Every July, cyclists from all over the world train for the Tour de France, perhaps the most famous bicycle race in all of the world. And among the most well known cyclists to win the race and compete, was a cycling legend by the name of Gino Bartali, an Italian.

However winning the yellow jersey wasn't the most important thing to him. Rather, he had his sights set on something greater than riding down the Champs-Elysees. This came as he matured and grew in life, and heard the voice of God helping him to understand what mattered most.

Born into poverty in 1914, the young Gino was not interested in schooling in his native Florence. What did interest, and later come to obsess him was cycling. Initially, his parents begged him to forget about cycling and to get a proper job. It was no use.

Soon Bartali was entering cycle races and, perhaps more importantly, winning them.

Before long, Bartali had turned professional. In Europe at that time, the world of a professional cyclist was a glamorous one — more glamorous

even than that of a movie star. The young Tuscan fitted the bill, and his face fitted the front cover of magazines as well as the sports pages. Soon he had so many fans he had to hire a press secretary to answer his mail. Women, in particular, were fans.

The Giro d'Italia was, and still is, the premier cycling race in Italy. By 1936 Bartali had won his first title. He did so again the next year. From his winnings he moved his parents from their tiny apartment to a house the size of the apartment block they had left. He went from being one of Florence's poor to walking around its streets dressed in a tailored three-piece suit; the world was at his feet. Then tragedy struck.

Bartali's brother, Giulio, also a professional cyclist, was badly injured during a race while descending a wet downward mountain course. Bartali rushed to the hospital where his brother had been taken. He arrived only to hold the dying man's hand. That death changed everything for Gino Bartali.

He left cycling and retreated into himself, looking for answers. Eventually, he became involved in Catholic Action. Using his celebrity, he spent his time urging young Catholics to live their faith. Soon he was to wed. His

wife, Andrea, urged him to see his cycling ability as a gift. Soon Bartali was racing again, and winning.

In 1938, he triumphed at the Tour de France, becoming only the second Italian ever to do so. The joy of the victory was short-lived, however. The Tour and all professional cycling across the Continent would shortly be suspended due to war. Bartali was conscripted into the military as a cycle dispatch rider; his fame saved him from the battlefield. His posting meant that he stayed in Florence. It was from another city, Rome, however, that he was to receive an altogether different task — one that was to involve great personal danger.

The Cardinal Archbishop of Florence, Elia Dalla Costa, asked to see Bartali. The initiative behind the meeting came from the Vatican where Pope Pius XII had specifically asked the Cardinal to escalate his secret operation that was helping countless Jews flee and hide from the German SS. This operation was centered on a Franciscan friary in Assisi and consisted of forging travel documents and passports to allow Jews to travel from danger or to remain where they lived but with new identities. Bartali was asked to be one of the chief couriers of these documents —

concealing them in the inner tubing of his handlebars. His sporting status meant that no one would think anything of his cycling long distances on a regular basis. It was a perfect ruse.

The work was not without danger though. Bartali had already hidden a Jewish family in one of the properties that he owned. Soon the local Fascists, at the behest of their Nazi masters, took an interest in Bartali and began questioning him about his movements. There was another cost, however, as he felt obliged to hide his activities from his wife. She was already suffering from nervous tension at having to live in a war zone — Italy by then had been invaded from the south by the Allies — and now she was pregnant.

When the Allied bombing started, there was an explosion near to where the couple were hiding. Andrea gave birth to a stillborn child soon after. As the raids continued, Bartali cycled alone to the graveyard where he had buried his brother. This time he carried with him a small box. In that same plot where his brother was buried, he laid to rest the child that had not lived.

Eventually, in August 1944, Florence was liberated.

Competitive cycling did not begin again, however, nor did it look as if it would for some time to come. In any event, now aged 30 years old, Bartali was deemed by many too old to race. These next years would be bleak for Bartali. One night he cycled to the graveyard that held the graves of his brother and child; there he prayed alone for some time, seeking what to do next. When he rose from his knees, he mounted his cycle, confident he had his answer.

