

## Chapter 9

# The Last Lap

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When you have arrived at your second major league pastorate, important board or agency post, or college presidency, you have entered the last lap of the race. By now the field of contestants for the crown has been drastically-reduced. Some of the original competitors possessed talent, but lacked endurance, so they dropped out. Others had the endurance, but no speed, and have now been lapped by the front runners. You can be certain that anyone who is still in contention at the 1/16 pole has something going for him: ability, dogged persistence, the inside track, something. From here on it is no breeze.

St. Paul, who evidently was something of a sports fan, wrote to the Corinthians a few words which you might take as your text, inspiration and guide for your final effort. “Do you not know,” he wrote, “that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.” Then he adds, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.”

This counsel on self-control is what you must keep in mind as you head for the finish line. By the time of your second major league pastorate (or its alternatives), you will have risen far above most of your contemporaries in the profession and will be widely-recognized as an outstandingly-successful man. You have to be a marked success to be considered bishop material, of course. Acknowledged geniuses exempted, practically nobody but you is thrilled by your superior achievements. So whoever expects the blue ribbon has to corner a substantial amount of recognition and build a shiny reputation,

and at the same time avoid offending his clerical brethren who haven't.

This is where St. Paul's advice on self-control comes in to save you. Not very many successful men can conceal their conviction that they are where they are because they are more gifted, energetic or deserving than those whom they have out-distanced. But even if all this is obvious and undeniable, it is necessary for you to pretend that it isn't. This pretense requires unusual and unnatural self-control, which is no doubt why the apostle listed it as characteristic of the winning runner. Remember that your clerical competitors — for the rich, spiritual prizes the church offers to those who breast the tape ahead of the pack — cannot bear the thought that you beat them because you are better at the game. It has a ruinous effect on a man's self-image. He can't stand it.

However, if he can attribute your success, not to superior ability, or harder work, or a more powerful personality, but simply to chance, luck or the irrational preferment of fate and higher authority; he can convince himself that, but for a less fortunate combination of circumstances beyond his control, he would be where you are, and his ego suffers no irreparable damage. He will not hate you for succeeding where he has failed — or, at least, he will not hate you with the virulence of the chap who is clearly-bested by a man of markedly superior ability.

What you must aim for, then, is a convincing pose which projects the image of

competence, success, mastery of your profession, etc., but which is diluted by a magnum or two of modesty. The church fathers, even those notably short on it themselves, have always been strong for the virtue of humility. Since it is widely recognized that mediocrities and failures have no need of humility, it is a grace reserved for winners. The fact that you possess it is a public proclamation that you have outdistanced the herd which began the race. So when you pour on the coal for the last lap, begin by cultivating this cardinal Christian virtue.

### **Achieving The Humility — Ability Balance**

So that you will not stumble in the home stretch, the author has formulated an easily-remembered equation which we shall call the Humility-Ability Balance. If you will commit it to memory you will not fail to balance any observable mark of ability, success, superiority or extraordinary competence with enough humility to take the curse off it, spare the sensibilities of your less-fortunate and less-gifted peers, and clinch your image as an unusually successful practitioner of the ecclesiastical arts and at the same time an enormously modest man.

Perhaps an illustration or two of the Humility-Ability Balance in operation will be helpful. Let us suppose you are attending a conference with a group of preachers. As you hobnob in the lobby or congregate in the coffee shop, whence you have fled the boring official sessions, one of your peers might say to you, "I hear you are packing them in every Sunday." The correct Humility-Ability Balance response is "Well, church attendance is good in most places these days."

You have managed, by this answer, to confirm the rumor that you are doing very

well, without actually saying so and without claiming any credit for this success you are said to be enjoying. Had you boasted about your success, your peers would have catalogued you as a braggart and would have invented reasons to explain away the good things happening in your parish.

Played the Humility-Ability Balance way, the brothers of the cloth, most of whom are struggling to keep their church attendance from sagging to alarming new lows, will not be offended, and will report to the grapevine communications system that you are not only a very able man, but a "heck of a nice guy," as well. Practiced over a number of years, this kind of thing builds a solid image of you as a humble hot-shot, which is exactly the impression you need to convey to those who will eventually have a hand in boosting you upward to the seats of the mighty.

