

Breaking through the Wall

Delivered April 5, 2009 (5th Sunday of Great Lent)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

St Paul often mentions in his letters how we are like runners – we run to obtain a prize, we fight the good fight and finish the race, we lay aside our sin and run with perseverance the race that is before us. He likens our efforts as Christians to the struggles, efforts and joys of athletes.

I think this imagery is most evident to us during Great Lent – it is during this season that we really feel like Christian athletes. We eat a special diet – we train, although rather than using weights and treadmills we practice a variety of ascetic disciplines like increased prayer or increased giving. We even get in some actual physical work when we pray the prayer of St Ephraim – we fall down in prostration, pick ourselves up and do it a few more times.

Well, if Great Lent is a race, then I think it is safe to say it is not a sprint. A sprint is a short run – you give it all you have for a short period of time and then you reach the goal. Great Lent is more like a marathon. It's long. It takes preparation. It is difficult, it requires a change in rhythm. It requires effort throughout. It requires consistency and discipline – one has to run not too slow and not too fast.

And here, as we enter the last week of Great Lent – and approach Holy Week – the finish line is almost in sight. We know that the end is around the corner! All the hard work, all the effort – this is when it will be tested the most. Because, in any long distance run, this is the point when we really begin to realize that it is *not* a sprint, but a marathon. We realize it because this is about the point where serious runners hit what is known as the wall.

The wall is the point in the race when a runner is a little more than half-way through - about mile 15 or 16 out of 26. This is the point when the exhaustion sets in, when every fiber of a runner's being is rejecting the move forward. The wall stands in front of the runner, blocking his vision – preventing him from seeing in front of him, preventing him from seeing or remembering the finish line.

Of course, this wall is not something that runners alone experience – we can encounter the wall when we try any difficult task or serious undertaking. Walls can pop-up at work, in our home and in our long-term relationships with loved ones – we hit them, and like the exhausted runner we don't feel like we can go any further.

And it is at the wall where we will be attacked – where our vision is cloudy, and the subtle snares of the devil will be employed. He will try to convince us to throw in the towel. To walk away from the race, to avoid the struggle. He will try to blind us to the blessings that brought us so far, and he will remind us of the difficulty ahead.

And because the wall always hits us deep into our marathons, deep into our struggles - we forget to see the end clearly. It may be close, but we can't see it. What began a joyous fast, a joyous relationship, a joyous event is presented to us by the devil as just another Lent, just *another* church meeting, just *another* day. And with that in mind our progress forward is flipped around and we are given every reason to move backward. And that's what our sin does to us – it blocks our vision, it sets these walls up in front of us, and encourages us *not* to finish the race. These walls, encourage us to become complacent – to stop moving forward – to stop running the race. And complacency is one of the most deadly attitudes for a runner – and for us Christians as well – that mode of cruising along, going through the motions and telling ourselves "I'm basically okay" prevents us from growing in Christ, of becoming his living icons here on earth. Being complacent, in fact, is the most difficult, deadly and *common* wall that we all will run into at some point in time.

As faithful Christian athletes, thanks to God, our Lord knows our struggles. Our Lord knows them and gives us everything we need to break through these walls that block us from having a blessed fast – he gives us the tools we need to even break through the walls that hold us back in life. He gives us the path, the road on which we should run – and a guide to light the way. Sure, this road may be narrow, and surrounded by darkness, but this road is straight and this road is true. And when we hold up Christ as our beacon, as the light that guides, we find the strength to persevere. Even when we make mistakes, even when step off the narrow road or get lost in darkness - all we need to do is look and he's there – we can find Christ in the Gospel, in our Churches, and in our acts of kindness and charity.

But, unfortunately, the converse is true – when we *don't* have kindness or charity, or when the Gospel or Church is *not* a part of our lives – we struggle to see Him. He may shine right in front of us, but until we begin opening our eyes we are lost without him.

As we run this marathon, no matter who we are, we will eventually hit a wall – but with preparation, with perseverance, and – most of all – with repentance (confession before the Lord) we can get to the finish line, Easter - Pascha, and be transformed by the Resurrection of our Lord. We have an opportunity to taste the real finish line, the end of the Marathon of our lives, to celebrate, and to bask in the joy of our Risen Lord. Without that preparation, however, without the struggle and the training – without repentance – without following Christ as our beacon and breaking through the walls that block us - we will not have the same experience at the end of the race.

As we get closer and closer to the Resurrection - May God's grace and love enable us to break through the walls that impede our progress – and may he make our Lenten struggles and efforts fruitful so that we might come prepared to the radiant day of His Holy Resurrection, rejoicing and giving thanks to Him.

Amen.