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## **Catholics and Sport in a Global Context**

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### **Introduction**

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If one were to proceed on the basis of a common narrative in the writing of the history of sport it would seem that it does not make sense for Catholic theologians and scholars to pay attention to sport. After all, according to this narrative Catholics historically have associated the human body with sin and evil and therefore loathed the flesh. Because of these attitudes, the claim is that Catholics in earlier periods did not regard physical recreation and sport as important or encourage them. As Stanley Eitzen and George Sage put it,

Early Christianity gradually built a foundation based on asceticism, which is a belief that evil exists in the body, and therefore, the body should be subordinate to the pure spirit. . . . Nothing could have been more damning for the promotion of active recreation and sport (84).

This recurring narrative tells us that it was only after the repressive regime of the Puritans in England and America (who loathed the flesh even more than Catholics allegedly did), that people in Western societies began to have more positive attitudes toward the body. In the nineteenth century, Protestant “muscular Christians” along with people with a secular world view started accepting games and sports and they began to have a more prominent place in

society. The suggestion is that Catholics have only recently embraced sports, finally deciding to go along with the direction the world was going in.

This way of understanding the history of sport has difficulty accounting for what we know about the daily lives of Catholics in earlier periods, however. Catholics participated in games and sports during the medieval period on the feast days of the church year and on Sundays. As William Baker put it in his book *Sports in the Western World*:

The Puritans opposed the recreational life of the masses of Englishmen because it was geared to a seasonal cycle associated with the old Catholic church calendar. Various saints' days, the twelve days of Christmas, Plough Monday (the first Monday after the Twelfth Day), Shrove Tuesday, Easter, May Day, and Whitsuntide (forty days after Easter) – all were occasions for common folk to play football, stoolball, quoits, and bowls; to engage in dancing, boxing and wrestling matches, and running, jumping and throwing contests; and to gamble on bull baits, bear baits, and cockfights (76-77).

Catholics played on feast days in other parts of Europe as well. Natalie Zemon Davis points out that from the late medieval period up through the sixteenth century the list of gaming and athletic contests that Catholics engaged in on feast days in Europe “would be longer than the 81 games in Bruegel’s famous painting or the 217 games that Rabelais gave to Gargantua” (98). And the feast days were numerous, typically accounting for one third of the calendar year. The games and sports were also depicted in the religious art of the period, on stained glass windows and woodcuts in churches and in prayer books.



Figure 1. A fourteenth century (1350) roundel in the Great East window, known as the Crecy window, in Gloucester Cathedral.

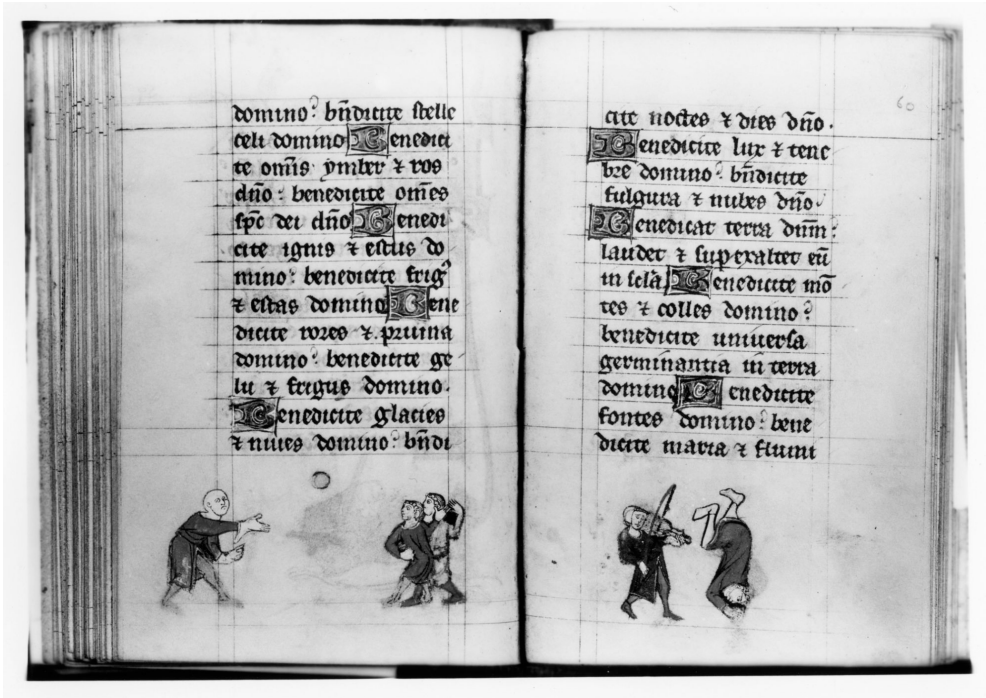


Figure 2. Book of Hours with Ball Players, Acrobat and Musician, Franco-Flemish, circa 1300. Walters Art Museum. Used with permission.

