

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Blessing of New Ministry and Team House

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Saint John Neumann/Blessing of New Ministry and Team House

Annapolis, Maryland

September 16, 2017

I'm glad to be with you today to celebrate this parish Mass, and after, Mass to bless the newly completed Ministry and Team House. This project has been in the making for quite a while, so I congratulate you warmly on its completion. With Fr. Tizio, I surely want to thank all who generously supported this project which will greatly benefit our student athletes and their coaches, now and for many, many years to come. Warmest thanks to school and parish leadership and to you, the parishioners, for your generosity - without which this wonderful new facility would not have been built.

Let us now turn to the Word of God just proclaimed, and in light of this special occasion, we ask what these readings mean for us and for our daily lives, beginning with our reading from the Book of Sirach. In this Old Testament passage, written some 200 years before the birth of Christ, the author, Ben Sira, a wise and learned Jerusalem resident, alerts us to the spiritual danger of being angry and vengeful. He warns us that we cannot expect God to forgive our sins if we nourish anger against other people - even those who have treated us badly. This teaching should not surprise us because every day, in the Our Father, we say: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We say those words often but we know

it isn't always easy to forgive others.

Now, to be more specific, our reading from the Book of Sirach is less concerned with sudden outbursts of anger or annoyance than it is with the harboring grudges, nursing our wrath, and plotting to get even with our enemies. Of course, it's never good to lose our temper and we should avoid doing so; but it's spiritually, emotionally, and even physically *corrosive* were we to lead an angry life and harbor vengeful thoughts in our hearts. If we choose to live like that, Ben Sira advises, we can't expect God's forgiveness. Let's be clear, the anger and vengeance which Sirach warns against is not the same as healthy competition on the sports field or friendly rivalries among teams. In fact, sports is meant to teach us not only how to compete vigorously and fairly but also the art of being magnanimous in victory and gracious in defeat. Sometimes in the heat of competition it's easy to get carried away and friendly rivalry can turn into enmity as tempers flare, both on and off the field. In blessing this Ministry and Team House, we pray that such things don't happen here. Rather we will pray for the grace to model for a world that is often angry how to strive hard and compete with passion but without bitterness and vengeance.

Which brings us to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, where the Apostle tells us that "none of us lives for oneself and none of us dies for oneself. While we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord." Here the Apostles brings to light two important points:

First, when we are let anger fester in our hearts, we also turn in on ourselves. More and more we can find ourselves thinking of what others have done to hurt us. Soon, we may not only feel sorry for ourselves, but also find ourselves consumed with hurt, anger, and vengeful thoughts. When that happens, the important relationships in our lives start going downhill - including our relationship with the Lord but also with our loved ones. May we never be self-absorbed, living for ourselves and not for the Lord

and others!

We can draw a second point from this reading apropos of the new Team House on the importance we tend to place on sports in our culture. Sports has an important place in our lives, but like everything else, but sports must be kept in perspective and balance. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (№ 2289) teaches us not “to idolize physical perfection and success at sports.” For many people, as we know, sports can actually be a substitute religion – another form of becoming all wrapped up in ourselves and in our own interests. With the blessing of the Ministry and Team House, we have a golden opportunity to link competitive sports and athletic activities with our faith – to become athletes for Christ who pray like champions, compete well, to learn the value of genuine teamwork, each working for the good of the other, and win not merely earthly victories but the trophy of eternal life on high. After all, you are The Saints!

This brings us to St. Matthew’s Gospel where we heard Jesus teach his disciples that they are to forgive those who wrong them – not seven times but seventy-seven times. In other words, we have to forgive others limitlessly – just as the Lord forgives us our sins limitlessly – if we allow him to do so. To illustrate this teaching Jesus offers us a parable about a servant who owed his master a huge sum of money, more than he could ever repay. And that us! We are that servant, for none of us is good or holy enough to expiate our own sins. Rather, like the servant in the Gospel, we need to beg God’s forgiveness, counting as we do on the Lord’s limitless capacity to forgive us our sins.

But if we continue to harbor anger against others or be all wrapped up only in our own concerns, then we may become like that same servant in the second half of Jesus’ parable. After the Lord forgives us, we may decide to withhold our forgiveness from others, demanding from them the proverbial ‘pound of flesh’ for their offense against us. But here is a prime reason why that is such a bad idea: Our unwillingness

to forgive others effectively blocks God's desire to forgive us. So it is that we pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"— a most challenging teaching, a most challenging prayer.

There is no panacea, no magic cure, for anger, vengeance, and hardness of heart. Rather, we must daily open our hearts to the Holy Spirit and ask that we might grow in the virtues that Jesus exemplified in his own life, especially his temperance, his patience, and his kindness towards others. And the only way we can acquire such virtues in God's grace is through practice - practice and training in overcoming vices and replacing them with virtue. Again, let us see this Ministry and Team House not merely as an athletic facility but rather as reminder of the training in moral virtues we need to undergo, virtues that give us the strengthen of character truly to forgive and forget, even as we make good use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, there to be truly reconciled to God and to our neighbor.

For now, let us enter upon this Holy Eucharist and as we share in the Lord's sacrificial and reconciling love for us, let us ask for the grace to replace anger with kindness, vengefulness with forgiveness. Then we will be competing well and wisely in the only race that ultimately counts. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!