

## Practice Makes Perfect: Growing Spiritually Through Sports Participation

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Have you ever found yourself wondering why some athletes pray before or after a competition? In a society which now places so much emphasis on the success of athletes, even at the lowest level of competition, it would come as no surprise that an athlete may want to pause and ask for a bit of “divine intervention.” While this action of faith is certainly an admirable trait in an athlete, or in any human being for that matter, it is not the only means of spiritual enrichment for the athlete but that athletics provide inherent opportunities for spiritual development.

### Competition & Human Value

As a foray into grasping the opportunities for spiritual growth in athletics, some thoughts regarding the value of the human person should be entertained. Anyone who has ever been witness to a college sporting event, either in person or on television, has undoubtedly noticed at least one or multiple unruly spectators, but what kind of tension and stress is placed on the athlete when that “unruly spectator” is the athlete’s parent? One theory suggests, “Negative competition occurs when a child competes for his self-worth and value. This happens especially when parents reinforce the concept that children must ‘play to win.’<sup>1</sup> Certainly, any child or teen having to compete for his or her own self-worth and value fosters a negative growth in development and thus undermines the very theological principle of “*imago Dei*,” that is our being created “in the image and likeness of God.” This very special creation endows all human beings, at the moment of their conception with an unequivocal and indissoluble value. The value discussed here does not come necessarily from our being human, in body, just as Christ was human, but from the fact that humanity has the capacity for choosing goodness and rejecting evil, for embracing selflessness rather than selfishness, and in the ability to seek relationship with our creator. The notion of having to “compete” for

one’s value clearly stands in contradiction to this fundamental teaching of Christian theology because our value is innate. Our creation, “in God’s image” establishes a strong foundation on which we are able to discover the connections between sports and spirituality.

In order to advance toward understanding the vast array of inherent opportunities for spiritual development in sports, it is important to establish a clear understanding of Christian spirituality as well as the new, emerging study of “sport spirituality.” The concise definitions of each of these fields are necessary as the opportunities for spiritual growth and development will be examined from their perspectives. In the first respect, Christian spirituality may be best explained as “the interpersonal relationships formed within the community of faith and the daily routine of a lived expression that centers around Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> In contrast, “sport spirituality” is new to the academic arena, but is gaining ground each day. “Sport spirituality” can most accurately be described as the study of the ways in which athletics “contribute constructively to the harmonious and complete development of humanity, body and soul.”<sup>3</sup> The development spoken of by the Pontiff occurs in a variety of different methods, however, one is central and known to all athletic participants: the concept of training.

### Similarities in Sports and the Spiritual Life

The practice of training or preparing for competition is likely to be understood by all athletes, no matter what sport they participate in. In theological and spiritual circles, training is referred to as *ascesis* which conveys this notion of “self discipline” or “self control.” St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians speaks of the ways in which athletes are expected to apply these concepts. He writes, “Athletes exercise self-control in every way; they do so in order to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.” (1 Cor 9:24-25) Upon open-

ing his statement, he refers directly to athletes training for a competition, but in closing his statement, when he says, “... but we an imperishable one,” it is clear that he is not referring to a mere athletic competition, but rather a spiritual victory over the temptations of sin. His reference here is not to a literal crown, but to the reward of eternal life with Christ.

Such was also the goal of the “Athletes of the Desert.” Several spiritual figures from antiquity earned this title because “they were spiritual athletes, undergoing a training at least as rigorous as that of a modern athlete, but aiming for a religious ideal rather than a medal.”<sup>4</sup> One such “athlete” was St. Anthony of Egypt who strictly practiced asceticism in efforts to train himself in self-control so that he may not give into sin and fall away from obedience to Christ. St. Anthony, a great model of the successful application of *asceticis* once contended: “Always have the fear of God before your eyes... test yourselves, to see if you are worthy of God.”<sup>5</sup> For any athlete, this concept of a “test” which St. Anthony speaks of is a common-place reality found in competition. It can be reasonably inferred that any competition stands as a “test of one’s own abilities.” The same is true of spiritual practice. Those who seek to enrich their spiritual lives in relationship with Christ must train themselves that they may “pass their tests of faith.” Here, in the similarity between athletic training and *asceticis*, one can notice the first opportunity for spiritual growth in sports. Athletes, who train themselves for competition and Christians who train themselves to reject temptations both exercise “self-control,” which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

