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# Sports in the Christian Life

BY MICHAEL P. KERRIGAN, C.S.P.

**Sports, physical exercise, and recreational activity contribute to our development as spiritual beings composed of body and soul. Today as sports take on an increasingly large role in popular culture internationally, they are becoming a new field for twenty-first century Christian mission.**

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Seeing “the world of sport today” as “a field of Christian mission” may be a novel concept for many people. On the superficial level, the spiritual values of Christian discipleship would seem to conflict with the ideals of sport, which are viewed primarily as a secular activity.

Sports are taking on a larger role in popular culture internationally. Some scholars claim they are a universally recognized aspect of contemporary society as evidenced by their ability to engage both participants and spectators and to exert significant influence upon societal values.<sup>1</sup> The fact that sports can draw huge crowds to competitive events demonstrates their potential influence upon the masses of humanity today, like no other time in human history. As a social phenomenon characterized by globalization and instantaneous Internet communication, sports can overcome social classes, cultural differences, linguistic barriers, and geographical boundaries among peoples.

On the other hand, sports have been used to promote political agendas, national ideologies, and economic gain. The restoration of the modern Summer and Winter Olympic Games as a way to bring the world together in peaceful international competition have been used on occasion for divisive demonstrations such as boycotts and displays of triumphal nationalism on the athletic playing fields.

## **A CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Over the last thirty years, Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) and his successor Pope Benedict XVI have seen sports as a way to promote positive values and foster the human potential for athletes who compete.<sup>2</sup> On numerous occasions they have addressed the role of sports in society and observed how the Christian life and sporting activity complement one another. Their

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insights were offered primarily in informal meetings with athletes—such as soccer players, ski teams, Ferrari driving team members, youth group athletic associations, and Olympic athletes visiting Rome—rather than articulated through formal teachings or official papal pronouncements.

The personal interest that Pope John Paul II took in sports and his penchant for engaging in recreational activities made him an ideal Christian spokesperson on this topic. Prior to his election as pope, he was renowned for being an avid hiker, skier, and swimmer. He had a swimming pool installed at the Vatican residence and was known for slipping away incognito to go skiing. His lengthy pontificate provided him with many opportunities to address the topic of sports and the Christian life.

Pope Benedict XVI has spoken on several occasions about this topic—most notably during the August 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany; while blessing the Olympic torch in St. Peter's Square as it made its way toward Turin, Italy, the site of the 2006 Winter Olympic Games; and greeting various athletes during papal audiences. In his message to the 20<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympics he stated, "Sport is one of the human activities which is also waiting to be enlightened by God through Christ, so that the values it expresses may be purified and elevated at both the individual and the collective levels."<sup>3</sup>

While he is more renowned for being a scholar than an athlete like his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI avails himself of summer holidays in Alpine locales for walks and time for reflection in the beauty of God's nature as a way to balance physical recreation with academic scholarship. Continuing in the tradition that Pope John Paul II established, the present pope frequently addresses the role of sports and their influence on society. Most recently on May 7, 2008, at the conclusion of a Mozart concert given by the China Philharmonic Orchestra and the Shanghai Opera Chorus, he extended his greetings and prayerful best wishes to "all the people of China as they prepare for the Olympic Games, an event of great importance for the entire human family."

These interactions between the sacred and the secular helped lay the groundwork for the first major international symposium, "The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission," convened by the Church and Sport Section of the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome from November 11-12, 2005. The meeting took place seven months after Pope John Paul II's death, a clear indication that Pope Benedict XVI would continue the work his predecessor had begun.

Scholars, leaders of sports associations, professional athletes, coaches, and representatives from the Bishops' Conferences of Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland took part in this "spiritual sports summit." Two Americans offered valuable input into the discussions: Clark Power from the University of Notre Dame addressed the topic of "Sport and Business" while Major League Baseball pitcher, Jeff Suppan, then a member of the St. Louis Cardinals and now with the Milwaukee Brewers, offered reflections on "The Challenges of Being a Christian Athlete" in a roundtable discussion.

Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, the president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, noted the significance of this historic meeting by observing that this seminar is "a palpable sign of the Church's concern for this important dimension of contemporary culture and in recognition of sports' educative potential in the development of the human person.... [as] the Seminar also dealt with sport as a 'field of mission' for Christians and for all men and women of goodwill, seeking to encourage the search for pathways that can truly restore the true face of sports, and lead it back to the lofty ideals in which sport has its roots and which have animated it throughout history."<sup>4</sup>

"The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission" culminates many years of a developing tradition as well as setting a trajectory for future discussion on this topic. Somewhat similar to Paul addressing the Athenians at the Areopagus with a new spiritual insight (Acts 17:22-31), this conference and its published proceedings encourage twenty-first century Christians to envision athletic competition and the sports playing fields as new opportunities for Christian evangelization. The roots of this contemporary vision, however, lie deep within Scripture and tradition.

### **DEEP ROOTS IN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION**

Through the metaphors the Apostle Paul used in both exhortations and autobiographical references, he drew attention to an affinity between athletics and the Christian life. He warned the Christians of Galatia, "You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?" (Galatians 5:7); and he urged Timothy to "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12a). About his own pilgrimage he wrote, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14) and "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). In his reflections on Christian commitment in 1 Corinthians

9:24-27, Paul combined the images of running a race, boxing, and training properly for an athletic contest.

The early Christian theologians resisted two exaggerated viewpoints on sports in the ancient world. In the Greco-Roman “cult of the body,” sporting events and games were primarily ritual celebrations to idols. Developing the physical body, promoting attractiveness, and placating the gods

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were emphasized while the spiritual significance of sport was downplayed. At the opposite end of the spectrum another ideology emerged: the Gnostic tendency to emphasize the spiritual by downplaying the significance of the physical body and to see the soul as “trapped in a body and

yearning to be set free.” These popular perspectives challenged the Christian understanding of human nature, which strove for an appropriate balance between the physical body and spiritual soul. By the early third century Tertullian advised Christians to shun such athletic competitions altogether, but Clement of Alexandria coined a phrase to nuance a Christian understanding: “physical activity, yes; cult of the body, no.”<sup>5</sup>

Almost two centuries later when Christianity emerged as the religion of the Roman Empire, Emperor Theodosius I resolved this dilemma by banning pagan rites and by outlawing the Ancient Olympic Games in 393.

During the Middle Ages the excessive brutality in athletic contests that became “tournaments fought until the death” before stadium crowds created another problem for Christians. “The Church would later criticize the medieval tournaments on account of their gory aspects,” notes Maria Aiello, a specialist in sports law, “yet the idea that sport could be a useful means, under certain conditions, of achieving the overall education of the human person remained firm.”<sup>6</sup>

This balanced understanding of sports, physical exercise, and recreational activity as contributing to the development of the human person as a spiritual being composed of body and soul formed the Christian viewpoint that shaped many centuries of thought.

Two recent events have had a profound impact on the contemporary Christian approach to sports. The inception of Modern Olympic Games at the end of the nineteenth century tried to promote the classical Greek ideals of appreciating physical activity as an educational value while fostering peace among peoples of various backgrounds. Unlike the ancient Olympics that were limited to men and the elite of those times, the modern Summer Games (from 1896) and Winter Games (from 1924) broadened the focus. The

Olympic Charter recognized the ecumenical character of sport, affirming that all individuals had the right to practice it based on the values of equality, fraternity, and fair play. With technological advances in travel and communication, the possibility of sports being played and athletic competition taking place on an international venue offered greater visibility than before.

Then a renewed sense of Christian mission occurred during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) with an understanding to “read the signs of the times” and foster dialogue between the Church and the modern world. The important role of leisure for the relaxation of the spirit and the positive benefits of sports events in the ongoing development of the human person were explicitly addressed in *Gaudium et Spes* (*The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*):

The widespread reduction in working hours...brings increasing advantages to numerous people. May these leisure hours be properly used for relaxation of spirit and the strengthening of mental and bodily health.... These benefits are obtainable too from physical exercise and sports events, which can help to preserve emotional balance, even at the community level, and to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races.<sup>7</sup>

The ideals stated by both the Olympic Charter and the Second Vatican Council offered positive ways for seeing sports as benefiting the international human community in terms of fostering peace, respect, and better understanding among peoples. The coinciding of these two events played an important role in the Church taking interest and expressing concern about sports. An important dialogue was about to begin between the Church and the modern world.