The Humility-Ability Balance response comes in handy, too, when the reports of your successes are greatly exaggerated-as they often will be. By neither confirming nor denying the reports, in so many words, you actually confirm them without the necessity for an outright lie. In the matter of image-building, it makes no difference, whatever, whether the reports are accurate or ballooned out of all relationship to the facts. What does count is that your peers believe them to be true. And if you are humble about the alleged brilliance of your record, the boys won't mind believing it.

The importance of the Humility-Ability Balance to any preacher desirous of the purple cannot be overstressed. Further research may reveal that it is the ingredient in the candidate's personality which assures his election. So, in order to rivet your attention to it, the author offers the following little literary effort, along

with the recommendation that you commit it to memory.

There was a young preacher named Pace  
Who commenced the episcopal race.  
Through some small ability  
And lots of humility  
He captured the miter and mace.

Your author has now divested himself of all the counsel and accumulated wisdom necessary to guide and direct you as you pursue the prize of our high calling. There remains, to be sure, the problem of putting together an organization with which to confront the diocese or conference or assembly with your candidacy. But this is a highly-technical matter, varying from denomination to denomination and requiring an analysis so detailed and exhaustive, as to constitute ample subject material for a subsequent volume or volumes (and which the author plans to offer, if anticipated demand develops).

### **The Unpredictable Nature Of Electing Assemblies**

It is only fair to warn you that while strict attention to the course outlined in these pages and meticulous care in executing the plan of attack step by step should bring you eventually to a bishop's throne or an equivalent lofty office in non-episcopal denominations, it might not. The reason that it might not is that the solemn assemblies which select the winners, in the race for high ecclesiastical positions are, like all fallible human organizations, somewhat unpredictable and occasionally capricious in their choices. In a world where fairness and commonsense prevail, a man can reasonably expect that diligent planning and half a professional lifetime spent in unrelenting devotion to the cause of getting himself named to an office of supreme spiritual

power, will almost automatically insure his elevation. It violates the American dream and confounds the log-cabin to White House mythology to believe, otherwise. What happens to our democratic ideals if accidental qualities, such as superior ability, outstanding intellectual equipment or bona fide spirituality tilt the balances; when weighed against the diligent efforts of the man of unexceptional endowments, but tireless zeal, who sweats, struggles, sacrifices and strives to make himself over into a model of what the vast, pious churchgoing public insists it wants in its clergy? What if, in an act of betrayal, comparable to the perfidy of Benedict Arnold, these electing assemblies will frequently ignore the just claims of a good, pious servant of the Lord like you, who has overcome the handicaps of small beginnings, average talents and undistinguished intellectual and spiritual attainments, by fashioning yourself into just the kind of clerical personality you have every reason to think that the church prefers, the electing assembly is stampeded into selecting men who have made no such effort as you have made; and they, who commend themselves only for their brilliance, natural leadership ability, scholarship, personal winsomeness, strength of character, prophetic voice and/or other gifts, traits and qualities which, like gold, forever escape the simulation of the alchemist or witch doctor.

### **Concluding Counsel**

This is a dreary thought on which to conclude our treatise, but do not be dismayed. The odds are still very much in your favor, what with 14-karat prophets in a perpetual short supply, and with the high probability that your painful efforts to make of yourself a reasonable facsimile will issue in your being mistaken for the real thing.

At all events, the goal is worth the effort, the rewards of a successful campaign are very great, and the prospect of serving the Lord in the greenest of all possible pastures should give every ambitious and reasonably-robust divine a holy hot-foot as he pursues it.

Do not be deterred by nagging twinges of guilt that you, after all, are one and the same with the organization man, clambering-frantically up the corporate embank-

ment, or the politician seeking secular office among smoke-suffocated and booze-benumbed delegates. When assaulted by such spiritually enervating thoughts, as you inevitably will be, remember that you are a servant of the church, and recall that the Apostle himself said (when writing to another ambitious young preacher), "This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work."

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