“Self-control” nurtures several valuable traits in the human person, all of which promote positive educational development. The first trait is “attention” which is absolutely necessary in Christian prayer life, in a student’s academic life – and, for the purposes of this paper, in an athlete’s continual *asceticis*. An athlete must demonstrate a firm willingness

to memorize their respective techniques, strategies, or fitness plans and in so doing, the athlete actually educates his or herself in “attention.” Of this notion of attention, the great mystic Simone Weil said, “It is the orientation of all the attention which the soul is capable towards God. The quality of attention counts for much in the quality of prayer.”<sup>7</sup> Through attentiveness, athletes become open to deeper means of educational growth through sports. The Church takes a great interest in the athletics world because of these possibilities for the overall development of the human person, which is of course, sacred because of our creation, “in the image of God.”

In 2005, an international seminar study on the values of sport speaks of the Church’s interest in its promotion of education through athletics: “...the teachings of the Magisterium reveal an educative potential of sport that gradually develops in the very practice of this activity.”<sup>8</sup> The educational potential present in sport can be approached from a variety of dimensions. One such dimension is the way in which athletic competition teaches life lessons and fosters a tolerance of “loss and gain.” All human beings, at one point in life or another, are faced with the difficulties of loss – such as the loss of loved ones, a job, or finances – or the pleasure of gaining something – such as a relationship, a friendship, or a successful career. Athletic competitions, in their results, educate their participants in these ways. A win can be likened to a gain in life because it was trained or prepared for, while a loss may be obviously likened to a loss in life because both are often unexpected. The ways in which the human person responds to loss or gain in their life “provides the opportunity for self-discovery.”<sup>9</sup> Because all human beings are sentient beings or those capable of feeling pain – be it emotional or physical – it can be reasonably contended that human beings may need assistance in overcoming their pain caused by loss or sharing in their pleasure caused by a gain; athletics provide this assistance.

A great help or assistance for human beings often comes in the form of another human being. Pope Benedict XVI once said, “Our lives are involved with one another; through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone.”<sup>10</sup> In the athletic world, the

comment of the Pontiff resonates with the existence of and value placed in a team. Athletic teams exist as support systems for each member within them. Each member of the team shares in victory and in defeat. This idea of sharing with one another promotes an understanding of solidarity and team chemistry. Solidarity has its root theological application in Christian Social Justice and means quite literally that “we are one human family despite any and all differences.”<sup>11</sup> Existing within this concept of solidarity is the aforementioned reality of team chemistry which refers to the collective working together and positive embrace of all members of the athletic team. Simply having another person there to share in the “ups and downs” of the competition or in life itself inspires hope; and this is not a selfish hope, but one that is shared. The Pontiff explains, “Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too.”<sup>12</sup> The hope fostered by existing as a member of a team in solidarity with one another leads us outside the realms of simply understanding the educational value of athletics, but of finally grasping the inherent spiritual values and opportunities for spiritual growth present within the sports world.

One of the more obvious opportunities for spiritual enrichment in sports is the understanding that one athlete cannot be successful on his or her own. In essence, we need others. The spiritual value here is the abandonment of self-reliance and the active embrace of humility. An essential part of embracing humility and resigning all notions that we alone can achieve success is necessary by coming to terms with simple truths. Thomas Merton, the great contemplative spiritualist, once said: “We must be true inside, true to ourselves, before we can know a truth that is outside us.”<sup>13</sup> When applied to understanding the need to reject reliance on the self as a means to succeeding in sports – one could argue that Merton is calling all athletes to admit the truth that they are fundamentally “nothing” apart from their team. This admission of “nothingness” brings the athlete into the important virtue of humility which combats the vice responsible for what I will call, “the culture of athletic arrogance.” When athletes abandon reliance on their own abilities, they are then opened to accepting the guidance

and the reliance on someone other than themselves – ideally, the new reliance is on God. St. Benedict once said, “Place your hope in God alone. If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself...”<sup>14</sup> In keeping with the understanding of *imago Dei*, one can then, after embracing reliance on God, recognize the presence of God dwelling within other members of His creation, such as the members of one’s athletic team or even their opponents. This realization opens the door to yet another vital spiritual dimension present within athletics: the promotion and acceptance of friendship.

