

What: Weekly Catholic Athletes for Christ message
Why: To keep our faith & athletics intersected
Who: All Catholic High Schools across the Diocese
From: Fr. Zach Edgar, Diocesan CAC Chaplain

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GREETINGS, RAIDERS!

It's a new week! Hope it's been a good one for you. As Fall Sports wind down, we keep hopes up for the seasons ahead. When things are out of our direct control (which is most everything in life), I cannot encourage you more to surrender whatever anxieties you have about these things to Jesus. "Lord, take *this* and put it at the foot of Your Cross. It's bigger than me. I need You. Help me." ***This week we ask for the gifts of our baptism to be renewed and deepened within us. Let's pray for an increase in hope, so we won't give up in tough times.***

Act of Hope:

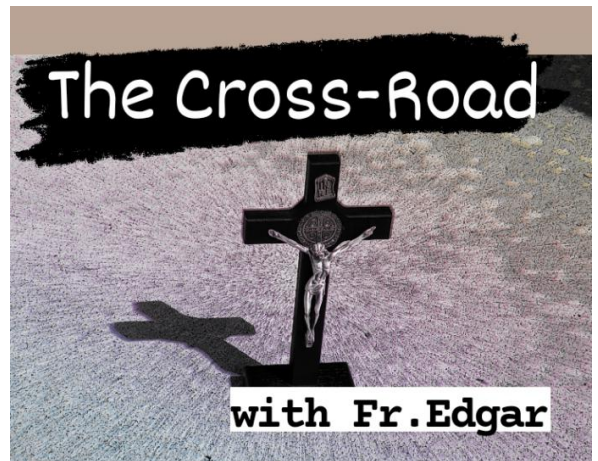
O Lord God, I hope by Your grace for the pardon of all my sins, and after life here to gain eternal happiness because You have promised it who are infinitely powerful, faithful, kind, and merciful. In this hope I intend to live and die. Amen.

This coming Sunday, we get "back to the basics." You've probably heard or used the phrase "starting at square one." Starting over, or, better said, new beginnings, are a part of life. When I was transitioning from 8th grade to high school in 1999, the song *Closing Time* by Semisonic was relatively new. The lyric "every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end" has always stuck with me, and I think I appreciate it more and more as time goes on. And as hard as some transitions will be, there is always one constant: **Jesus**.

"Square one" in the spiritual life is what we're given at the moment of our baptism: original sin and any personal sin are completely destroyed, and, at that moment, the soul is perfect and ready for heaven. Our baptism makes heaven possible. The supernatural gifts of Faith, Hope, and Love (or Charity), are God's very life, His grace, *poured into our hearts* (Romans 5:5). Those three "theological virtues" are square one in the spiritual life. What's even cooler is, this week, we're hearing from St. Paul's oldest letter, First Thessalonians. So this really is "square one" in his ministry of writing to these fledgling Catholic communities between the Holy Land and Rome. He writes: *We (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy) give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God, how you were chosen. For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.*

In almost every case, St. Paul would follow up his personal visit to a city where he preached with a letter "checking-in." This letter to the people of Thessalonica was Paul's first written "follow-up" and is dated to within 20 years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. But enough of the history lesson; what St. Paul sees alive in these people that he has preached to, and that St. Timothy would have recently visited as well, is the faith, love, and hope of Christ. He calls them "chosen" - which is a word, along with "elect", that describes those who have been initiated into the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, through Baptism. This makes us members of the team, if you will.

Sharing the Gospel was clearly more powerful than Paul teaching any other ordinary lesson - the Holy Spirit convicted the hearts of these new Christians who listened and said yes to the Gospel. Everywhere in the public ministry of Jesus and the apostles, the people who have had a conversion are



the ones who are truly listening. These are people who were clearly on fire with Faith. *Everybody* that is baptized has that same *potential*. We all too rarely feel like we're on top of the mountain of the spiritual life. Why is that? What is holding us back from fulfilling our potential in using the Faith, Hope, and Love that we were permanently marked with at our baptism? The short answer is: our sins are holding us back. Sin kills the divine Love (or Charity) that we received at Baptism. Confession restores it. We will be recognized on the day of our death as belonging to God if that supernatural Love of our baptism is still alive in us. If we throw that charity away through serious sin - that we're never sorry for - we choose eternal separation from God.

Before the word "Catholic" was coined by St. Ignatius of Antioch in the early Church, disciples of Jesus were known as the followers of "The Way." The Gospel teaching was simple: there are two ways - the way to Life and the way to Death. Jesus Christ is the Son of God and is the way to Life. He came among us, preached, was crucified, and on the third day rose, and is alive at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. The "two ways" are really the "square one" of Apostolic times. This was the starting point for St. Paul and so many others of the church's early bishops to tell people about Jesus, the one Savior of the world.

We have to let God destroy the sins of our life so that we can be totally His, both now and later. Confession is what gets us back to the place we need to be to "start over." We need to pray for the Holy Spirit to come to us *in power* and *with conviction* so that we don't downplay or explain away things that are, in fact, serious sins. The Lord came precisely to *free us* from our sins, and instituted the Sacrament of Baptism and the other Sacraments to show us He wants to help us be free. To deepen the three "theological virtues" in our life, Jesus gives us His Mercy through Confession, which helps move us back towards that moment of perfection of our baptism, and He gives us His very life in Holy Communion in the Eucharist to deepen our Faith, Hope, and Love.

The biggest struggle I see today as a former teacher and coach is a lack of hope. People get to a point where they feel so far away from God, or they know they have had serious addictions for years and years that they just give up hope. But, some of the greatest moments in my priesthood have been helping bring back those who have been away from confession for years - even decades. And baptizing people much older than me, including an 88-year old who served in the Marines in Korea! My own dad wasn't baptized until he was 54, when I was halfway through seminary. It is never, ever too late. And as I've told many of my students and athletes as a confessor, I don't care what "it" is - I just want to help you get rid of "it", because that's not you. God sees the highest potential in all of us - what we would look like free from sin and all its effects. But we've got to be moldable and coachable to let him take us there. Because everybody that is in heaven has let God make them into a Saint, the perfect version of themselves. All the garbage of sin has been stripped away, and those souls are finally who they were always meant to be, back to the perfect Faith, Hope, and Charity they had the moment of their baptism.

So what's our motivation? The conviction that will come from the Holy Spirit if we ask. How do we get there? We very simply pray for an increase in the baptismal gifts of Faith, Hope, and Charity every day, and get to confession if we've committed grave sin. What does it cost? Just our pride. Being able to ask for help when we need it doesn't have to be hard. At least not with God. He gives us His **infinite** Mercy, so **there's no way we could ever begin to pay Him back**. He then wants us to be generous, to give freely in our own lives to those who can't repay us. These are the works of Mercy. Living out our baptismal gifts is as simple as carrying out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Without enumerating all 14 of them, here are some that I'd challenge you to incorporate into your life this week.

Works of faith: counsel those with doubts, instruct those who don't know our faith

Works of hope: pray for the living & the dead, comfort the afflicted and be the face of Jesus for those who need Him most.

Works of charity: give food & clothes to the needy, forgive offenses willingly.

It's easy to stay on the sidelines and feel hypocritical because we are all sinners, but St. Peter told us to "always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is inside you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Lord, help us to be good witnesses to Your gifts of Faith, Hope, and Love!

Action Items: Do you know the date and place of your baptism? Find out! Celebrate the day.

Pray 3 Hail Marys every day for an increase in Faith, Hope, & Charity. God can't run out of these. Ask!