## **KEY RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

Among the many occasions on which Pope John Paul II addressed the role of sports in the Christian life, two are most significant for the development of the teaching that culminated in “The World of Sport Today” Seminar. During a 1987 address to participants of Athletic Championship, he noted:

Sport, as you well know, is an activity that involves more than the movement of the body; it demands the use of intelligence and the developing of the will. It reveals, in other words, the wonderful structure of the human person created by God, as a spiritual being, a unity of body and spirit. Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall the moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of his creative work.<sup>8</sup>

In an October 28, 2000, address on the occasion of the Jubilee of Sports People, he observed:

In recent years [sport] has continued to grow even more as one of the characteristic phenomena of the modern era, almost a “sign of the times” capable of interpreting humanity’s new needs and new expectations.... Sport is not an end, but a means; it can become a vehicle for civility and genuine recreation, encouraging people to put the best of themselves on the field and to avoid what might be dangerous or seriously harmful to themselves or to others.<sup>9</sup>

As the 2004 Summer Olympic Games approached, Pope John Paul II called for a worldwide truce to all wars and civil conflicts in anticipation of the Athens game. In a concurrent development that summer, it was announced that a new section of “Church and Sports” for the Pontifical Council for the Laity was being established as “a new tool for evangelization.” This ministry has five goals:

To insure more direct and systematic attention to the vast world of sport on the part of the church that fosters a renewal of pastoral work in and through sports.

To diffuse the teachings of the Church regarding sport and to promote the study and research of various themes of sport, especially those of an ethical nature.

To promote initiatives that can serve to evangelize the world of sport, especially those which foster the witness of an authentic Christian life among professional athletes.

To promote a culture of sport in harmony with the true dignity of the human person through youth education.

To favor collaboration among the various sporting organizations and associations on the national and international level, serving as a point of reference and dialogue with the various national and international entities.<sup>10</sup>

The new “Church and Sports” section will encourage an ongoing dialogue about the role of sports in society, and continue to develop an optimistic view in which the values of Christian discipleship complement, rather than compete with, the intrinsic values of sports and athletic competition. This newly envisioned tool for evangelism already is producing important results, like the aforementioned international seminar “The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission.”

The trajectory set in that meeting is evident in an address given on October 31, 2007, by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Apostolic Nuncio of the Holy See to the United Nations, to the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly on sport for peace and development. In anticipation of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, he noted that the Olympic motto

*"Citius, Altius, Fortius"* ("Swifter, Higher, Stronger") is a clear example of how the secular and spiritual intersect, for it was adapted from the nineteenth-century French Dominican priest, Father Henri Martin Dideon, the headmaster of Arcueil College in Paris who used these words to describe his students' athletic achievements. Archbishop Migliore concluded his speech by remarking, "The Olympic Creed reminds us that the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle."<sup>11</sup>

### **SUMMARY OF THIS PERSPECTIVE**

I have sketched a developing contemporary Christian perspective on sports. Let me now summarize its key insights.

*The dignity of the human person is grounded in our creation in the image and likeness of God, a unity of body and soul.* Each person is unique and gifted with various talents and abilities, including athletic ones, to develop in loving service to God and others.

*The human body is an instrument for full human life, and it should not be viewed as an end in itself.* The shortsighted view of "winning at all costs" reflects a "cult of the body" in which the spiritual dimension is downplayed with the primary emphasis given to immediate results to succeed. Human life is more than an immediate, physical, and transitory existence.

In order to succeed in sports and athletic competition, *discipline and at times personal sacrifices are necessary.* A regimen of physical activity and regular practice is an ascetic life that mirrors a form of Christian discipline; it is a way in which one learns to how to deal positively with balancing human passions, intelligence, and the will.

