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Let us...persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.

-- Now that the Olympics are underway, we've heard a number of stories of athletes who've overcome many obstacles to get where they are. One is a swimmer named Yusra Mardini.

-- Originally from Syria, her Christian family had to flee during the chaos in her land. They found themselves on a boat in the Aegean Sea when the motor quit. She and a couple other people who were strong swimmers got in the water to guide that boat to safety.

-- She is competing under the Olympic flag as a refugee, as nine other athletes are doing this year. She didn't medal, but she did demonstrate great perseverance to get to this point.

-- One US athlete came to our country with his family as a refugee from the troubled country of Eritrea when he was 10 years old. Thirty one years later, Meb Keflezigi is in his third Olympics, running the marathon at age 41. He was a silver medalist in that event in 2004.

-- He has persevered in his training over a long period of time, and I can appreciate his efforts, having run that event at a much more modest level. He's had the fire in his belly for many years.

-- Most Olympic athletes have a similar "fire in the belly." They are focused on their mission. So was Jesus Christ, though his mission was not the ancient Olympics. It was proclaiming the word of God.

-- He knew its transforming power. He also knew that not everyone would want to hear that Word, especially if it meant they would have to change their ways.

-- But he persevered in his mission, even to the cross. That's why the author of Hebrews told his followers to focus on Jesus. That advice is still as relevant as it was then.

-- For it is easy, even for those of us who profess to be followers of Jesus, to be distracted. The pursuit of money and the security we think it brings... the need to be thought well of by everyone around us... the temptation to manipulate people to satisfy our needs...can all distract us from following the true message of Jesus Christ.

-- The Lord asks us to have the same focus upon his word as the Olympic athlete has on his or her goal. The obstacles we have to overcome may not seem as great as those of Yusra Mardini or Meb Keflezigi, but they are still significant.

-- In most cases, following the way of Jesus Christ is more like a marathon than a sprint. It requires perseverance. A wife who cares for a husband with Alzheimers knows this. A young mother who balances her work with caring for three children (e.g., Kerry Walsh Jennings, to give a Catholic Olympian example) knows this.

-- All of us face particular challenges in staying faithful to the mission God has for us in life. But we also have God's grace. And we have the example of our own "cloud of witnesses" who have shown faithfulness to God's love. Some of them are great saints of the Church; others are people we may have known personally or are cherished in our family memories.

-- May we call upon them to give us strength to live up to the challenges we face in being faithful to the message of Jesus Christ. For not everyone will support us in this task.

-- But God's grace will be there for us, if we don't give up. May the grace of perseverance abound for each of us, so that we will press forward in running the race that leads us to our eternal home with Jesus Christ.