

**Sacred Heart Church**  
**Oxford, PA.**  
**February 25-26, 2006**

For me the most memorable moment at this year's Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy was not an event held at one of the sports venues. It was a quiet moment away from cameras and reporters in which U.S. Speed skater Joey Cheek announced he was donating the \$40,000.00 bonus money, the value of his gold and silver medals, to a non-profit humanitarian organization called "*Right to Play*." Founded in 1994 by Olympic gold medalist Norwegian speed skater, Johann Olaf Koss, "*Right to Play*" helps children in undeveloped countries. Joey Cheek earmarked his donation to help children in the Darfur region of Sudan. He subsequently challenged corporate Olympic sponsors to match his charity. Their response tallied nearly \$400,000.00. Here is an Olympic athlete with two small medals and one enormous heart of gold.

He embodies the meaning of the Hosea prophecy in the first reading and the teaching of Jesus in the Mark gospel story.

Hosea is an 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel. In the few verses proclaimed today he uses the bridegroom image in speaking of Yahweh's efforts to stem Israel's infidelity. Referring to the exodus desert experience Hosea prophesies that Israel (the bride of Yahweh) must be led again into the desert where, alone and free of distractions she will again hear the voice of her spouse. A renewal of the covenant will be a converted Israel, gifted or espoused with right and justice, love and mercy and fidelity. Yahweh will be the guiding presence nurturing these virtues.

In the gospel, Mark identifies Jesus as a new groom. During the time that Jesus is present in his earthly ministry, the old Mosaic practice of fasting is inappropriate. The question the Pharisees ask reflects the tension between old Jewish customs and the new religious practices emerging through Jesus who ushers in the new reign of God. Jesus responds to this tension with the image of a new cloth attached to an old garment. Just as it will tear away with the shrinking in the first wash, so will old and worn wineskins burst under the pressure of a new fermenting wine. Jesus is teaching that a new Spirit-guided covenant will have its own forms of expression.

St. Mark is teaching his community that Jesus did not bring a new religion of laws. Rather, he came with a vital new spirit. It did not take long to see that the old and the new did not match. Mark is evangelizing his community how to keep the gospel central to their new Christian lives and not the tensions with old religious practices. In this respect Mark is a voice for encouraging his community to develop a willingness to let go of being de-focused on tensions in the community in order to stay focused on always rediscovering something new about their covenant with Jesus.

For the next three days I am here to help you do just that. My name is Paul Mast – a priest of the Diocese of Wilmington, DE. My presence among you is to help you get ready to go into the desert of your heart for the forty days of Lent. In the spiritual life the desert is an inner place where we filter out the voices that speak to our heart. By simplifying our life through prayer, fasting and almsgiving we learn to attune the heart to the voice of the Holy Spirit who graces us with the fruit of hope, joy, happiness, contentment, satisfaction, delight, peace. The fruit of the evil spirit is just the opposite; despair, sadness, discontentment, dissatisfaction, doubt, conflict, and turmoil.

Last week, different voices of Olympic athletes spoke from different hearts. The voice of Joey Cheek spoke from a heart that was humble, compassionate, caring, other-centered. The voices of Shani Davis and Chad Hedrick spoke from hearts that were angry, proud, arrogant and self-centered. All three were part of the U.S. speed skating team. All three won gold and silver medals. But, only one displayed a heart of gold. Like these athletes we all have different voices competing for our attention. The spiritual question is: which voice will you give your heart to?

I believe Joey Cheek answered that question long before he arrived in Torino, Italy. While other athletes thought small and went only to win medals, he thought big and went to be a philanthropist. He modeled his hero, Johann Koss, and gave away the value of his medals. In the end he became a hero and was selected by his teammates to carry the U.S. flag in the closing ceremony. This is how a heart of gold touched other hearts.

In one respect Joey Cheek was to the U.S. Olympic team in the 21<sup>st</sup> century what Hosea was to unconverted Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and what St. Mark was to his post-resurrection community. They are all voices for converting hearts to a covenant, a gospel way of life that is life-giving for others.

This parish retreat is entitled *“The Oxford Project at Sacred Heart.”* I want to thank the students of Oxford High School for the inspiration for this title. But, while your project focuses only on yourselves this retreat will use a camcorder to record the faces and voices of Sacred Heart in Oxford and connect them with the faces and voices of Sacred Heart in Biloxi, MS. Before Hurricane Katrina they were a parish of 1500 families. Now they have just over 400 families. Before Katrina they had over 500 children in their school and religious education programs. Now they have only 115 children in the parish. Before Katrina they had five Masses in their own church. Now they have two Masses in a local Baptist Church and one Mass in a Methodist Church. To make matters worse last week their pastor, Fr. Bob Higginbotham was operated on for a ruptured appendix.

During this retreat I will invite you to go into the desert of Lent and fall in love with Jesus again by falling in love with the people of Sacred Heart in Biloxi. Let them be the beneficiaries of your renewed covenant with God. And through your prayer, fasting and charity may you be new wine for them as they continue to rebuild their lives and faith community from the ashes of the storm.

Each evening we will gather and get still with centering prayer. There will be singing, scripture, preaching, witnessing and rituals. In preaching I will open the book of my life and share some chapters and verses of my own unconverted heart. I was invited into the desert for conversion. I went there kicking and screaming, but the good news about ongoing conversion of the heart is that we always have new stories to tell. Invite an inactive Catholic or a non-Catholic to come with you.

Hosea, St. Mark and Joey Cheek all had other-centered hearts. You can have that kind of heart to. My prayer during these three days is that the compassionate heart of Christ in them will get into you and then out of you and into the hearts of your brothers and sisters at Sacred Heart in Biloxi, MS. Begin to think big this Lent. Think the way God thinks when calling us into the desert of conversion so we have more of God's heart to share with others when the forty day desert journey is over and the fifty days of celebrating Easter begins.

Amen.