

## Racing for Paradise Fr. Bohdan Hladio

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*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? . . . And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty . . . But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (I Cor. 9: 24 - 27)*

He was taller than I, and walked in a loose-jointed sort of way. We were sitting on the grass stretching before the race. He came over and sat next to us.

After getting acquainted I asked, "So, how long have you been running?"

"A few months" he replied.

"How do you think you'll do?"

"I think I have a good chance of winning" he said confidently.

I've seen stranger things happen, but the goal of someone who's been training for only a few months is usually just to finish comfortably. I knew some of the runners there that day - they were well-trained and fast.

We talked a bit more about our training and expected finishing times, finished our warm-ups, and were off.

After completing the race I did my warm-down run, and was stretching when I saw him cross the finish line. He was a bit shaky, breathing hard, clearly having difficulty.

His disappointing performance was due to three simple mistakes. He trusted his feelings; he didn't conform his training to an objective standard (a stop-watch or mile-post); and he wasn't properly prepared.

These same mistakes are often made by Orthodox Christians in their spiritual life.

**1. We feel good about ourselves!** "Of course, I'm not perfect, but I go to Church . . . not as much as I should, but I'm so busy . . . and anyway, I'm better than most of the people I know - they don't go to Church at all! And I'm not like those hypocrites who go to Church every Sunday just for show . . ."

Rather than look honestly at myself, consider my own weaknesses and attend to my own sins, how often do I just ignore them, smug and self-satisfied with the pleasant disposition or natural gifts God has given me? Such an approach would never get anyone to the Olympics, and it certainly won't get us into heaven. It's no coincidence that the Lenten prayer *par excellence*, the prayer of St. Ephraim, says "Grant me to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother. . .".

This isn't to say that we shouldn't have a healthy sense of self-worth, as creatures made in God's image and unconditionally loved by Him. But if we think we can fulfill the teachings of Christ without ever experiencing a real sense of sinfulness or failure regarding our own personal ascetic struggle we're simply deluding ourselves.

**2. We don't conform ourselves to an objective standard.** "I know I'm not supposed to eat meat or dairy products during lent, but isn't the main thing to be a good person? Just because I don't fast doesn't mean I'm a bad person. I know lots of people who fast, but are simply intolerable!"

Christianity is not a "touchy-feely" religion. We have an objective standard of conduct to which we adhere. "Do not murder", "Honour your parents", "Do not steal", "Love your enemies", "Feed the hungry", "Pray", "Worship", "Read the Scriptures", "Confine sexual activity to a monogamous, heterosexual, loving marriage which has been blessed in

Church”, etc. Christianity is a faith of commitment and sacrifice. Trying to meet the standard set for us by Christ and the Church is a difficult struggle.

Yet how often we see people trying to “lower the bar”. People who want to be excused (e.g., “it’s OK to eat steak on Friday night because the liturgical day begins at sundown so it’s really Saturday”) rather than forgiven (“forgive me, I sinned by breaking the fast”). Using the metaphor of spiritual life as a race, the result of living a “Christian life” according to personal subjective rather than biblical objective standards is exactly what happened to my friend in the race. We “crash and burn”.

**3. We aren’t properly prepared.** Certain people argue that self-renunciation, abstinence in food, reading scripture instead of watching TV, etc. are not that important. If we lived in an age where temptation was minimal this hypothesis might merit consideration. But in fact we live in a society where temptation presents itself on every virtually every screen, page or billboard we see and every song or conversation we hear. For some of us fighting the temptation to sin is more difficult than running a marathon. And how do we train to fight temptation? By asceticism (prayer, fasting, almsgiving, etc). The word asceticism means “exercise”. Strengthening our will or self-control is just like strengthening our body. It takes exercise. This is what Lent and Christian discipline are all about.

There’s only one difference between a spiritual race and a physical one. Only one runner wins an earthly race. Everyone can be a winner in the race for paradise.

*“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.” (I Cor. 9:24)*