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-- During the past couple of weeks several thousand athletes have been competing in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. They have come from all parts of the world for this great event. But they didn't just show up: they had to qualify, to meet certain standards.

-- In order to do this, they have trained hard. Most of them have trained for years to reach this goal. They didn't just take a casual interest in their chosen sport; they went into it full force. That's the route they all took to Rio. That was their narrow gate.

-- Their stories may help us to understand what Jesus says in the gospel about entering through the narrow gate. God offers salvation and the gift of life to everyone. It's not reserved for people from one nation or ethnic group, or from one particular part of the world.

-- But there is a specific gate into God's life. We have to accept God's invitation to new life. It's not something we get by osmosis, kind of like those people who heard Jesus' message but went on with their lives as if it didn't matter expected.

-- And it's not something we acquire simply by becoming a member of a group. The fact that we accept the label of "Catholic" does not guarantee we will accept the invitation to new life.

-- And the fact that we make a one-time pledge to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior is not enough, either. That pledge has to be renewed continually in our life and verified by how we treat one another.

-- Yes, there is that narrow gate, which each of us individually must enter. That gate, as St. Anselm says, is the gate of love. We must love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. It is the great commandment Jesus gave us in the scriptures.

-- Fortunately, there is one big difference between the gate to the Olympics and the gate to God's eternal life. All the training in the world

would never have made me into a world-class sprinter, even in my prime. My genetic makeup wasn't meant for sprinting.

-- And, even in the events for which I was more genetically-inclined such as distance running, I doubt whether I could have broken into the very top tier (unless I magically had become a woman).

-- God's gift, though, is not dependent upon any of those native abilities or other limiting factors. It is offered to all of us without distinction. But we have to receive the gift with gratitude. We cannot think we can earn it by doing certain things which will obligate God to reward us.

-- One thing I remember learning when I was young was that, as human beings, we can never be absolutely 100% sure of our ultimate salvation, no matter who we are. That would probably contradict what you may hear from some of the popular TV evangelists.

-- Sure, we can hope we are on the right track, and we never doubt God's desire that we all would be saved. Even saints often wondered about their salvation. And God respects our freedom, even if we get to the point of rejecting his love for eternity.

-- May each of us pray that we will pursue that narrow path, the path of love of God and neighbor. For God welcomes all who are willing to trod the path that leads to everlasting happiness. But we have to take that path. We have to enter through the narrow gate.