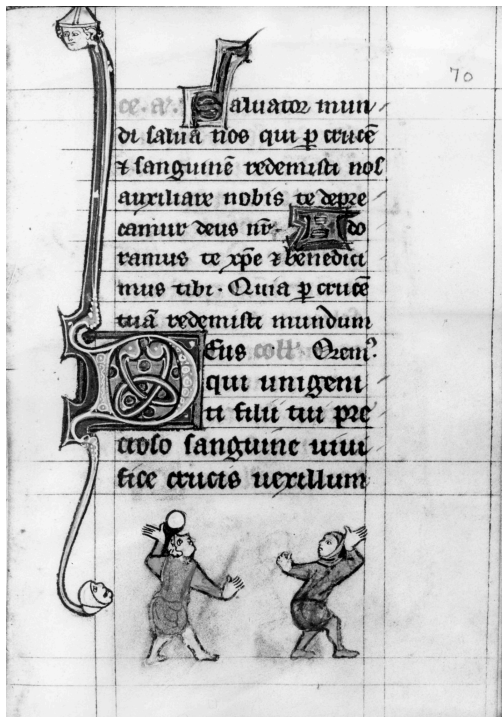


Figure 3. Book of Hours with Ball Players, Franco-Flemish, circa 1300. Walters Art Museum. Used with permission.

When the humanists began running the first schools primarily for lay students during the Renaissance, they included time for students to play games and sports in the daily schedule. The early Jesuits followed the humanist lead and provided time and space for play and sports in the first schools they opened in the late sixteenth century – and all of their subsequent schools. These developments would have a significant influence on education as the Jesuits were running nearly eight hundred schools in Europe and in other parts of the world by the mid-eighteenth century.

The ease with which games and sports were incorporated into medieval and early modern Catholic cultures and educational institutions was supported by at least three factors.

First, contrary to what Sage and Eitzen claim, early and medieval Christian theologians emphasized the goodness of the material world and that the person was a *unity* of body, soul, and spirit. Indeed, these theologians spent much of their time criticizing Gnostics and Manicheans, precisely because these groups regarded the material world and the human body as evil *in se*. To do so, they appealed to fundamental Christian beliefs about the creation of the material world (“And God saw that it was good” is the refrain), the incarnation (Word became *flesh*) and the resurrection of the person as *body and soul*. This understanding of the material world and the body provided support for the emergence of a religious culture in which the body was integrally involved in religious practices – in pilgrimages, religious dramas, crawling to the cross, praying with stained glass windows and statues, and in the sacraments, which made use of water, fire, oil, bread, and wine. When Michel Montaigne wrote in an essay on education in 1575 that “We are not bringing up a soul, we are not bringing up a body, we are bringing up a person” and therefore that physical education and sports should be included in the school day, he was writing out of this longer tradition (59).

Secondly, there was an understanding of the relationship between faith and culture which tended toward the acceptance of non-Christian customs and cultural traditions, such as sport. St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, played an important role in this regard. In his letters to Greeks living in places like Corinth and Phillipi, he used athletic imagery as a matter of course to describe the Christian life. As he put it in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Some of the most prominent early Christian spiritual writers, following St. Paul’s example, also made use of athletic metaphors to describe the dynamics of the Christian life. They used these metaphors most often when describing the Christian life at its most challenging and even costly, in accounts of the suffering and trials of the martyrs and the ascetic<sup>1</sup> lives of monks

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<sup>1</sup> For Eitzen and Sage, as was mentioned earlier, “asceticism” in the Christian tradition is “a belief that evil exists in the body” (84). In fact, the word “asceticism” is taken from the Greek word *askesis* which was used in ancient Greece to refer to the self-denial and discipline of an athlete in training. Rather than referring to something in

(see Kelly 2012: 99-106). St. Paul's opening to the Greeks also set a precedent that influenced the way Christians in later periods regarded the customs of new cultures that were converting to Christianity that were not morally objectionable in themselves, including their games and sports. The tendency was to accept and incorporate such customs, while criticizing their excesses or abuses. The opening to the Greeks, of course, also meant that Christianity would be influenced by Greek philosophical traditions, which is related to the next factor.

For the ancient Greeks, moderation was regarded as central to a life of virtue. This way of understanding virtue influenced how Thomas Aquinas thought about play and sport. According to Thomas, there can be a "virtue about games" because a moderate person should not be spending the whole of his or her life working or worrying about work. As he put it:

*I pray, spare yourself at times: for it becomes a wise person sometimes to relax the high pressure of his attention to work (Augustine).* Now this relaxation of the mind from work consists in playful words and deeds. Therefore it becomes a wise and virtuous person to have recourse to such things at times. Moreover, the Philosopher [Aristotle] assigns to games the virtue of eutrapelia, which we may call *pleasantness* (1947: 2.II-II.168.2).

