

The Catholic Athlete #2: Me, an Idolater?

Luis Fernando Aragón V., Ph.D., FACSM
School of Physical Education and Sports
University of Costa Rica

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.

Yes, you may be an idolater, worshipping money or cars or the stars who perform on stage, not too different from people in ancient times who worshipped the stars of the heavens or abominable figures of animals. You may even worship your own body, worshipping the creature rather than the creator (see Romans 1:25), forgetting that your body is not yours but belongs to God: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). You don’t have to spend endless hours in front of a mirror admiring your athletic body; if you love your body more than you love God, you ARE an idolater. The Bible tells us “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

You are precious in the eyes of God, you are his beloved child. At the same time, have you realized that you are actually nothing more than a servant of God? Even after performing wonderfully, you should recognize that you have only done what was expected of you. Jesus said to his disciples:

“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:7-10).

Your duty as a Christian athlete is to train and compete with excellence, keeping in mind that the glory and praise should always be God’s, not the winner’s. That is no easy task, because sport fans idolize their champions. The whole structure is built around a secular perspective. Olympic Games, for instance, are a celebration of men’s and women’s physical accomplishments. Professional sports reward the best athletes with nice contracts and juicy sponsorships. Meanwhile, I cannot help but think that true Christian games would not award



medals to the winners but would end with praise and adoration of God (see Acts 14:8-17). Perhaps you should consider not accepting any medals or trophies? (Aragón-Vargas, 1991).

Besides, who needs another idol?

You don't. And neither do hundreds, thousands, even millions of people around you.

Pope John Paul II was invited to speak at the inauguration of the renewed Olympic Stadium in Rome on May 13, 1990, on occasion of the FIFA World Cup. He said

“It is not only the champion in the stadium, but the man as a whole person who must become a model for millions of young people, young people who are in need of **leaders** and not **idols**. They need men who know how to communicate to them a taste for the difficult, the sense of discipline, the courage of honesty, and the joy of altruism.” (Pope John Paul II 1990, Section 5. Free translation).

He had made a similar statement to the Italian Tennis Federation and to the athletes participating in the XLIII International Championships of Italy on May 14, 1986: “You are very frequently in the public eye. You therefore have a responsibility, especially to young people and children who look to you for example, to set high standards of sportsmanship and personal excellence.” (Pope John Paul II 1986, Section 2). Furthermore, on September 2, 1987, addressing those participating in the World Athletics Championships, he said

“(…) people tend to exalt you as heroes, as human models, who inspire ideals of life and action, especially among the youth (...) You are watched by many people who expect you to be extraordinary figures, not only during athletic competitions, but also when you are far from the sports fields. We ask of you to be examples of human virtue, beyond your performance of strength and endurance.” (Pope John Paul II, 1987. Section 3. Free translation).

Nobody needs another idol: young people need leaders, role models, examples of human virtue. They need the true God.

May we all, athletes and non-athletes alike, reflect the One who lives in us. Paraphrasing St. Patrick,

*May Christ be in all eyes that watch me train and compete,
may Christ be in all ears that hear me speak,
may Christ be in the heart of everyone
who thinks of my athletic career and my personal life.*



References:

Aragón-Vargas, L.F. (1991). *Some Thoughts on Christianity and Sports*. Kérwá Institutional Repository, University of Costa Rica. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10669/416>

Pope John Paul II (1986). *Address of John Paul II to the Italian Tennis Federation*. May 14, 1986. Available from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19860515_federazione-tennis.html

Pope John Paul II (1987). *Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II ai partecipanti al Campionato Mondiale de Atletica* [Speech by John Paul II to the participants in the World Athletic Championships]. September 2, 1987. Available from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870902_campionato-atletica.html

Pope John Paul II (1990). *Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II per la benedizione dello Stadio Olimpico di Roma*. [Speech by John Paul II for the benediction of the Olympic Stadium in Rome]. May 31 1990. Available from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1990/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19900531_stadio-olimpico.html

All Scriptures are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*[®], NIV[®]. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.[™]. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide, www.zondervan.com

