

I expect some of you watched at least part of the World Series that ended a couple days ago, and perhaps still more of you regularly watch football games on weekends. Sports like baseball and football, even though definitely team sports, readily allow individuals to stand out as star players, whether it be for hitting home runs or throwing or catching passes for touchdowns. There is another sport that doesn't attract a huge number of fans any more but that can tell us something important about life. I'm talking about eight-oar rowing. A friend recently gave me a book titled *The Boys in the Boat*, about the young men from the University of Washington who won the gold medal in that sport at the 1936 Olympics, much to the chagrin of Hitler and other Nazi leaders who expected the German team to win.

Now in that sport, it does make a difference just where an individual rower is seated. The one in the bow position (that is, nearest the finish line) has to be not only strong (like all the others) but also technically proficient, capable of pulling a perfect oar for stroke after stroke, sometimes for as far as four miles. The three rowers in the middle (the four, five, and six seats) are often called "the engine room," for they are regularly the biggest and strongest persons in the boat. The rower in the eight seat is called "the stroke oar," seated face-to-face with the coxswain and having to row precisely at the rate and with the degree of power called for by the coxswain, who in turn must know when to increase the rate, perhaps from thirty to thirty-four strokes per minute, depending on where the competing boats are and how fast they are going.

But if there are these subtle but important differences among the rowers, there is something more important that they have in common. Perhaps no other sport calls for such selflessness, for the team effort is what most matters. As the author of that book about the crew from the University of Washington puts it, "each man or woman in the boat must recognize his or her place in the fabric of the crew, accept it, and accept the others as they are. It is an exquisite thing when it all comes together in just the right way. The intense bonding and the

sense of exhilaration that results from it are what many oarsmen row for.... But it takes young men or women of extraordinary character ... to pull it off.”

After that lengthy introduction, I now want to relate all of this to what brings you here today and to what we heard in our first reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, for I think there is a close and important connection. That reading began with the words: “We, though many, are one Body in Christ and individually parts of one another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them.” Paul then lists some of the different gifts. There’s no need to repeat the details of his list, but let us keep in mind that all of us, and indeed all the rest of your colleagues who work for the Archdiocese of Washington, have different gifts, and the key thing is not to think that those of any one individual are the crucial ones. Not at all. Just as in the sport of eight-oar rowing, it is a matter of all working together, harmoniously and with mutual respect, toward a common goal.

We can see this in today’s saint, Martin de Porres. Here was a man who definitely did not stand out in his humble, even disgraceful beginnings, in Lima, Peru. He was born out of wedlock to a father who was a Spanish knight and a mother who was a freed black slave. When Martin was born, the father was so disconcerted at seeing that the infant had the complexion and features of his mother that the father wouldn’t even allow his name to appear on the birth certificate, meaning that Martin was illegitimate in the eyes of the state. And not only of the state but of the Church as well, for his illegitimacy prevented him from becoming a full-fledged Dominican lay brother until a special dispensation had been received, and that took a long while to come through. Before then, and for many years, Martin was a member of the Dominican Third Order and spent much of his time performing the most menial tasks. But he took very seriously the kind of teaching we heard in the final half of today’s reading from Romans, where

Paul writes: “Love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal.” As Pope John XXIII said in his homily at the canonization of St. Martin in 1962, Martin “never failed to find excuses for the faults of others.... He made every effort to bring sinners to repentance. He nursed the sick devotedly, procuring food, clothing, and medicine for those too poor to buy them.”

For these and other reasons, we rightly honor Martin de Porres as one of the canonized saints, but he would have been the first to recognize and admit that the gifts he had and used so well were not necessarily the gifts that others have. We need many kinds of people serving in the Church, including each of you with your own particular responsibilities. The main thing is to use your own gifts as faithfully as you can, fulfilling your own duties in a way that doesn't seek to bring glory to yourself but instead helps bring growth and support to the Church, especially the Church here in the Archdiocese of Washington. I hope that your time together here at the abbey for this day of retreat, with all of you rowing together in the only race that ultimately matters, will lead you ever closer to the finish line of God's kingdom.