While Thomas references the need for a break from work in the above quote, in his view play is not only the "pause that refreshes" so one can return to work and be more productive. Nor is its value to be found in extrinsic goods that it produces. Rather, as he put it, "what we do in play is done for its own sake" (1988: 527). Thomas even viewed play as similar to contemplation because both activities are enjoyable and done for their own sake (1988: 527). In response to the objection that virtuous acts must be directed toward an end, Thomas says that the enjoyment experienced in play is directed to "the recreation and rest of the soul" (1947: 2.II-II.168.2, reply to obj. 3). For Thomas, then, play has its *telos* in the human person being fully alive.

Play is "necessary in the intercourse of human life," according to Thomas (1947: 2.II-II.168.3, reply to obj. 3). It is only sinful if it is excessive, or misused by becoming indecent or causing harm. But he pointed out that *it was also possible to sin by having a lack of play in one's life*. In his view, whatever is against reason is a sin. "Now it is against reason," he wrote, "for a person to be burdensome to others, by offering no pleasure to others, and by hindering their enjoyment" (1947: 2.II-II.168.4).

Thomas's "play ethic" had a significant influence on preachers and educators in the late medieval period and beyond (for the influence on preachers, see Rizzi). The humanist and early Jesuit educators were careful not to have young people studying for too long without some recreation. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, wrote in a treatise about education for the still very young King Ladislaus of Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia, for example:

I approve of and praise your playing ball with boys your own age. . . . One should not always be intent on schooling and serious affairs, nor should huge

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Christianity that is anti-body and anti-sport, then, it is an example of the way in which early Christian spirituality was influenced by ancient Greek athletic culture.

tasks be imposed upon boys, for they may be crushed with exhaustion by such labors, and in any case if they feel overcome by irksome burdens they may be less receptive to learning (Kallendorf: 143).

The “Rules” of the first Jesuit-run colleges likewise point out that “It is necessary to moderate the spiritual exercises, such as devotions and studies.” Accordingly, the academic schedule should provide “some hours for honest bodily recreation, as after lunch or dinner for a while” (Lukacs: 68, 70). This emphasis on moderation and the importance of recreation was also present in the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), the formal education program for the Jesuit schools. “A nice balance should be maintained,” the authors of the *Ratio* wrote, “between study time and recreation periods” (Farrell: 12). Because the *Ratio Studiorum* was the plan of studies for all Jesuit schools, it was common to set aside space and time for recreation and sport in the network of Jesuit schools throughout Europe and beyond.

### The Rift Between Faith and Sport

The factors that have contributed to lack of attention to sport by Catholic theologians and scholars in our time have more to do with dynamics that have shaped the modern world than with an anti-body sentiment that has allegedly always been part of the Catholic world view. I will discuss three of these factors.

As we have seen, Christians in the early and medieval periods insisted on the unity of the human person, body, soul, and spirit. This sensibility is evident in the religious culture that emerged in this context, where embodied practices were the locus for spiritual experience. According to Charles Taylor, one of the most significant developments associated with the elite-led religious reform movements starting in the late sixteenth century and with the body/soul dualism of Rene Descartes, was that bodily engagement with the world was no longer regarded as the avenue to truth or to spiritual experience in the same way it had been in earlier periods. Taylor refers to this as a process of “excarination,” by which he means “the steady disembodiment of spiritual life, so that it is less and less carried in deeply meaningful bodily forms, and lies more and more ‘in the head’” (771).

While, as Antonella Stelitano points out in this volume, Pope Pius X (1903-1914) was accepting and encouraging of sport and understood its significance with respect to peaceful coexistence and international relations, other papal statements about sport in the early twentieth century reveal that the broader cultural phenomenon of “excarination” had an impact on Catholic theology as well. It is evident in a talk Pope Pius XII gave to the young men of Catholic Action in 1940. In this talk, the pope told the young men:

Everything which has to do with physical exercise, with contests, rivalry, sport, interests and attracts the youth of today. But young Christians know that intellectual exercises and especially the race toward intellectual light . . . are all the more beautiful, noble, and gripping as knowledge and strength of the mind surpass and outstrip muscular strength and the precarious agility and suppleness of the body’s members (Benedictine Monks of Solesmes: 22).

Pius XII regarded the fascination of people with physical exercise and sport as an instance of a broader modern preoccupation with the material world, which tended to neglect spiritual values. By way of contrast, he emphasized that Christians should value “intellectual exercises”



and the “race toward intellectual light.” The problem is that his statement makes it sound like the spiritual life is not associated with bodily activities such as sport but rather takes place “in the head.” This view is expressed in starker terms later in his talk, when he said:

You are seeking a mother who will teach you more the things of the mind and the spirit than those of the body and the material order. And where have you found that mother and that most loving teacher? Where did she communicate to you, not the life of the body, but the life of the spirit, the most high destiny of your soul? (Benedictine Monks of Solesmes: 22).

Secondly, play began to be regarded with a new kind of suspicion, especially in the North Atlantic world, as we entered the modern era. In Protestant traditions this was in large part due to the emergence of the work ethic, which associated godliness with one’s calling or work. Because play could distract from one’s calling, it started to be associated with sin in a new way. Seventeenth-century English Puritan minister Richard Baxter expressed this view in his *Christian Directory*, in which he lamented that his readers

have no mind of your work, because your mind is so much upon your play . . .  
[you] are weary of your business, because your sports withdraw your hearts . . .  
They [play and sports] utterly unfit you, and corrupt your hearts with such a kind of sensual delight, as makes them more backward to all that is good (619).

