

“A Christian Perspective on Sport”
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As a sports chaplain for more than 25 years, I’ve been asked numerous times, in one form or another, “Can a Christian play competitive sport at the highest levels and still be a faithful Christian?” or, “Is being competitive compatible with being a Christian?”

To answer these questions, it is helpful to recall 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

“Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win.

“Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus, I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.”

St. Paul¹ was always fascinated by the picture of the athlete. An athlete must train with intensity if he is to win his contest. And Corinth knew how thrilling contests could be, for at Corinth the Isthmian games, second only to the Olympic games, were held. Furthermore, the athlete undergoes this self-discipline and this training to win a crown of laurel leaves that within days will be a withered chaplet. How much more should the Christian discipline himself to win the crown, which is eternal life?

In this passage, St. Paul sets out a kind of brief philosophy of life:

1. Life is a battle.
2. To win the fight and to be victorious in the race demands discipline. We have to discipline our bodies; it is one of the neglected facts of the spiritual life that very often spiritual depression springs from nothing else than physical unfitness. If a man is going to do his best work in anything he must bring to it a body as fit as he can make it.
3. We need to know our goal. A distressing thing is the obvious aimlessness of the lives of so many people; they are drifting anywhere instead of going somewhere.
4. We need to know the worth of our goal.
5. We cannot save others unless we master ourselves.

The Vatican's first published document on sport: "Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person" provides Catholic teachings that support athletic competition.

Competition² has often been one of the most difficult aspects of a Christian understanding of sport. Can one love their neighbor while trying to block their shot, tackle them behind the line of scrimmage, or check them into the boards?

To respond to this question, it is helpful to step back and look closely at the etymology of the word "competition." The Latin *com-petito*, literally means "to strive together," rendering sport a "mutually acceptable quest for excellence."³ As iron sharpens iron, competition enhances play.... True competition is cooperation, not rivalry, that is at the heart of competition: "In sports, teams or individuals agree cooperatively to oppose one another within the stated goals, rules, and obstacles of the game."⁴ Within this context of playfully developing and delighting in God's creation we can say that *sports are part of God's intention and design* for creation.

It is also helpful, for the purpose of clarity, to look at the *Cambridge Dictionary*⁵ for a definition of sport as *a game, competition, or similar activity, done for enjoyment or as a job, that takes physical effort and skill and is played or done by following particular rules...* Sport also includes, *all types of physical activity that people do to keep healthy or for enjoyment.*

St. John Paul II⁶ affectively was known as the "athlete pope." He believed that sport, in its pure form, could provide a arena for evangelization because the attributes required to become a champion — sacrifice, passion, obedience, discipline — were similar in many respects to those required to become a saint.

"Sportsmanship, as an ideal, is all about character. It's about humility, honesty, loyalty, respect and generosity. It is not a quest for perfection but, like a faith journey, sportsmanship is a quest for virtue. There will be moments of temptation and times of failure but the true sportsman, like the faithful person, will acknowledge setbacks with integrity and strive to become better."

St. John Paul II continues, "Sports⁷ have, in themselves, an important moral and educative significance. They are a training ground of virtue, a school of inner balance and outer control, an introduction to more true and lasting conquests." He called sport a gift from God to mankind.

He wrote: "St. Paul the Apostle proposed the image of the athlete to the Christians of Corinth in order to illustrate Christian life and as an example of effort and constancy

(cf. I Cor 9: 24-25).”⁸

Indeed, the correct practice of sport must be accompanied by moderation and training in self-discipline. It very often also requires a good team spirit, a respectful attitude, appreciation of the qualities of others, honest sportsmanship and humility in recognizing one’s own limitations....

The Christian can also find sports helpful for developing the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance in the race for the wreath that is “imperishable,” as St Paul writes.

Pope Francis commenting on the Vatican publication of “Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document about the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person” wrote:⁹

“Giving one’s very best is a fundamental theme in sports, as athletes both individually and collectively strive to achieve their goals in the game. When a person gives his very best, he experiences satisfaction and the joy of accomplishment. The same is true in human life in general and in living out the Christian faith....This document attempts to help the reader understand the relationship between giving our very best in sports and in living the Christian faith in every aspect of our lives.

Pope Francis continues, “I would like to emphasize the role of sports as a *means for mission and sanctification*. The Church is called to be a sign of Jesus Christ in the world, also through the sports practiced in oratories, parishes, schools, and associations...Every occasion is good for announcing Christ’s message, “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable” (2 Tm 4:2). It is important to bring, to communicate this joy transmitted by sports, which is none other than the discovery of the human potentials that incite us to unveil the beauty of creation and of the human being, made in the image and likeness of God. Sports can open the way to Christ in those places or environments where, for different reasons, it is not possible to announce Him directly, and people, with their witness of joy, practicing a sport as a [team], can be messengers of the Good News....

“We need to deepen the close connection that exists between sport and life, which can enlighten one another, so that the effort to surpass oneself in an athletic discipline also serves as a stimulus to always improve as a person, in all of life’s aspects. This pursuit puts us on the path that, with the help of God’s grace, can lead us to the fullness of life that we call holiness. Sport is a very rich source of values and virtues that help us to become better people. Like the athlete during training, practicing sport helps us to give our best, to discover our limits without fear, and to struggle daily to improve...

Archbishop Jurkovic, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the SIGA (Sport Integrity Global Alliance) Special Session Geneva, in Geneva (November 28, 2017), continues:

“When athletes¹⁰ prepare themselves for a race or a match, the methodical workout develops their talents and helps them to overcome personal challenges, learn discipline and a sense of sacrifice. All this creates the pathway for authentic human development since it requires sacrifice, tenacity, patience, and, above all, humility, which does not receive applause from the public, but which is the real secret of victory.

