

**Conduct Your Affairs with Humility:
Homily at St. Philip Neri Church
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ALL OVER OUR PLANET, for the past two weeks, the eyes of millions of men and women, young and old, of virtually every nationality, have been glued to television sets. The heroics of athletes from different countries competing at the Athens Olympics have arrested the attention of many citizens of our world. Nations and races have been celebrating the excellence of their representatives in one sporting event or the other. Families have stayed up all night to watch the performance of their sons, their daughters, brothers, sisters, or cousins. Apart from the officially stated objective of the Olympics, which is to foster friendship among nations, the spirit of competition among nations has been put on display. It is not an unusual thing for nations and the competitors who represent them to show their pride in circumstances such as these. Those who have closely followed the men's soccer event would have seen how the unexpected brilliance of the Iraqi soccer team rekindled the pride and morale of a nation moving from the throes of dictatorship through the terrifying chaos of bomb blasts and, God wills it, to the tranquility of order.

In a season when nations celebrate the number of medals they have won as they show justifiable pride, and politicians campaign for public office proudly presenting themselves to their compatriots as the best option at the polls, the word of God cautions and invites us to differentiate between the overestimation of self-worth that is arrogance and the justifiable celebration of hard-earned achievement that is pride. In undiluted frankness, the

wisdom of the book of Sirach challenges us to take a critical look at the way we view ourselves as individuals, as Christians, and as men and women of the twenty-first century.

“My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts. Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God” (Sirach 3:17–18).

And Christ Jesus, who is the Wisdom of God itself, confirms this teaching in the Gospel: “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor. . . . Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place. . .” (Luke 14:8–9).

Hubris comes from the mistaken and unexamined assumption that one is the most distinguished, the most outstanding personality in the pack. The one who calls himself the greatest probably does so because he has not made a sufficiently intelligent inquiry as to what others can do and what they have in fact done. Those who have a lot to celebrate by way of achievement must avoid the kind of attitude that looks down on those who have little or nothing to display.

How do I celebrate my achievement without looking down on others? How do I nurse my aspirations, as legitimate as they can be, without falling victim to the stubborn myth of entitlement?

First, I must see God as the greatest. I must see the image of God in every human being, even in the one who may not be as talented as I am, or who may never accomplish what I have accomplished. For while our achievements may be very important, and our contributions to civilization eminently laudable, what counts is the dignity of our common humanity and the fundamental equality that pertains to it.

Second, I must learn to thank God for what I am and for what I have accomplished. For without God we would have been nothing. In fact, we would have no being at all. Without God we would accomplish nothing. The talents we have, the life and energy in us, we did not create. Even the greatest genius is not the product of self-creation. He or she is a creature of God. The admonition the Apostle Paul addressed to the Corinthians is addressed to us, too: “[N]o individual among you must become filled with his own importance and make comparisons, to another’s detriment. Who made you so important? What have you got that was not given to you? And if it was given to you, why are you boasting as though it were your own?” (1 Cor 4:6–7).

Third, rather than use personal achievement to diminish the humanity in the other person, I should use it to enhance the beauty of that humanity. If you are up do not keep others down. If you are up it is because you have been placed there by Divine Providence. The same

Divine Providence intends to use you as an instrument to bring others up. Granted, some people cannot be helped up because they find comfort in mediocrity. But there are people who are striving for excellence even though they have no means or insufficient means to attain the excellence they so much desire. By using what we have achieved to help others would be working to reduce or eradicate the unhealthy rivalry of a pull-him-down syndrome. By using what we are, what we have, and what we have accomplished to help others up, we would be like God who, in the words of the Response to the Responsorial Psalm of this Mass, uses his goodness to provide for and to empower those who are deprived (cf. Ps 68).

Our God reveals himself to us in the words of Scripture as a God who, though high above, lifts up the lowly. The psalmist understood this very well when he wrote:

High above all nations is the Lord,
above the heavens his glory.
Who is like the Lord, our God,
who has risen on high to his throne
yet stoops from the heights to look down,
to look down upon heaven and earth?

From the dust he lifts up the lowly,
from his misery he raises the poor
to set him in the company of princes,
yes, with the princes of his people. (Ps 113).

This is the same God who personally introduces himself to us in the humanity of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ as a God who assumed the status of a slave to transform the slave into a prince (cf. Phil 2:6). Christ, who, in the words of the letter to the Colossians, has primacy in everything, showed the human family the face of a God who was willing to take the lowliest position so as to extinguish the flame of the passion of mutually destructive rivalry that sin brought into the world.

Today, the word of God, by exhorting us to humility, challenges us to recognize the folly of a self-affirmation that annihilates other selves and to embrace the wisdom of a self-effacement that elevates humanity, the self-effacement of Christ which every Christian worth the name ought to imitate.

For the recession of unhealthy rivalry, and for the emergence in our world of a civilization of love driven by respect for every member of the human family, let us pray: May the body of Christ which we shall receive

in a few moments at this Mass give us the courage, the inspiration and the strength to conform our minds to the same Christ in the self-effacement that elevates. Through the power of this Eucharist, may we all become agents of the civilization of love. **N V**