

The Catholic Athlete #4: Sports as a Tool

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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.

You can find an incredible number of short papers, posters, and quotes, targeting Christian athletes. A significant number of them focus on using religion or faith as an inspiration to be more competitive, to train harder, to improve performance: the Christian faith as a tool. Instead, I would like to address sports as a tool to help us be better Christians.

For the Catholic athlete, sport is not an end in itself. In the words of Pope Paul VI, during a 1975 speech for the Jubilee of Sportsmen:

“The Church, having the mission of welcoming and elevating everything that is found to be beautiful, harmonious, balanced, and forte in human nature, cannot but approve of sports, more so if the engagement of physical strength goes together with the use of moral energies, which can become a magnificent spiritual force (...) Sports competition, even so noble and beautiful, should not be considered an end in itself, but only as a means and an aid.” (Cipriani, 2021. P. 500. Free translation).

John Paul II insisted on this idea, in his 1984 speech to the Free Italian Medical Association of Football (soccer): “The sports goal is not an end in itself. Men and women should be the focus of sports, not the other way round. Each football player, even the professional, is not a robot.” (Pope John Paul II 1984, Section 5. Free translation). Moreover, in his homily during the international sports jubilee in 1984: “there should always prevail a ‘philosophy of sport’ where the key principle is not ‘sports for their own sake’ or for a motivation other than dignity, freedom, and an integral development of man.” (John Paul II, 1984. Free translation). He built on this during a 1989 speech:

“For sport not to have a life of its own, risking thus to erect itself as a vain and harmful idol, those deceitful and misleading expressions before the sporting masses must be avoided (...) Sport is for sure one of the most popular human activities, which can have great influence on people’s behavior, above all on youth; however, it is also subject to risks and ambiguity. It should, therefore, be guided, supported and oriented in such a way as to express its positive side.” (Cipriani, 2021. P. 502. Free translation).



Back in 1959, barely six months after I (Luis Aragon) was born, Pope John XXIII addressed a group of Italian athletes calling them to virtue:

“Sports have a first order value in your lives for exercising virtue (...) Also in sports, in fact, is it possible to develop those strong Christian virtues which God’s grace will eventually make stable and fruitful (...) The spiritual value of sport is deduced more from that sense of temporality which, because of the quest for ever better performances, characterizes every competition.” (Cipriani, 2021, p. 499. Free translation).

That last sentence is a very elegant way to put a phrase we have all heard: *records are meant to be broken*. Saint John XXIII’s point being that because sports achievements are passing, they should help us cultivate those things that will be part of us for the rest of our lives. Like virtues.

A few more words on how sports can help us develop virtues, this time from Papa Montini (Pope Paul VI) addressing cyclists participating in the 1964 *Giro d’Italia*

“The Church sees in sport a gymnastics of the spirit, an exercise in physical education, and an exercise of moral education. And for that reason it admires, approves, supports sports in its various forms (...) The Church admires, approves and promotes sports, particularly if the application of physical strength is accompanied by the application of moral strength, able to make sports a magnificent personal discipline, a severe training in social interactions based on respect for oneself and for others, a principle of social cohesion, getting to weave friendships even in the international field.” (Paul VI, 1964).

Rather high ideals, which are nevertheless non-negotiable. Let’s add one more quote, similar to what I declared as a young volleyball player, that I’d rather lose than win because the other team did not show up. Similar, but more demanding: “A clean defeat is better than a dirty win”. Spoken by Juri Chechi to Pope Francis. (Cipriani, 2021, p. 511. Free translation).

You may say: —Very nice words. But in the end, I am an athlete. Only the best will get the prize!

Yes, athletes strive to get a medal or money prize. The Christian strives to receive an eternal reward:

“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.”

(1 Corinthians 9:24-25).



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