Bartali started racing again. Soon the slurs that followed his return were not just about his age. His opponents now openly mocked his Catholic faith. From the start of his career, Bartali had regularly attended Holy Mass before races; in addition, he would exhort his fellow Catholic riders to practice their faith. And in Paris, at the end of the 1938 Tour de France, Bartali had taken his winner's bouquet to the church of Our Lady of Victories, laying it before her altar there — dedicating his win to the Mother of God.

Although Bartali was competing again, he was not winning. Nevertheless, in 1948, he entered the Tour de France. Ten years earlier he had won it; no rider had ever achieved the prize again with such a time lapse between attempts. No one gave him a chance of winning.

To everyone's surprise, Bartali rode that 1948 race with almost preternatural strength. The climax of the year's race came in a mountain stage. Riding drenched in sweat, his body shivering in the unseasonal snowstorm that had awoken he raced through the frozen Pyrenees for more than just the victor's crown.

Because on that July day in 1948, as the snow and sleet continued to pelt the by then solitary cyclist far ahead from the chasing pact, little did anyone realize that what Bartali was really racing against was the hardest adversary of all, one directly opposed to his earlier act of faith at the graveside, namely, a "voice" that kept telling him to quit.

Crowds, rivals and organizers looked on in astonishment at the figure racing through the snow on treacherous mountain ridges. Even so, they could have not known how hard it was for the former champion, who, by

then, was suffering from severe hunger pangs so great that he felt that he couldn't go on. Then, suddenly, a hand came from the crowd and offered him some fruit. It was to prove enough for him to continue. No one knows who performed this act of charity. Later reports claimed that it was someone dressed as a priest, but whoever it was this kindness changed everything. Bartali was later to say that, from then on, he felt as if he was being picked up and carried to the finish. On that day, he vanquished his opponents in the race — the victory was his. On what was the eve of the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, he had ascended the mountain, and won.

Bartali retired from cycling soon after to lead a quiet life in his native Florence. In May 2000, after a Requiem Mass, he was laid to rest dressed in the robes of the Carmelite Third Order, wearing the Scapular of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It was not until many years later that what he had done for so many during the war became public knowledge — only after he had been dead 13 years was he declared by Yad Vashem: "Righteous Among the Gentiles."

Bartali was as self-effacing about his many sporting triumphs as he had been about his wartime heroics. On being asked by one reporter about his medals and trophies, he replied simply that the only “medals” worth winning were those received in Heaven.

At last year’s Tour de France, it began in Florence - the capital of the arts, and started there for the first time as a way to honor Bartali. A yellow jersey from his victory was given to Pope Francis, and hes become known as “Gino the Pious” for his love of his faith, and for all the Jewish people he helped during the war.

Thousands of cyclists every year train and work so hard to win the yellow jersey, and that’s a noble thing to do; excellence in sports, in our profession, these are good things. But a question the Christian always needs to reflect upon is what is the most important thing, what should be the center of our lives and our focus?

In a reflection he gave this weekend, Bishop Robert Baron spoke about visiting Rome recently for the Papal Conclave, and around him in this beautiful city were so many things from the past, including the Roman

Empire which once ruled the world. These include the remains of places where Christians were killed such as the Colosseum, and the Circus Maximus. But today, all that remains is ruins; there is no successor to Caesar and the Roman Emperors. However what is there are beautiful churches, including Saint Peter's Basilica, which is built over the tomb of Peter.