It stands to reason to believe that teammates are already or will become friends with one another because of their shared interest in their respective sport, but also because of the great amounts of time they spend in one another’s presence as they train or compete alongside one another. Christianity is, in itself, a great call to friendship. When Jesus spoke to His Apostles and issued His great commandment to “Love one another as I have loved you,” (John 13:34) it is clear that Christ was instructing the Apostles to love as they had experienced Jesus’ love. St. John, in his first letter, reminds the faithful that “God is love.” (1 John 4:8) Following logically from St. John’s explanation of God’s nature all the while understanding that there is a type of love that exists known as “philia” or “the love of friendship,” one could understand that because God is love and love exists in friendship, then God is present in the experience of friendship. It is imperative for athletes to recognize that an individual’s existence as an opponent is not a valid reason for the denial or rejection of friendship. Because of the universally equal creation “in God’s image,” it is wholly possible for athletes to experience the presence of God on their respective field of play. Christ meets us in our day-to-day through the interaction of those who also share in relationship with Him; His Spirit is present in others. It is that presence that greets athletes through their interactions with others and allows them to confidently acknowledge that Christ’s Spirit “is a presence calling us to be friends.”<sup>15</sup> As Christians, we welcome the reality of Christ’s presence in our lives by embracing the theological virtues.

Athletes may greet Christ's presence among them in the athletics realm through a merger between their own *ac-sis* and faith – the first of the theological virtues. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us: "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and the evidence of things not seen." (Heb 11:1) Faith is indissolubly linked with Christian spirituality in that it encourages a "love of learning and the desire for God"<sup>16</sup> in our lives. The first relationship amidst athletes and faith must be in the desire for the presence of God. Athletes are encouraged to have faith in God and recognize Him as the giver of not only their lives, but their athletic talents. Athletes do not become athletes on their own; they do so by the blessing of Christ. The Christian athlete is able to develop their faith in God through their athletic participation recognizing their talents and abilities as gifts from He who is the source of love Himself. From such an understanding, then by joining their prayers of thanksgiving for their talents to those of St. John Baptist de La Salle who often prayed, "Domine, opus tuum – Lord, the Work is Yours."<sup>17</sup> Here, the "work" being spoken of is a reference to the good produced by the athlete which would not be possible without God having first blessed him or her with their athletic talent. In this understanding, the athlete becomes a "vessel" of God's work.

The second of the theological virtues is hope – a concept not at all foreign to athletes. Athletes practice hope in every competition when it seems like the odds are against their achieving a victory. In this situation, athletes begin hoping that they will be able to summon what is left of their strength so that they can attain victory or personal success so as to win. Though athletes have trained, practiced, and studied for their competitions, certain factors may prevent them from attaining success outright. It is in these moments that they are encouraged to resign themselves not to despair, which is the vice against hope, but to Christ's providence, which by nature is the "hope which does not disappoint." (Rom 5:5) Pope Benedict XVI spoke of this truth when he said, "This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain."<sup>18</sup> In

our weakest moments, when we as human beings realize that we cannot overcome a challenge on our own, we are encouraged to turn to Christ who gives us eternal hope as a result of His mercy. Hope in Christ, in one's team, or in one's own abilities are all linked together through their remarkable means of inspiring perseverance in situations near loss or defeat.

Love is the third and final of the theological virtues, however, the greatest importance is placed in this experience. St. Paul assures us of the importance of love: "So faith, hope and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor 13:13) In athletics, it is not difficult to find evidence that love exists. Athletes display an intense dedication and admiration of their respective sport – this we call "love of the game" – as well as a love of their team. When one witnesses a difficult loss sustained to a team who had so wished to achieve the victory, it is not uncommon to see tears, hugging, or other forms of consolation. What must propel athletes – those who are typically viewed as the rugged and tough – to cry? It can only be because they have lost something which they dearly loved. It is necessary in these and all moments to realize that God's very existence and nature is love. Any athlete who loves the game he or she trains for and loves his or her teammates can view their practices of love in light of the love of God. Pope Benedict XVI explains, "I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to Him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, His own."<sup>19</sup> In loving one's teammates, who most likely, by succession, have become one's friends, we encounter God who is love Himself. It is entirely possible to perceive the presence of Christ's Spirit dwelling amidst athletics because Christ dwells where love is present; accordingly, it is said, "In sport there are many examples of athletes whose relationship to their sport could be likened to passionate love."<sup>20</sup> The displays of love in sports, by athletes, coaches, parents, and even spectators speaks of yet another spiritual dimension present in athletics and thus challenges those who experience love – which is to say Christ – to act in certain ways correlative to proper morality.