While Catholic theologians did not embrace the Puritan work ethic, many Catholic theologians and pastors did tend toward a moral rigorism as Catholicism entered the modern world, particularly with regard to the area of sexuality. Charles Taylor sees this in nineteenth century France in a “disproportionate fuss” on the part of clergy regarding dancing and their attempts to suppress or clean up folk festivals. Young people who refused to change were denied communion. The concern with such matters, according to Taylor, seems obsessive at times (493).

Another reason for the separation between faith and sport is that the Catholic Church tended to see itself as “at war” with the modern world. In the wake of such significant events as the Reformation, the emergence of a scientific *Weltanschauung* and the Enlightenment, and the French revolution, most church leaders and theologians had adopted a defensive and critical posture toward everything that was deemed modern. Some Catholic theologians in the early to mid-twentieth century were attempting to engage with social, cultural, and intellectual movements or trends of the modern world, but they tended to run into trouble with church leadership. In the process a gulf was created between faith and cultural traditions. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., superior general of the Jesuits, still saw this to be the case in 1978, when he wrote to Jesuits of an “abyss which separates faith and culture” (179). It is no surprise then, that as we entered the modern world there developed a separation between faith traditions and sport, and that Catholic theologians and scholars had not been paying attention to the lived experiences of people in this domain of culture. It was precisely at this time that modern sport was beginning to have a new level of importance in many societies throughout the world.

## Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council, which took place between 1962 and 1965, challenged the negative attitudes that many church leaders and theologians had toward the modern world

prior to the Council. Pope John XXIII said in his speech to open the Council that he had called the gathering in order to “open the windows of the church and let the fresh air of the Spirit blow through.” And he criticized the “prophets of doom, who were always forecasting the worst disasters, as though the end of the world was at hand.” In the Council documents there was a shift from an understanding of the Church primarily or exclusively as a hierarchical body to a recognition that the Church is the entire “people of God.” This “people of God” was characterized as a pilgrim people who journey with and alongside all people of good will. As it was put in the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts (Flannery: GS 1).

The approach at the council shifted from condemnation of a modern world gone astray to an emphasis on *dialogue* with all people of good will. As the bishops put it, “the most eloquent demonstration of the church’s solidarity, respect and love for the entire human family cannot be given except by entering a dialogue with it” (Flannery: GS 3). The dialogue with the human family was to center around “the dignity of the human person and the profound significance of his activity in the world” (Flannery: GS 40). Theologians and those involved in pastoral care were encouraged to be in dialogue with and learn from “the findings of secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology” so that “the faithful will be brought to a purer and more mature faith” (Flannery: GS 62). The council also published separate documents on ecumenism and non-Christian religions in which they encouraged Catholics to dialogue with other Christians and persons of other religious traditions.

Another important development at the council was that there was a new level of attention to and appreciation of the lay vocation. *Lumen Gentium* famously emphasized that there is a “universal call to holiness” (Flannery: LG 5). A separate document dedicated to “The Apostolate of Lay People” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) highlighted that every baptized person is called to be “priest, prophet and king” and to participate actively in the mission of the church (Flannery: AA 2). Because the lay vocation is lived in the midst of society, this document also implicitly and indirectly supported the view that the church needed to pay attention more closely to people’s lived experiences in society and in various domains of culture.

A new attention to culture is already evident at the council itself. In *Gaudium et Spes* it is pointed out that human beings “can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture” (Flannery: GS 53). The church has been sent to all ages and nations, and “therefore is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any set of customs, ancient or modern” (Flannery: GS 58). Faithful to its traditions and conscious of its universal mission, the church “can enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves” (Flannery: GS 58). The council points out that culture itself is to be subordinated to the integral development of the person, the good of the community, and of the whole of humanity (Flannery: GS 59).

In *Gaudium et Spes*, sport is discussed under the category of leisure activities which “are properly employed to refresh the spirit and improve the health of mind and body” (Flannery: GS 61). According to the council, physical exercise and sport can “help to create harmony of



feeling even on the level of community as well as fostering friendly relations between people of all classes, countries and races.” Christians are encouraged to cooperate in the cultural framework and collective activities of our time, “to humanize them and imbue them with a Christian spirit.” These activities of contemporary life, such as sport, will not confer full cultural development, however, “unless they are accompanied by a deeply thought out evaluation of the meaning of culture and knowledge of the human person” (Flannery: GS 61).

