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4-2023

## On the 8th Day: A Catholic Theology of Sport

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### Recommended Citation

Nuzzi, R. (2023). On the 8th day: A Catholic Theology of Sport [Review of the book *On the 8th day*, by Hoven, M., Carney, J. J., & Engel, M. T.]. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 26(1), 119–121. <http://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2601072023>

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BOOK REVIEW

## On the 8<sup>th</sup> Day: A Catholic Theology of Sport

*Reviewed By: Ronald J. Nuzzi*<sup>1</sup>

Authors: Matt Hoven, J. J. Carney, Max T. Engel

Place of Publication: Eugene, Oregon

Publisher: Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

Year of Publication: 2022

Price: \$9.99 (ebook); \$27.00 (paperback); \$41.00 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-6667-0166-6 (ebook); 978-1-6667-0114-2 (paperback); 978-1-6667-0115-9 (hardback)

Number of pages in the book: 191

**Keywords:** sports, sportsmanship, team, play, spirituality, theology.

Catholic school leaders everywhere today are increasingly concerned about the unique and value-added aspects of a Catholic school education. Whether one names it as Catholic identity, culture, or ethos, the challenge remains the same: How best to communicate, teach, share, and celebrate the wisdom and beauty of the Catholic intellectual tradition within the normal operations and day-to-day dynamics of a school.

Educators often point to unique curricular aspects like religious education, prayers, sacraments, and celebration of the liturgical seasons. *On the 8<sup>th</sup> Day* identifies athletic participation or sport as a compelling vehicle to engage youth in ways that connect them to essential elements of a Catholic faith while fully capturing their interest in intense athletic performances and competitions.

The authors, a mix of U.S. and Canadian professors whose friendship was forged during doctoral studies, mine their own experiences through a theological lens, proffer numerous practical examples of

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the deeper meaning to be found in a variety of sports, and display a thoughtful immersion in Catholic philosophy and theology as well as an uncanny ability to relate sport themes, metaphors, and structures to Catholic thought. Examples abound, including hockey, soccer, American football, baseball, basketball, various Olympic games and sports, and everything from backyard pickup games to interscholastic sports and professional leagues.

The book is not, however, some New Age screed simply attempting a literary baptism of popular secular behaviors of the day. Rather, the authors engage the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, the teachings of Plato and Augustine, and the works of a series of more contemporary philosophers, historians, and theologians to support their main thesis: Sport offers a transcendent experience that is sacramental and contributes to human flourishing. Josef Pieper's, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, a text often the subject of admissions essays at private colleges and universities, comes under discussion, as well as Hugo Rahner's, *Man at Play*. Modern studies supporting the central thesis lead the reader to current publications by Christian Smith, Ron Rolheiser, and F. Clark Power, all of which place the Catholic foundation of the book in clear view.

Chapter Five, "*Sports Can Hurt: The Problem of Suffering and Loss in Sports*," presents what is perhaps the strongest argument in the book by relating the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus to common experiences in the world of sport. Challenges such as making versus being cut from the team, riding the bench versus being a starter, winning versus losing a game, a debilitating injury, a disqualifying penalty, and winning versus losing the championship game can all be understood as distinct ways to participate in the Paschal mystery, i.e. to die to self and rise into something new. While this perspective may not be found often on the lips of a losing coach, it is the overall context and posture that this perspective offers that eventually proves redemptive. Personal anecdotes and examples in the book are many and on point, illustrating the power of sport to arouse human passions and fuel the fire of faith.

Given the communitarian aspect of most team sports and the bonding that typically ensues with sports teams, it is somewhat surprising and disappointing that the authors overlook the theological facets of community and communion as well as their relationship to another great mystery of the faith—the Trinity. To be sure, the authors acknowledge that sports are fundamentally relational, but they pass over any explicit connection of community experiences in life and in sport to the community that is God. Such an understanding would elevate the operation of teams beyond cooperation in the pursuit of a common goal to an experience of the transcendent divine, tasting a bit of the life of the Trinity within the routines of teamwork.

Moral reasoning comes into play in analyzing the various rules, rituals, and traditions in sports, some of which have a decidedly liturgical expression. The authors also explicitly address prayer and superstitions in sport and reach a zenith of theological celebration in closing with the topic of eschatology in sports, where they correctly claim and revel in sport's ability to deliver fleeting and unforgettable tastes of glory.

The book would be a helpful and engaging contribution in undergraduate coursework, especially in pastoral theology. Aspiring teachers, coaches, and school administrators in the Catholic sector would benefit from learning to see and understand all sports through such a theological lens, though the sophistication of the theological thought might be beyond the average reader. As educational leaders continue the quest to strengthen the Catholic culture of schools, *On the 8<sup>th</sup> Day* invites them to look no further than their already existing interscholastic and intramural sports and teams as ways to teach about the faith experientially, and to take advantage of this rich source of grace that youth are preternaturally drawn to.