual roles on the team. We must own our roles and strive for excellence in our efforts, glorifying God in our lives and fully engaged in the mission. This will involve continuous learning, self-reflection, and spiritual exercise by which we put on the mind of Christ.

Being united in the mind of Christ is to be in possession of the team identity set by him. We look to him, *“the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”* Allowing the purifying fire to forge us in the team identity is crucial for guiding behavior and decision-making within the Church, rooted as it is in the new life in Christ. The core values that he sets before us serve as foundational principles that support the Church's mission and identity. This unity in the body of Christ, team Jesus, will require humility, patience, forbearance, and especially a close personal relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Run: Evangelization is a collective mission of the Church, emphasizing the need for active participation in spreading the Gospel. The Great Commission instructs followers to make disciples of all nations, highlighting the urgency of the mission. Therefore, the Church's mission is to spread saving truth and engage all members in this effort. Although the mission is ‘urgent’ it is more of a long-distance run than a sprint. Endurance is essential and will require that our lives as mission minded disciples is founded upon and rooted in the theological virtues.⁶ But, that doesn’t mean our approach to the urgency of the mission should be subject to our whims of interest nor our schedule of convenience. This is not life plus mission, but rather life is mission. Run *“with perseverance the race that is set before us.”* The letter to the Hebrews *“is a sermon in written form, of uncertain origin, intended to encourage perseverance in Christian faith.”*⁷ It was written to a community of Christians going through a wilderness time. Their knees were weak; their legs were drooping. The temptation to give up was strong.

And so, the writer of the letter challenges them to keep on keeping on: *“Run the race with perseverance that is set before us.”* If life is a race, it’s a relay race, but it’s also a marathon. The Christian life is described as a race to run with perseverance in the second reading, but more accurately the author of Hebrews intends us to understand that the Christian life is an agonizing contest requiring focus on Jesus as the leader and perfecter of faith. We will not be able to endure in every way necessary if we are not focused on Christ, fueled by the Holy Spirit, and in persistent prayer to the Father. We must be frequent receivers of the graces of the Sacraments. Missionaries immersed in the living Word of God.

Refocus: Fix your gaze upon the cross. Christ’s endurance of the cross’s shame: Jesus embraced the humiliation of crucifixion, discounting its shame for love of us, exemplifying in his humanity the trust and love he had for the Father. Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Disappointingly true, is the cost of discipleship, particularly as it manifests in our familial relationships. Our commitment to Christ, Jesus warns, may bring division within families, as loyalty to him can conflict with natural family ties. While natural family relationships may be strained by faith commitments, the Church offers a spiritual family that provides consolation and strength. Reconciliation is hoped for but faithfulness to Christ remains paramount. Christian discipleship is a journey during which we can expect

⁶ https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one/article_7/ii_the_theological_virtues.html

⁷ Daniel J. Harrington, *“The Letter to the Hebrews.”* in *New Testament*, ed. Daniel Durken, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 731.

suffering, sacrifice, challenges, and all manner of temptation to give in or give up, and if not for the transformative power of faith we could not endure. The greatest commandment involves loving God wholly, followed by loving one's neighbor, with the latter rooted in the former, emphasizing the primacy of divine love in who we are and all we do.

In summary of the themes, we've reflected upon in these two homilies, the 14th and 20th Sunday's of Ordinary Time, I think we can focus on Jesus as our team manager, the characteristics of a mission minded team, the importance of team formation, and the essential elements of a championship culture.

The Church as 'Team Jesus' has a collective mission, likened to a team sport emphasizing cooperation and shared purpose. The Church operates under a hierarchical structure with God the Father as the owner, Jesus as the manager, and the Holy Spirit unites and animates the team. The Pope serves as the coach, bishops as assistant coaches, priests as team captains, and all baptized believers as players. Unity and communion empower individuals to play their roles within the mystical body of Christ.

Jesus: Team Manager

As the Team Manager Jesus oversees, initially, a team of 12 individuals who work toward common goals. He ensures they are motivated, productive, and effective. He manages both the work and the people, setting goals, delegating tasks, providing feedback, and fostering a positive work environment. Ultimately, Jesus' is the key role in the success of the Apostolic Team and the growth of the team into the Church.

His key responsibilities are leadership and guidance, providing the vision, mission with clear direction toward his established goals and objectives aligned with the owner, God the Father. He makes judgements about performance, provides meaningful feedback, and helps the team members identify development needs. Jesus models and instills effective communication within the team as well as communication of the team identity to the world around them. He provides instruction about how the players are to relate to each other and resolve any conflicts that might arise. He provides what's necessary to train them and highlights opportunities for them to enhance and perfect their skills.