Peter, given that name by Jesus, was in Rome preaching of a new emperor, Jesus, who would be King of the world and universe; far greater than Caesar. So was Paul at various points as he visited all the churches in the world at the time. Neither of them spoke ill of the emperor, but it was enough for both men to be seen as threats. And so outside of the city, both men were killed. In the place where Peter was martyred and buried, Saint Peter's was built over his tomb, which you can still visit to this day. And a little further outside of the city is Saint Paul Outside the Walls; it is believed the remains there are of Saint Paul, and to be the place where he was martyred. Both churches are quite beautiful and move the soul. But it also makes you think about what got them killed; and it was a love for God, and wanting to grow the Church that Jesus established. The ruins are still there around these beautiful churches built over their tombs, but the churches

are not museums, and the successor of Peter is still there, trying to build the Church.

So what does that ultimately mean for us?

Well, 3 things come to mind. Namely a keeping God and HIs Church as the center of our lives to guide us; a trusting in the Church; and a fortitude to follow in their footsteps.

With the first point, keeping God and His Church at the center of our lives, and that was Bartali. He found his gift of being a cyclist - and indeed his faith helped him to triumph despite his older age after the war as God spurred him on - but note he was never hiding his faith. He did not leave the faith when others would mock him for his faith. The success was all secondary to his love for God. And so on our part, we have to look at the lives and lives of our families; where is our focus? Is God truly the center of our lives, so that we pray, we make Mass a priority, and we listen to God every day?

With that, let us remember we hear God in our daily prayer life, but we also trust in the Church that was established by Jesus on Peter. Here is the Church still standing after all these years. Yes, at times there has been sin and corruption and bad choices among some people; even Jesus though had Judas as an apostle. But Jesus knew what He was doing when He said you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. The Church is where we receive the sacraments which give us life. And the Church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is there to help us grow in holiness. Paul as one of the Church fathers, when you read thorough his epistles, sometimes he comes out quite strong in his language; but he is trying to help the people in his communities to find God and happiness. And that is what the Church wants for you and me; not to tell us what we want to here, not to tell us hey it's all relative do what you want, but to show us the way - to save us. And this means we think about the moral teachings of the Church which are there to help us. Yes we will struggle at times, but rather than reject a teaching and fall into schism, we should pray about the things that we struggle with, think about them. We should reflect on our consciences and go to confession a few times a year and own up to our mistakes, knowing God's mercy is there. Every day hopefully we are a little better than the day before - for just as Bartali trained over and over again to

become the best, hopefully we do that with the guidance of the Church to help us know right from wrong.

And lastly, how do we articulate it? This was Bartali; open about his faith, and helping people in need. His thanks? Being mocked at times. It is not easy being a Christian for any of us. We do as Peter and Paul; we preach a message that is counter-cultural. Even as a priest from the pulpit I've gotten my share of nasty grams over the years because at times content in a homily will challenge people. But we have to be people of conviction. From wearing a crucifix or Miraculous Medal in public, to praying over your meal in a restaurant, to testifying to what the faith teaches in the public forum, to challenging people to return to Mass or find God, there at times will be pushback. But it can also result in the saving of souls.

When we are kids, inevitably we get asked the question "what do you want to be when you grow up?" Hopefully whatever path we go down in life, we find happiness and peace in what we are called to do. But on a deeper level, that's a question we are still working to answer, because what matters most is one day being a saint in heaven. Cycling experts may be able to name you the winners of the various Tours de France; sports experts will still talk about champions of yesteryear. But you and I are

called for something far greater - the crown that isn't made of leaves that withers and fades, but the crown of eternal life. The Church is there to help us obtain that, and as Saint Paul said, our task is to run the race so as to win to obtain that crown. May we follow the example of these holy apostles who were seized by Jesus; who got into the boat of Peter and stunned Paul on the way to Damascus. Peter and Paul both had their lives changed by Jesus, but also both men didn't return to their old ways or run from Rome where they would both be killed. Rather they made the choice to follow Jesus to the City of God. May we do the same, knowing the answer to the question we were asked as kids is "one day a saint." Jesus and His Church will help us to do just that. May we never give up on the Church, trusting in Her always, and follow Peter and Paul by bringing souls to heaven through setting the world on fire by helping one another come to know who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.

Saint Peter and Paul, pray for us!