*Through sports we can learn important values for life.* Participation, not solely winning results, should be the primary focus of sports. Learning the rules of the game, fostering respect for the values of honesty, integrity, and fair play, along with developing skills to deal with adversity on the playing field offer potential for positive formation of life skills in other areas such as family, community, and work.

*Sports can enrich the social dimension of human life.* Learning how to play as a team member shifts the focus from "me" to "we." Rather than individual success, the importance of contributing to a group effort is emphasized. As an alternative to competitions on computers that foster a more passive and impersonal lifestyle, sports and physical recreation offer a more active lifestyle that involves other people, offering opportunities to form friendships based on similar interests.

*Nevertheless, sports and athletic competition, like other aspects of our culture, are in need of redemption.* The temptation to "win at all costs" dominates sports, as evidenced by the current scandals of athletes fixing results for gambling purposes, using steroids and other performance enhancing substances, and stealing team signals on the field to gain an advantage. Another temptation is to commercialize sports so that athletes and specta-

tors are reduced to commodities, exploited for financial gain (by team owners, corporate sponsors, and so on), and not respected for their human dignity. Yet with Paul we may proclaim, “where sin increases, God’s grace abounds even more” (Romans 5:20); our sports can be transformed with Christian values.

Thus, *we should see athletic competitions as opportunities to witness to Christian faith*. Christian athletes must live “in the world” of contemporary sports, but not “of that world.” In sports (as in other human cultural endeavors such as the arts, sciences, academia, political life, and so on), opportunities abound to witness to the gospel way of life. Christian athletes can be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity.

A helpful evangelization perspective comes from an adaptation of a prayer “Christ Has No Body Now but Ours” from the sixteenth century Christian mystic Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but ours,  
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.  
Ours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ  
looks out upon the world;  
ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good;  
ours are the hands with which he blesses us now.<sup>12</sup>

In this spirit, we are called not to close our eyes to the unique evangelization opportunities and challenges that contemporary sports offer, but to see sports as the new field for twenty-first century Christian mission.

## NOTES

1 Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay, and David. Rowe, *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2001), offers the viewpoint that culture is the focal point for understanding sports.

2 Monsignor Carlo Mazza identifies almost two hundred occasions when twentieth-century pontiffs have publicly addressed the topic of sports, in simple greetings to more elaborate speeches: Pius X (1903-1914), 3 times; Benedict XV (1914-1922), 1; Pius XI (1922-1939), 5; Pius XII (1939-1958), 20; John XXIII (1958-1963), 9; Paul VI (1963-1978), 35; and John Paul II (1978-2005), 120. He notes the need for a comprehensive collection and systemic study of these papal discourses. See Carlo Mazza, “Sport as Viewed from the Church’s Magisterium,” in *The World Of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission* (Vatican City State: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2006), 57. *The World of Sport Today*, the collected proceedings from the international symposium described below, can be purchased from The Pontifical Council for the Laity ([pcpl@laity.va](mailto:pcpl@laity.va)).

3 Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for the 20<sup>th</sup> Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy: A Light for Sports,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 6 (8 February 2006), 2.

4 Archbishop Stanislaus Rylko, “Preface,” *The World Of Sport Today*, 11.

5 Dietmar Mieth, “Towards an Ethic of Sport in Contemporary Culture,” *The World Of Sport Today*, 30.

6 Maria Aiello, “A Brief History of Sport,” *The World Of Sport Today*, 16.

7 Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 268.

8 Pope John Paul II, “Address to Participants of Athletic Championship: Be Examples of

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Human Virtues," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly English Edition) 36 (7 September 1987): 5.

9 "Jubilee of Sports People," Address of Pope John Paul II to the International Convention on the Theme: "During the Time of the Jubilee: The Face and Soul of Sport" (October 28, 2000); available online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

10 Kevin Lixey, L.C., "The Goals of the Church and Sport Section" in *The World Of Sport Today*, 75-76.

11 Archbishop Celestino Migliore, "Holy See's Address on the Values of Sport" (4 November 2007); available online at [www.zenit.org/article-20907?l=english](http://www.zenit.org/article-20907?l=english).

12 "No Body Now but Ours," *Living with Christ* 12 (June 2006), 43.

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