Jesus strives to ensure that the team culture is focused, positive, and engaging in such a way as to increasingly motivate them about the mission and their role on the team. He provides clarity about resources, how to recognize those that are a means to the end as well as those that are of essential and lasting value. He will guide the team through challenges, empower them to identify priorities, navigate difficult situations while ensuring that they adhere to the elements of his way, truth, and life. As team manager Jesus exemplifies the skills they will need, such as excellent verbal and written communication, ability to have and to foster holy relationships, inspire others as they take on leadership and guidance aspects of their roles. He demonstrates and helps them to understand how to identify and resolve issues effectively.

Characteristics of a Mission-Minded Team include a clear mission, compelling vision, and strong leadership. Championship teams have a clear and inspiring mission that drives their culture and purpose. Effective leadership is crucial for instilling confidence and accountability among team members. The apostles and early disciples exemplified strong leadership, embracing challenges and fostering unity.

Ongoing team formation is essential for developing engaged members who embrace the Church's mission. Team formation involves energizing members to actively participate in the mission and take pride in their roles. Continuous learning and personal growth are key components of a successful team culture. Members must be committed to the team's vision, values, and standards to achieve collective success.

Building a "championship culture" within the Church is crucial for effective evangelization. A clear, compelling mission and vision serve as the guiding light for the Church, inspiring members to make sacrifices for its achievement. Credible leadership sets the tone for the Church, with the Apostles exemplifying commitment and accountability. Strong team identity is established through core values that define the essence of the Church's mission.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Communion of Saints:** The spiritual solidarity of the faithful on earth, the saints in heaven (Church Triumphant), and the souls in purgatory. It emphasizes that believers are connected to each other across time and space.
- **Church Militant:** Refers to the faithful on earth, who are still engaged in the spiritual struggle against sin and evil. They are "on the field" of the great arena.
- **Church Triumphant:** Refers to the saints in heaven, who have successfully completed their earthly journey and are now in glory with God. They constitute the "great cloud of witnesses."
- **Cloud of Witnesses (nephos):** A term from Hebrews 12:1, referring to the multitude of faithful individuals (heroes of faith, saints) who have gone before us. The Greek word *nephos* also connotes the highest seats in a stadium, implying spectators cheering on those still in the race.
- **Cost of Discipleship:** The sacrifices and challenges, including potential division within families or social ostracization, that a person may face as a result of their commitment to following Christ.
- **Evangelization:** The act of proclaiming the Gospel and spreading the Christian faith through word and deed. It is presented as a collective mission of the Church.
- **Heroes of the Faith:** Individuals mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11, such as Abraham, Moses, and others, who demonstrated extraordinary faith and perseverance despite enduring hardships, persecution, and even death. They serve as examples for believers.
- **Purifying Fire of God:** A metaphorical concept derived from Jesus's statement about setting the earth on fire. It symbolizes God's transformative power, which cleanses, illuminates, and perfects believers, even through painful experiences, leading to holiness.
- **Sacraments:** Sacred rituals of the Christian Church, such as Baptism and Eucharist, believed to be outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. Frequent reception is encouraged for spiritual strength.
- **Team Jesus:** An analogy used to describe the Church as a community of believers united in Christ, working together with a shared purpose and mission, much like a sports team. God the Father is the owner, Jesus the manager, and the Holy Spirit animates the team.
- **Theological Virtues:** Faith, hope, and charity (love). These are virtues that are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to enable them to act as His children and merit eternal life.
- **Zeal for God's House:** While not explicitly defined, this phrase often refers to an intense passion and commitment to God, His dwelling (the Church), and His mission, sometimes leading to strong action or division. (Implied from the "fire" and "division" passages).

What is the "cloud of witnesses" and how does it relate to believers today?

The "cloud of witnesses" refers to a vast multitude of holy people, both biblical figures and saints throughout history, who have remained faithful to God despite enduring hardships, persecution, and death. This imagery, drawn from ancient Greek stadiums where "clouds" referred to the highest seats, emphasizes that believers are surrounded by an immense crowd of those who have "stood the test of time" and achieved holiness. They are not merely passive spectators but active "cheerleaders" who, from their perfected state in heaven, intercede for and encourage those on the "playing field" of the world. This concept highlights that individual faith is not solitary but part of a larger, interconnected community of

believers, the "communion of saints," encompassing both the "Church Triumphant" (those in heaven) and the "Church Militant" (those on Earth).

How does Jesus' statement about setting the earth on fire and bringing division relate to Christian discipleship?