Vatican II was also the first truly global council of the Catholic Church. Twenty-nine bishops opened the Council of Trent which took place from 1545-1563. They were from Italy, France and Spain. At Vatican I (1869-70), seven hundred and thirty-seven bishops were present, although almost all of them were still from Europe. At Vatican II, on the other hand, two thousand four hundred and fifty bishops attended (although not all attended every session). While there were still a large number of bishops from Europe (1089) what was new was the number of bishops participating from other regions, such as Asia (374), Africa (296), South America (489), North America (404), Oceania (75), and Central America (84). Many of these bishops came from these regions of the world. There were so many bishops present from non-European cultures, in part, because papal encyclicals in the early and mid-twentieth century emphasized the importance of establishing a native clergy and hierarchy and of full adaptation to local cultures in these contexts (see Treacy).

### **Faith and Cultures**

According to Karl Rahner, it is instructive to think of three epochs of church history. The first is the proclamation of the gospel in the Jewish context. The second was inaugurated when the early Church, influenced by arguments made by St. Paul, made the decision that non-Jews did not have to be circumcised and follow other Mosaic laws in order to be accepted into the Christian community. This was so consequential (as was mentioned earlier) because it set in motion a dialogue with Greek and later other European cultural traditions, that would profoundly shape and influence Christianity and the cultures themselves.

According to Rahner, we are living in the third epoch now, as the Church is making the transition from being a European to being a world Church. From a theological perspective, the Church has always potentially been a world Church, given the universal character of the salvation that is offered in Christ. But, according to Rahner, the Church is only in actuality becoming a world Church recently. And the Second Vatican Council played a crucial role in this regard (1981: 77-89).

### **Inculturation**

The term “inculturation” came into use after Vatican II. It was initially most often used and developed by members of the Society of Jesus. It has since become part of the terminology of the wider church, however, as papal and Synod documents refer to it (John Paul II 1979b; Bishops, Extraordinary Synod 1985) and theologians have written extensively about it (Arbuckle; Schineller; Schreiter 1989, 1994, 1999; Phan; Pieris 1985, 1993). Pedro Arrupe, who was the superior general of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983 made a first attempt at explaining the term. In a letter to the Jesuits, he wrote that

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds

expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it so as to bring about a “new creation” (173).

Arrupe’s successor as superior general, Peter Hans Kolvenbach described inculturation as “the existential dialogue between a living people and the living gospel.” This was an approach that highlighted the experiential, dynamic character of inculturation, understood as an encounter between the lived experiences of people in a particular cultural context and the living gospel.

Of course, cultures are complex. And one of the aspects of this complexity has to do with the presence and influence of religious traditions. The influence works both ways, that is cultures are shaped in important ways by religious traditions and the religious traditions themselves are shaped by the cultures in which they are present. This means that any attempt on the part of Catholic theologians to understand a culture or to move toward meaningful inculturation also requires dialogue with other religious traditions.

### **Faith, Cultures, and Sport**

After the Second Vatican Council Catholic theologians and scholars are beginning a new level of engagement and dialogue with sport. They have started to publish journal articles, special issues of journals, and books on the topic (Barbieri; Baum and Coleman; Bustarret; Byrne; Endres; Kelly 2012, 2015; Lixey; Neary; McClelland and Merrilees; Munoz and Tolleneer; Stelitano, Dieguez, and Bortolato; Pichon; Vanysacker). They have also gathered at regional and international conferences in Spain, England, Belgium, Italy, and the United States dedicated to the topic of sport. Catholic scholarship has been helped a great deal by the development of the academic sub-discipline of social history which focuses on the experiences of daily life of ordinary people. Because of new studies in this sub-discipline, which emerged in France in the 1930s and in the English-speaking world in the 1960s, we have learned a great deal about the games and sports of Catholics in medieval and early modern Europe (Aries; Arcangeli 2003, 2012; Brailsford 1991, 1992; Burke; Carter 1988, 1992; Huizinga; Hutton 1994, 1997; McClean; McClelland; McClelland and Merrilees; Merdgrignac; Mehl; Orme; Reeves; Thomas; Verdon 1996, 2001, 2003; Zemon Davis). Some Catholic scholars also began to direct their study to “lived religion,” which is similar to the sub-discipline of social history in its attention to the lived religious experiences of ordinary people in daily life. As Robert Orsi, a Catholic scholar and leader in the study of lived religion, put it, “[R]eligious practices and understandings only have meaning in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to the life experiences and actual circumstance of the people using them” (xxxviii; see also Byrne: 10-11; Massa). On a more pastoral level, leaders in Catholic parishes, youth organizations, and high schools have also started to reflect meaningfully and critically about the place of play and sport in the integral formation of young people and become committed to the training of youth coaches to help foster such development.

Theologians were also encouraged by papal addresses on sport. There had been a number of such addresses before Vatican II by Pius XII. While some of Pius XII’s earlier talks showed traces of a body/soul dualism, his later addresses increasingly emphasized the unity of the person as the basis for engaging with and thinking about sport. In the post-Vatican II

addresses, gone was any hint of “excarnation.” John Paul II, for example, in an address to Italian and Argentine athletes in 1979, referred to the controversies with the Gnostics and Manicheans:

It is worth recalling, . . . that already in the first centuries Christian thinkers resolutely opposed certain ideologies, then in fashion, which were characterized by a clear devaluation of the physical, carried out in the name of a mistaken exaltation of the spirit. On the basis of biblical data, they forcefully affirmed, on the contrary, a unified view of the human being (1979a).