Archbishop Jurkovic maintains, “The Church attaches great value to sports education, which is a training ground of virtue, a school of inner balance and outer control, an introduction to more true and lasting conquests. As a matter of fact, athletic activities — when practiced in the proper manner — can develop strength, proficiency, perseverance, and harmony, while, at the same time, favoring interior growth, becoming a school of loyalty, courage, endurance, tenacity, and fraternity. Since “in sport, as in life, competing for the result is important, but playing well and fairly is even more important!” the real challenge before us is, therefore, to maintain the honesty of sport.”

The core identity¹¹ of a Christian is that he or she is “in Christ” by the work of the Spirit. This truth flows from the fountain of the gospel: the Christian’s identity is based not on their performance but on God’s grace. One is not a soccer player who happens to be a Christian. He or she is a Christian who plays soccer. The follower of Jesus does not need to build an identity through their accomplishments, for they have been given an identity because of Jesus’s accomplishment. Sports matter, but they must be understood from the right perspective. Because of the gospel, we are not defined by our sin nor by our success, but by our savior.

Sports ethics¹² plays out on the field and off the field. The church does not need more athletes who cut corners so they can get to the top and thank God, but rather athletes with integrity who are unwilling to compromise their conduct because they care more about what God thinks of them than what the world does.

The purpose of sport is *a godly endeavor when approached in prayer and love*, and played with dignity and passion. With your witness of joy in playing the game with your absolute passion and your utmost dignity, you can be messengers of the Good News, setting a good example on how sport can be the school of virtue.

Learn well these lessons of sport and faith that you may be found trustworthy — with good team spirit, respectful attitude, appreciation of the qualities of others, honesty in the game and in life, and humility to recognize one’s own limitations. They will serve you well on your journey of life.

Finally, Pope Francis, in his talk to the Italian Sports Center in 2014, encouraged his listeners, and us today, to give the very best of ourselves, not only in sport, but in the rest of our lives as well:

“As sportsmen,¹³ I invite you not only to play, like you already do, but there is something more: *challenge yourself* in the game of life like you are in the game of sports. Challenge yourself in the quest for good, in both Church and society, without fear, with courage and enthusiasm. Get involved with others and with God; Do not settle for a mediocre “tie,” *give it your best*, spend your life on what really matters and lasts forever.”

Conclusion, Give it Your Best! In Sport and in Life.

Rugby Team Prayer

Franciscan University of Steubenville

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October 16, 2010

“May the Lord bless you and keep you;
May God’s courage fill your hearts,
and God’s strength be in your legs;
May God’s right arm be upon you,
and God’s shoulder be at your back;
May God’s passion inflame your spirit,
and the dignity of God’s presence
guide your play and stem your temper;
This day, may God’s enduring fortitude
raise you up to be men
who are strong, noble and wise.
May the blessing of Almighty God
descend upon you,
The Father, and the Son,
and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.”

Notes:

1. The Letters to the Corinthians, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, *The Daily Study Bible* series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975), 86.
2. Jeremy R. Treat, "More than a Game: A Theology of Sport," *THEMELIOS: An International Journal for Studies of Theological and Religious Studies*, Volume 40 - Issue 3, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/more-than-a-game-theology-of-sport/>
3. Stuart Weir, "Competition as Relationship: Sport as a Mutual Quest for Excellence," in *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports*, ed. Donald Deardorff and John White (Lampeter, Wales: Mellen, 2008), 101–22; See also Watson and Parker, who add, "Etymologically, sport competition can be understood as a 'mutual striving together for excellence' (Greek, *arête*) in which opponents honor their opponents and cooperate to bring out the best in one another" ("Sports and Christianity: Mapping the Field," 32, cf. 53).
4. Goheen and Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, 154. Ellis adds an important point regarding competition: "If competition is an evil that Christians should avoid or discourage such a judgment would place a burden a great deal more than our sporting activity. It would affect business (and the creation of wealth) and education very clearly, but its impact would have much wider reverberations" (*The Games People Play*, 198–99).
5. "Sport." *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed on 7/31/2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sport>
6. Catholic Register Editorial, "Virtue of Sport," July 25, 2012, <https://www.catholicregister.org/columns/item/14926-virtue-of-sport>
7. *Ibid.*
8. John Paul II: 25th World Day of Tourism (27 September 2004) https://www.vatican.va/coinstantinople/john-paul-ii/encyclicals/messages/tourism/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20040625_xxv-giorjata-mojdiale-turismo.html
9. Pope Francis, "Letter to Cardinal Farrell on the New Document on Sport 'Giving the Best of Yourself. A Document about the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person'," June 01, 2018, ZENIT, <https://zenit.org/articles/popes-letter-to-cardinal-farrell-on-new-document-on-sport/>
10. Archbishop Jurkovic, "Lessons from World of Sports," ed. Jim Fair, December 1, 2017, <https://zenit.org/articles/arch-jurkovic-lessons-from-world-of-sports/>
11. *Op. Cit.*, Treat, "More than a Game: A Theology of Sport."
12. *Ibid.*
13. Pope Francis, *Address to members of the sports associations for the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center)*, 7 June 2014) https://www.vatican.va/coinstantinople/francesco/encyclicals/speeches/2014/june/documents/papa-francesco_20140607_societa-sportive.html