### **Christ's Spirit in Sports: Closer than We Realize**

Acting in ways of proper Christian morality or making ethical decisions is an outgrowth of our love for, with, and in Christ. Athletes have a tendency to become popular, sometimes elevated to the status of local celebrities, which has the capability to "fuel" their human ego which, in turn, thus produces an individual who may believe he or she can do whatever they wish and have to face no consequences. St. Augustine described that consequences to the rejection of God's love and an embrace of improper morality certainly exist. He said, "It is no true joy at all, but leads only to a miserable life and shameful ostentation."<sup>21</sup> Athletes cannot be held to any extraordinary expectations, but should be regarded in equality with all members of God's creation, regardless of their talents. The Christian faithful are encouraged to be living examples to athletes – and to that end, all peoples – who embrace God's love and reject actions of immorality which distance us from the full experience of Christ's love. Even in athletic competition, athletes should be mindful of the promptings of their faith understanding that, "out of faith in Christ good actions must inevitably come."<sup>22</sup> This means that even amidst the intensity of competition against an opponent, athletes must regard the fundamental goodness in one another, endowed equally to each of them by God.

All involved in athletics must remain mindful, just as ordinary human creation must remain mindful, that at life's end we must face the judgment of Christ who reminds us through revelation to St. John: "Behold, I am coming soon. I bring with me the recompense I will give to each according to his deeds." (Rev 22:12) Our deeds or our actions determine a great deal about our relationship with Christ, of which it is clear – the said relationship can certainly be strengthened through athletic participation in a plethora of dimensions and inherent opportunities.

In conclusion, it is important to realize that even as much as athletics are a part of the athlete, the human person who plays the role of the athlete is not defined by his or her participation in the sport. Human beings are complex individuals and cannot be simplified, espe-



cially not by something as insignificant as participation in a simple game. God, in His infinite love for us has promised that He will always be with us – instilling guidance, friendship, faith, hope, and of course, love.

We, as human beings, may be able to ascertain a great deal of knowledge about ourselves, and with respect to athletics – things such as with what level of intensity one must train, what strategic method one must improve in, the desire one may have to win, or even the longing one may have to meet new challenges – but as many of these things about ourselves we may know, with respect to God, we know very little even of ourselves. St. Augustine famously contended, “You [God] were more interior to me, even than I am to myself.”<sup>23</sup> As God is more a part of us than we are, it seems to stand with reason that in His infinite existence God is as much, if not more a part of athletics, than the athlete who participates in them.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bethanne Black, “Winning at all costs: It’s not worth it” *Kids’ & Teens’ Health* (February 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Art Canales, “Cultivating Athletic Spirituality” *National Center for Catholic Youth Sports* (July 2007):1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Sport As Training Ground for Virtue and Instrument of Union Among People,” in *A Catholic Perspective: Physical Exercise and Sport*, edited by R Feeney Minneapolis, MN: Aquinas Press, pp. 59-62.

<sup>4</sup> William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Saint Anthony of Egypt, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Alphabetical Collection* (London: Cistercian Publications, USA).

<sup>6</sup> See Galatians 5:22

<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, “Reflections of the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. ed. William Placher, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Mazza, “Sport as Viewed from the Church’s Magisterium” *The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission*. Laity Today, 10 (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Jim Parry et al, *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, Taylor, & Francis Group, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> *Spe Salvi*, paragraph 48

<sup>11</sup> Catholic Bishops, *Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*. 18 Oct 2008 [www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml)

<sup>12</sup> *Spe Salvi*, paragraph 48

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (New York, NY: Fall River Press, 1955).

<sup>14</sup> Saint Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (New York: Vintage Books).

<sup>15</sup> Paula Ripple, *Called to be Friends* (Notre Dame, IN.: Ave Maria Press, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> Bradley Holt, *Thirsty for God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005)

<sup>17</sup> Luke Salm, *The Work Is Yours: The Life of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, Maryland: Christian Brothers Publications, 1996)

<sup>18</sup> *Spe Salvi*, paragraph 31

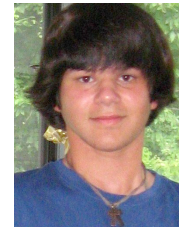
<sup>19</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, paragraph 14

<sup>20</sup> Jim Parry et al, *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, Taylor, & Francis Group, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).



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