The post-Vatican II addresses of the popes on sport reflected the general orientation of the Council, particularly in their emphasis on dialogue. John Paul II pointed out that St. Paul, in his attempt to make the gospel known to the Greeks, drew from the concepts, images, terminologies, modes of expression, not only of the Jewish heritage, but also of Hellenic culture. “And he did not hesitate to include sport among the human values which he used as points of support and reference for dialogue with the people of his time” (1984). According to John Paul II, St. Paul did not make references to sport merely to illustrate a higher ethical or aesthetic ideal. Rather, he recognized the fundamental validity of sport and its role in the formation of the human person and of cultures themselves. In this way he

established the Christian attitude towards [sport] as towards the other expressions of natural human faculties such as science, learning, work, art, love and social and political commitment. Not an attitude of rejection or flight, but one of respect, esteem, even though correcting and elevating them: in a word, an attitude of *redemption* (1984).

What would an “attitude of redemption” be in relation to sport in our own context, according to John Paul II? Judging from his many addresses on sport, an important part of it has to do with recognizing the dignity of the human person. The person does not exist to serve sport, according to the former pope; rather, sport should serve the human person in his integral development, which includes his faith life and spirituality. As he put it:

Athletic activity, in fact, highlights not only the person’s valuable physical abilities, but also his intellectual and spiritual capacities. It is not just physical strength and muscular efficiency, but it also has a soul and must show its complete face (2000).

According to John Paul II, this will most likely happen when we remember that “sport is the *joy of life, a game, a celebration . . .*” and when it is “freed from excess technical perfection and professionalism through a recovery of its free nature, its ability to strengthen bonds of friendship, to foster dialogue and openness to others, as an expression of the richness of being, much more valid and to be prized than having” (1984).

Pope Francis has also emphasized the importance of celebration and joy in sport. He laments when there is excessive influence of business interests in sport, and is wary of an exclusively economic way of framing sport, which he sees as undermining its human meaning. This meaning, he says, is experienced in the joy of playing. “When sports is considered only within economic parameters or for the sake of victory at any cost,” he said to the members of the European Olympic Committee, “one runs the risk of reducing athletes to mere

merchandise for the increasing of profit. These same athletes lose the true meaning of their activity, the joy of playing that attracted them as children and that inspired them to make many real sacrifices and become champions” (2013). For Francis, it is when sport remains a game and people experience the joy of playing that sport can facilitate the growth of the person. Speaking to young people at a meeting with members of the associations of Italian Sports Centre, he said “It is important, dear boys and girls, *that sports remain a game!* Only by remaining a game will it do good for the body and spirit” (2014).

Because the human person is social by nature, sport also serves the person by helping to foster the common good, as was alluded to in the quote above from John Paul II. The common good has to do with the social conditions that allow for the possibility for all persons to flourish. For many young people, playing on a sports team is one of their first experiences of being a part of something larger than themselves and can be an introduction to the common good. As Pope Francis put it when speaking to young people at the seventieth anniversary of the Italian Sports Center:

I also hope you can taste the beauty of teamwork, which is so important in life. *No individualism!* No to playing for yourselves. In my homeland, when a player does this, we say: “This guy wants to devour the ball all by himself!” No, this is individualism: don’t devour the ball, be team players. To belong to a sports club means to reject every form of selfishness and isolation, it is an opportunity to encounter and be with others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in brotherhood (2014).

According to the popes, sport should also foster encounters between people and a sense of the unity of the human family. As Pope Francis said when speaking to the members of the European Olympic Committee:

Sport must always go hand in hand with solidarity, because sporting activity is called upon to radiate the most sublime values throughout society, especially the promotion of the unity of peoples, races, religions and cultures, thus helping to overcome many divisions that our world still experiences today (2013).

Another theme in papal addresses is inclusion. Since sport is associated with human goods, then societies and educational institutions should provide opportunities for all who wish to participate to be able to do so. This includes persons living in poverty or who are experiencing displacement and persons with disabilities. In an address to the Italian Sports Center that focused on youth sport, Pope Francis said, “Everyone gets to play, not just the best, with the advantages and limitations that each has, indeed, focusing on the disadvantaged, as Jesus did.” In this way, according to Francis, “sport becomes an authentic service to the growth of the community” (2014).

At the level of the Curial Offices at the Vatican, in 2004 Pope John Paul II established the “Office of the Church and Sport” in the Pontifical Council for the Laity. This office is now housed in the newly formed Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, and has hosted seminars having to do with topics such as chaplaincy, coaching the whole person, the role of Catholic sport associations and has published the proceedings from these seminars (Pontificium

Concilium Pro Laicis 2006, 2008, 2009). The Pontifical Council for Culture also has a section that deals with sport and hosted an international gathering in 2016 titled “Sport at the Service of Humanity” at which Pope Francis, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, IOC President Thomas Bach, and other prominent leaders from sport, education, business, and the religious traditions of the world met to discuss sport. This conference highlighted the importance of sport providing a context for encounter and dialogue with people from different cultural, racial, religious and socio-economic contexts. The conference also focused on inclusion. The founders of the Homeless Olympics and Paralympics spoke and participants on the Refugee Olympic Team and in the Special Olympics gave powerful testimonies about the importance of participation in sport in their lives. Squash player Maria Toorpakay Wazir told of how she dressed as a boy for the first sixteen years of her life to be able to participate in sports in her native Pakistan, where girls were not allowed to play sports. The Pontifical Council for Culture has co-sponsored several regional gatherings subsequently. They are also developing with educational consultants in Johannesburg, South Africa a global “Skills for Life” formation program for youth involved in sport. In June 2018, the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life published the first Vatican document about sport called “Giving the best of yourself: A document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person.” Because historically and in the present it is lay people who are most involved in sport activities, it is fitting that the church’s first major document about sport, “Giving the Best of Yourself” would come from the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

### **This Supplementary Volume**

The authors in this volume are engaged in the kind of meaningful dialogue with sport that is characteristic of the post-Vatican II church. In introducing their work, I will mention the ways it is influenced by the Catholic cultural and theological heritage in relation to sport and the more recent teaching of the popes, as well as the ways it carries forward this heritage and opens up new understandings of the human and spiritual meaning of sport in our time.

First, some general comments. The authors are from several different countries and therefore cultural contexts, namely the United States, Nicaragua, India, England, Canada, and Italy. The positive (graced) and negative (shadow) sides of sport are different in each context, as will be discussed below. In reading these essays, the reader will recognize the importance of taking cultural contexts seriously, and the need for any theological or spiritual reflection to be “inculturated.” The reader will be observing in the articles an “existential dialogue between a living people and the living God” taking place with respect to sport as a cultural phenomenon.

The scholars who have contributed to this journal bring to bear the lenses of several academic disciplines on their study of sport, namely: psychology, sociology, history, moral development, religious education, international relations, missiology, and theology. The advantage of making use of the lenses of these academic disciplines is that they help to provide a “thick description” of the human experiences associated with sport in different cultural contexts. Any meaningful theology or spirituality of sport needs to first understand the human and cultural experiences under consideration, in both their positive (graced) and negative (shadow) manifestations. And these academic disciplines help us to attain this kind of understanding.

The teaching of the church as expressed in the addresses of the popes provide general principles or guidelines for thinking about sport. They emphasize, for example, that the dignity of the person should be the primary consideration when evaluating sport practices or policies. And that sport should serve the human person in his or her integral development, which includes his or her faith life or spirituality. But, apart from occasional discussion of personal growth in the virtues in sport, they do not attempt to explain in detail *how it is* that sport participation leads to the integral development of the person or how dynamics in particular cultural contexts might impact this either positively or negatively. This is where the work of the scholars in this volume, whose research is in diverse disciplines such as psychology, moral development, and religious education can be very helpful. The same thing is true with respect to the common good, the unity of the human family, and social inclusion. The teaching of the church provides us with general principles with regard to these themes, but research is needed in order to understand the concrete dynamics in sport in particular cultural contexts that either impede or help to foster these desired objectives. In this volume, scholars in disciplines such as history, sociology, missiology and international relations attempt to further our understanding in this regard in their own cultural contexts.

### The Articles

F. Clark Power and Lillie R. Rodgers write from the United States where they point out that the Protestant work ethic has exercised an enormous influence historically and still influences Americans of all backgrounds today. They are concerned in this context about a loss of the play element in youth sport. Similar to Thomas Aquinas, they understand play-sport as autotelic and yet as having benefits for the person and the community. Drawing on the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs, they claim that “sports *qua* play constitute an ideal paideia for the social, moral and spiritual development” of young people. They point out that participation in youth sport in the United States today is increasingly becoming a possibility only for those with means to pay. Children from poorer communities are deprived the opportunity to experience either the enjoyment or the developmental benefits of playing sports. They say that we must develop again civic programs and extracurricular opportunities in schools that in the past have allowed children from all socio-economic backgrounds the opportunity to play sports.

Timothy Neary writes from the United States about Bishop Bernard Shiel (1886–1969) and the organization he founded in Chicago in 1930, the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). Shiel received the “call” to start the CYO when he was serving as chaplain at the Cook County Jail and was accompanying young men on the “last mile” to their executions for capital offenses. Shiel believed such young men were both perpetrators and victims, that they had been let down by a society that failed to provide an environment within which they could grow into healthy adults with a moral compass. The CYO was his response to this situation. Although his experiences in prison were with young men, the CYO was for both boys and girls right from the start. The CYO is an excellent example of the *inclusion* of young people from poorer communities and the margins of society on playing fields and sports teams. Because Shiel also included young people from different cultures, races, religious traditions and socio-economic classes, the CYO became a context within which young people would *encounter* other youth from very different backgrounds from their own. Neary sees in the vision



and inspiration of Bishop Shiel a model for the way forward today for the Catholic Church in the United States, a country which is experiencing social instability due to racial tensions and class divisions and is being torn apart by crime, gangs, and gun violence.

