

## LIMITATIONS - WHO DECIDES?

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*Text: There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance. 1Cor.13:7*

You know, it's hard to think and come up with material to share with you. Meaningful stuff I mean, and what is meaningful for me may not be meaningful for you. But with all that has been happening around Covid restrictions, I just could not get out of my mind the idea of limitations. So many, for so long, and so difficult to follow, at times.

I am quite sure that many of us have felt, both in recent times, and throughout our life, the feeling that we are at the limit of our endurance, or our strength, or our patience, even our faith. And there are undoubtedly some limits that we can't go beyond - we can only run so fast, or swim so far, or stay awake so long. Life is, after all, living within limits. To be human is to be limited.

So, we know there are limits we can't do anything about. Even the best trained athlete has limits. Some limitations can't be overcome. I can't help but think of the A.A. prayer which, with a few modifications, could read "Help me to accept the limitations that I cannot change, the courage to go beyond the ones I can, and the wisdom to know the difference".

We do know that there ARE limits that we can do something about - and that's what I'd like to talk about today, along with the question as to just who decides what the limits are that we place upon ourselves.

As I thought about this, a vivid picture came to mind, a memory from over 20 years ago. I'm always amazed that some of my best recollections are from long ago, and not about last week. A sign of my age, I am told.

The memory is of my experience of a remarkable example of limitations, so remarkable that the memory remains clearly with me even today. I also recall sharing this experience with you some time in the past, and I wonder if my recall will be as complete as it was then. But it fits in so well with my talk of limitations so, bear with me as I share it again, to the best of my ability - here goes...

Behind the tall, stone walls of a medium-security Federal prison in Kingston, past the guard towers and the string of chain-link fences topped with barbed wire, I attended, with a fellow clergy person, their 7<sup>th</sup> EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE'S OLYMPIAD.

The place - Collins Bay Penitentiary.

The exceptional people - mentally disabled residents of institutions such as Smith's Falls, at that time.

The Olympiad - simply what the name suggests, a series of competitive sports events.

For two days I was privileged to be part of an experience that went beyond the walls and barriers and limitations of physical and mental disabilities, and criminal records, and social structures, and ethnic differences, of age, and sex, and religion. Instead, I saw people with one kind of need - reaching out to people with another kind of need. I saw the unwanted in society (because of what they had done) reaching out to the unwanted in society (because of their disabilities).

Each of the competitors was made the responsibility of an inmate. He or she was assigned a Godbrother, an inmate, who would stick with him, or her, like glue throughout the two-day event - for everything! Surprisingly to me at first, the system worked. A hardened criminal leading a mentally challenged kid by the hand, making sure he or she has their name entered in each event, shaking their hand or hugging them even when he or she came in dead last in a 6-person race, building confidence and building a friendship based on trust.

The athletes, ranging in age from 16-60, were a picture of smiles caught up in their own laughter. They never seemed to notice that they were inside prison walls and if they did, they didn't care, no more than they cared about the colour of the skin of the hand they were holding.

Everything ran like clockwork. All the events were planned for and organized by the inmates, starting a year in advance. The races were timed, the jumps were measured, the meals were prepared and served by them. They provided the music, which was very lively, and to which all those who wished danced during the lunchtime break. And the races were run as I've never seen them run before, with every ounce of strength and determination, cheered on and encouraged by the spectators (mostly inmates), with their Godfathers either waiting at the finish line or running alongside supporting all the way. What struck me most was that they were all winners! And they knew it! They knew it because their Godfathers let them know it. They knew it because they were not only allowed to go beyond what appeared to be their limitations, but they were encouraged to do so.

And what of the prisoners - many of them repeat offenders serving long-term sentences - the undesirables of society? Where were they in all of this? All that I can say is that for two days they were treated as normal, and acceptable, and human! I saw trust in the eyes of the somewhat misshapen but enthusiastic athlete as he walked around the field with his hand in the hand of the big, burly con. I saw compassion and tenderness and yes, pride, in the eyes of the Godfather, as he escorted his charge to the area where he or she was going to compete, or for an ice cream or to the outdoor toilet.

People doing what they weren't supposed to do - running when they could barely walk - being compassionate when they were supposed to be hard-boiled - going beyond their limitations - leaving with me, both then and now, with lasting impressions- and a new awareness about prisons - whether that be by bars and locked doors or by accident o birth.

What about us here, in Carlisle and Kilbride!

Could it be that too often, the limitations we place on ourselves are self-inflicted, rather than the results of an accident, or an illness? Limitations that often remain concealed, even from ourselves?

It may be that sometimes we hear words, but we do not listen to the silences. To understand requires active listening, between the lines, deep into the human heart, into the solitude that is God. Not to hear the silences is to miss the Word beyond words. Such a deafness can happen when our mouths are so full of words and programs and justifications that our inward ears cannot pick up silent cries for help, or quietly exuberant shouts of celebration, or the voiceless promise of new things being born. "Do you not yet understand?" asked Jesus.

We also limit ourselves in our seeing, we can be blind. We look, and look, but sometimes we cannot see the essential. Vision requires imagination, to see the invisible potential, the hidden goodness, the divine purpose masked behind the obvious. Adult blindness can be the lack of child-like vision. "Having eyes, do you not see and having ears do you not hear?"

Deafness, the kind that Jesus speak about, can also result in a resistance to new ways. It is an inability to dream, to envision and to hope. It is uncomfortable around the unexpected.

Each of us has to learn what to do with our own situations. Do we let it govern us or do we let our mind go beyond the limitations? Like those inmates, in prison, but not imprisoned, at least for the time of the Olympiad.

So I would ask are we, in the Church, are we imprisoned by the walls of our building (that is, when we allowed to return there) or are we set free by them? Do we limit ourselves in some way or other? If so, what can we do? Is there anything to learn from my story of these long years ago?

The disabled athletes ran with all they had. As far as they were concerned, they were running the Olympics. But they unquestionably had limitations!

Godbrothers and inmates - reaching out with compassion and tenderness. As far as they were concerned, they were just human beings. But they unquestionably had limitations!

Limitations.....you decide.....who says that we are limited?

You.....me.....the Church?.....Who decides/

Scripture:

THERE IS NOTHING LOVE CANNOT FACE  
THERE IS NO LIMIT TO ITS FAITH  
ITS HOPE  
AND ITS ENDURANCE.

Prayer:

Dear God, help us to accept the limitations that we cannot change, the courage to go beon the ones we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen