

The Catholic Athlete #3: Sports and Health

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This series of short reflections addresses athletes who profess the Christian faith, in an attempt to bring together sports and Christianity. I write as a Catholic, hence the title of the series. I trust, however, that athletes from other denominations may also find spiritual profit in these texts.

Every Christian should care for his or her body and be healthy, to better serve God. In times when a sedentary lifestyle and multiple stressors are causing serious problems to a large percentage of the population, recreational and competitive sports play a very important role, providing the necessary distractions and physical stimuli to prevent cardiovascular disease, lower back problems, obesity, and other maladies. Are you, as an athlete, immune to these problems? Do you really know what to eat and how to care for your body? Should you worry about these things? There is ample information from the exercise sciences which you most likely know or could easily find; meanwhile, that information should be expanded with some Catholic perspectives.

First, excessive training and being obsessed about victory are serious threats to an athlete's health. Finding the right balance between moderation and pushing yourself to the limit remains one of the main challenges in competitive sports (I am sure you can think of one or two athletes at each one of those extremes). Do we find any advice in the Bible or from the Catholic Church?

The Bible tells us, in the book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), also called the Wisdom of Ben Sira, that being healthy and physically fit is a good thing:

“You are better off to be poor and healthy and fit
than to be rich and tormented in one's body.
Health and fitness are better than gold,
and a strong body is better than countless riches.
There is no treasure to compare with health of body
and no happiness to surpass a joyful heart.”

(Sirach 30:14-16. NCB)

Tomás Bolaño (2021) refers to Clement of Alexandria and one of his works, *Paedagogus* (Pedagogue) from the year 200. According to Bolaño, St. Clement approved of gymnastics, recommended physical exercise both for spiritual and physical health, specifically encouraged women to exercise vigorously and, in general, stated that all should exercise in moderation. These recommendations agree with orthodox exercise physiology and psychology. Rodrigo Lau Zelada (2021), using a broken link to a Vatican News radio program, quoted Pope Francis addressing the Tennis National Federation of Italy in 2015. The text of that address is available from Aica: “The sport you practice is very competitive,



but the pressure to get significant results should never lead you to take shortcuts such as doping.” (Aica 2015. Free translation).

Second, it is not just athletes who should find the right balance between athletic success and health in competitive sports; all Christians should aim for a healthy life. In this regard, according to Lau Zelada (2021), our Second Vatican Council offers guidelines regarding the Catholic Church’s vision on participation in sports activities:

“With the more or less generalized reduction of working hours, the leisure time of most men has increased. May this leisure be used properly to relax, to fortify the health of soul and body through spontaneous study and activity, through tourism which refines man's character and enriches him with understanding of others, through sports activity which helps to preserve equilibrium of spirit even in the community, and to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races.” (Pope Paul VI, N°61).

Third, being an athlete is not easy (Aragón Vargas 1991). The kind of patience and perseverance it takes to practice day in and day out for years, often without immediate reward, in pursuit of a gold medal, is not common. The true athlete follows all the rules in order to achieve his or her goal. And it is not easy to be a Christian. The kind of righteousness and perseverance it takes to please God until the last day is available to us only because of God’s grace. Both the Christian and the athlete know very well what it means to fight patiently now to be glorified later. They know how to live wholeheartedly for a goal. Paul compares the Christian life to a race, but with a better prize in the end:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

(1 Corinthians. 9:24-27. NIV)

In summary, the Christian athlete finds several advantages in practicing sports in a regular, disciplined way: his or her approach helps build the kind of character conforming to that of a good Christian, while helping care for the body the way God wants us to.

By the way, some people claim that the Catholic Church does not approve of sports and physical activity. But they are clearly wrong, as discussed by José María Cagigal, from Spain: “Filled are those old volumes of the apologies and the fathers of the Greek and Latin Church, with rebuttals against gnostic theories, Eucratic and Manichaeian heresies, and others, which preached hatred of the body (...) Christian conception has always seen the body with



maximum respect, deserving of honors even after death”. (Bolaño 2021, p. 709, quoting Cagigal, 1957. Free translation). Pio XII supposedly said:

“Far from the truth is both the one who rebukes the Church for not taking care of the bodies and of physical culture, as well as the one who would want to narrow down its competence and its action to the ‘purely religious’ matters’, ‘exclusively spiritual’ (...) There are natural and Christian virtues without which sports could not develop, but would decay inevitably in a closed materialism, an end in itself; Christian principles and norms applied to sport open up higher horizons, illuminated even with rays of mystical light.” (Cipriani 2021, p.498. Free translation).

We are our body, and we are our spirit, loved by God as a whole. In the end, we should care for our bodies, but remembering that physical health is not the supreme good. Being an athlete, even an extremely successful athlete, is not who you ARE, it is only what you DO.

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