Jesus' declaration, "I've come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing," symbolizes the transformative and purifying power of God's love and the Holy Spirit. This "fire" is not destructive but cleansing and illuminating, leading to spiritual transformation and liberation, even if it involves pain ("no pain, no gain"). His statement about bringing "division" rather than peace signifies that commitment to him may create conflict, even within families, as loyalty to Christ can challenge existing relationships and priorities. This highlights the cost of discipleship, where faithfulness to Christ must be paramount, even when it strains natural family ties. It calls believers to embrace a "purifying fire" that forges holiness and to prioritize God above all else, recognizing that this commitment may lead to unexpected separations or opposition.

What is the "Team Jesus" analogy and how does it describe the Church's structure and mission?

The "Team Jesus" analogy describes the Church as a mission-minded championship sports team, emphasizing cooperation, unity, and a shared purpose. In this analogy, God the Father is the team owner, Jesus is the manager, and the Holy Spirit animates and unites the team. The Pope serves as the coach, bishops as assistant coaches, priests as team captains, and all baptized believers are players. This framework highlights that each member plays a vital role in fulfilling Christ's mission of spreading saving truth. The Church's mission is collective and requires active participation from all members, working together for a common goal, much like a relay race where individual efforts contribute to the overall success of the team.

What are the four essential aspects of Christian discipleship for "Team Jesus" members?

Christian discipleship for members of "Team Jesus" is characterized by four important aspects: "Remember," "Remove," "Run," and "Refocus."

- **Remember:** To acknowledge and draw inspiration from the "great cloud of witnesses"—the heroes of faith who have gone before us and are now cheering us on from heaven. This emphasizes that we are not alone in our faith journey.
- **Remove:** To lay aside "every weight and the sin that clings so closely," urging Christians to eliminate distractions, sinful temptations, and misordered priorities that hinder their path to holiness. This involves submitting to God's "purifying fire."
- **Run:** To "run with perseverance the race that is set before us," emphasizing the long-distance, enduring nature of the Christian life. This requires continuous effort, rooted in theological virtues, and active participation in the Church's collective mission of evangelization.
- **Refocus:** To constantly fix attention on Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," especially in times of struggle or when facing the "cost of discipleship." This means looking to Christ's endurance of the cross as an example and allowing his identity to shape the team's culture and individual behavior.

How does the concept of a "championship culture" apply to the Church?

Building a "championship culture" within the Church is seen as crucial for effective evangelization and fulfilling its mission. This culture is characterized by:

- **Clear, compelling mission and vision:** These serve as the guiding light, inspiring members to make sacrifices for the Church's goals.

- **Credible leadership:** Leaders like the Apostles set the tone, demonstrating commitment and accountability, instilling confidence in team members.
- **Strong team identity:** This is established through core values rooted in the new life in Christ, defining the essence of the Church's mission and guiding behavior and decision-making.
- **Ongoing team formation:** Energizing members to actively participate, take pride in their roles, and commit to continuous learning and personal growth to achieve collective success.

What is the significance of the "purifying fire of God's love"?

The "purifying fire of God's love" is a central theme, closely linked to Jesus' statement about setting the earth on fire. It represents God's transformative presence, which is not destructive but cleansing, illuminating, and refining. This "blazing crucible" forges holiness, helping believers overcome sinful temptations and reorder their priorities. It signifies a process that, while potentially involving pain ("no pain, no gain"), ultimately leads to full conversion, liberation, and perfection in love, allowing individuals to become part of the "great cloud of witnesses" who have been perfected by this fire.

How is the Church connected across time and space through the "communion of saints"?

The Church is deeply connected across time and space through the "communion of saints," which unites believers both living and dead. This concept emphasizes that when individuals worship or pray, they are not alone but in communion with "thousands and thousands of souls" who have worshipped in the same sacred spaces over generations. It includes the "Church Triumphant" (saints in heaven who cheer on and intercede for those on Earth) and the "Church Militant" (believers currently on Earth). This profound connection means that prayers from past generations are metaphorically "mixed with the very paint and mortar" of sacred places, and the spiritual race is a relay, not a solo, where the "race isn't over until everybody has been brought into the great cloud of witnesses."

What role do individual accountability and continuous growth play in the "Team Jesus" mission?

Individual accountability is essential for each member of "Team Jesus" to understand their impact on the team's success and the consequences of failing to use their natural abilities to the fullest. This recognition highlights the need for divine grace to perfect nature, enabling members to achieve mission goals. Believers are called to "own their roles," strive for excellence, and glorify God in their lives. This involves continuous learning, self-reflection, and spiritual exercise to "put on the mind of Christ," which ensures unity and guides behavior within the Church. The mission is a "long-distance run" requiring endurance, focus on Christ, and constant prayer, indicating that personal responsibility and ongoing development are crucial for collective success.