

## Mass of the Holy Spirit

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As I look out at you student athletes, I am reminded of the recent Olympic games. While watching the games, I heard a TV commentator talk about the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which were hosted by Hitler and viewed by him as an opportunity to demonstrate to all the world the alleged “supremacy” of the so-called “master race” over presumed “inferior” persons of color, ethnicity and non-Nordic cultures.

Nazi hopes were dramatically dashed by the great African American track and field star, Jesse Owens. Owens won four gold medals. In the long jump, he defeated the second-place German and Nazi “great white hope,” Karl “Lutz” Long. When Jesse stepped up to the winner’s podium, Hitler angrily stormed out of the stadium; when Owens stepped down from the podium with the gold medallion around his neck, Lutz put his arm around Jesse’s shoulders and the Black American and Blond German walked arm-in-arm off the field. This simple gesture of admiration and friendship was an act of inexplicable courage and daring at the time. Owens later said, “you can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn’t be plating on the twenty-four carat friendship that I felt from Lutz at that moment.”

More recently, the African American Mayor of Newark, Cory Booker, pushed his security team aside and ran into a flaming building to save his neighbor. He said afterwards, “we have to fight ... the narcissism and me-ism that erode our moral culture. We can’t put shallow celebrity before core decency. We have to have a deeper faith in our human spirit.”

USF Professor Julio Moreno recently sent me an autobiographical essay about his harrowing passage from the grinding poverty and brutal violence of rural El Salvador during the 1980 Civil War to the United States, where he lived without documents for over a decade. He successfully struggled against overwhelming odds to support his family and ultimately graduate from college and earn his Ph.D. It is a compelling story of unparalleled courage, hope, self-sacrifice and determination. This is the story of countless numbers of undocumented brothers and sisters in this country today.

You may have less dramatic but equally compelling stories about our human spirit at its best. My point is simple: we human beings are capable of doing what is remarkably noble and selfless; we may also do what is petty and selfish. We can do the right thing, even at great cost to ourselves; or we can ruthlessly pursue our own gratification, no matter the cost to others.

I believe with the Gospel that the human spirit at its best – whether in “Lutz” Long, Cory Booker, Julio Moreno or someone you know – is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised would be with us forever. Our first reading insists that when we act according to “the better angels of our human nature, “ we are responding to the promptings of the good Spirit, the Holy Spirit; when we act from base, selfish motives, we are seduced by the bad spirit, the Spirit of evil. The reading tells us what we already know: two forces are battling for our hearts and minds. Those forces are diametrically opposed to each other; we cannot follow both at the same time. At any moment, we are free to follow either the human/holy Spirit of God or the inhumane/evil Spirit. However you choose – and choose you will – your choice will make all difference for you and for others in your life. Today, we pray that we may all choose wisely and that our lives may bear witness to the power of God’s Holy Spirit abiding within us.

One final observation: the first reading talks only about the effects of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit is like the wind that blows across our lower campus. We never see that wind but we feel its effects and we know it is there. We cannot see the Holy Spirit but we certainly feel the effects. This Spirit is not unique to Christians. Let’s be clear about that. In fact, our sacred texts clearly teach that wherever there is love, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness, truthfulness, there the Spirit is at work. Those qualities come from somewhere. They cannot come from nowhere. Recall the ancient Latin chant, “ubi caritas et amor, ibi Deus est” – wherever there is goodness and love, there is God. We do not see God but we certainly feel the effects of God’s presence in the love and the goodness we experience and share – the very love that makes our lives worth living.

At this celebration let us reaffirm our desire to be guided by the human/Holy Spirit whom we invoke at this liturgy, and let us further pledge to support and encourage one another’s efforts to be responsive to the Holy/human Spirit of truth who is with us and in us now and forever.