Juan Jose Sosa is Director of the Sociology Department at the Universidad Centro Americana in Managua, Nicaragua, the second poorest country of the Western hemisphere. He is concerned primarily with the debilitating effects of poverty and social exclusion on young people. The Santo Domingo soccer league run by the Our Lady of Guadalupe Christian Life Community (of which Mr. Sosa is also a member) was started to reach out to young people in one of the poorest barrios of Managua, and to begin a process of meaningful inclusion of these youth. The league is for male adolescents and young men ages 14-25. It started with twelve teams, and currently has twenty-five. Games are played on Sundays from February through November. Participants in the league are required to participate in workshops on topics that playing soccer itself naturally gives rise to such as leadership, masculinity, emotional intelligence, community, and violence. There are also workshops on other topics such as family dynamics, addictions, and spiritual growth. Participants report valuing especially the opportunity for recreation and enjoyment in a safe space, saying this prevented them from falling into bad habits such as alcohol or drug abuse; the fact that their relationships and friendships were strengthened and that they made new friends by participating in workshops with players from other teams; and that because of their participation they were pulled away from violence, and began to adopt values like coexistence, respect, fellowship, and solidarity.

Bryan Lobo, S.J., who is from Mumbai, India and now teaches at the Gregorian University in Rome, writes about sport in India from the perspective of mythical, theological, spiritual, anthropo-socio-cultural, and commercial paradigms. Secularism has not occurred in India in the same way it has in many Western countries. Indeed, religion and spirituality still have an important presence in Indian society and in people's everyday lives. One of the pressing issues in the Indian context is how people from different religious traditions can co-exist peacefully. This requires dialogue, including about matters of religion and spirituality. Lobo, a Jesuit priest and missiologist, brings Hindu and Catholic theological and spiritual traditions into such dialogue around sport. He finds strong resonances (as well as some differences) between the two religious traditions, in particular with respect to the theology and spirituality of play.

Mark Nesti, a psychologist who works with soccer players and teams in the English Premier League, points out that many of the players in the league come from outside of England and are from religious and often Catholic backgrounds. Nesti points out that sport psychologists working with professional soccer players take a counselling-based approach where players often bring up topics having to do with meaning, spirituality, and even religious belief. And yet the dominant models in sport psychology do not engage with these dimensions of human experience. Nesti develops an approach to counseling that is influenced by the personalist philosophical tradition as represented by Josef Pieper and other Catholic thinkers that can accommodate these dimensions of players' experiences and recognizes terms such as play, joy, sacrifice, courage, and faith. Pointing out that "it has been a remarkable experience listening to English Premier League players talk about the importance of play and playing in their lives," he develops a phenomenology of play, drawing on Thomas Aquinas, Josef Pieper,

and the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, thereby broadening out the framework within which sports psychologists can listen to the players they are accompanying.

Matt Hoven interviewed 15-year-old high school students in Edmonton, Canada, attempting to understand how religion and spirituality supported students' psychological, moral, and social development. Students reported that religion or spirituality supported them in various ways, including helping them to be calm and have confidence, to be better people by not retaliating on the court, or forgiving someone rather than seeking revenge. They also spoke of a tension between their religion or spirituality and the hyper competitive environment of youth sport. Additionally, students mentioned the important roles that coaches played in their lives as mentors, at times becoming life coaches or acting in effect as spiritual advisors. While he found that religion or spirituality did support students' growth in these ways, Hoven also discovered that students had not previously considered how religion or spirituality influenced their sport participation, although all his interviewees considered themselves to be religious or spiritual and were attending a Catholic school. They had tended to compartmentalize their lives: religion or spirituality was one world, and sport was another. In this sense, religion or spirituality was "privatized." For Hoven, educators in Canadian Catholic schools who are interested in the integral formation of youth in sport need to do better at finding ways to help young people to explicitly reflect on religion or spirituality and its relation to their everyday lives.

Antonella Stelitano is writing from Italy and her academic background is in International Relations. She points out that in the early twentieth century Pope Pius X (1903–1914) understood very quickly the value of Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic movement for international relations and peace building and was an important collaborator of de Coubertin's in these areas. The popes in the middle of the twentieth century, however, tended to emphasize the educational value of sports for personal growth, rather than its importance for intercultural or international relations. She highlights the importance of the deterioration of international relations in the post-World War II context and the rise of the Cold War for a renewed emphasis by the popes on the importance of sport for international relations and peace-building. It was also at this time that the United Nations began work with the Vatican and the International Olympic Committee to promote international sporting events as opportunities for persons from different cultural, racial, religious and national contexts to encounter one another. According to these three international bodies, such encounters can be a significant help in bringing about peaceful coexistence.

This supplementary volume is intended to be illustrative of the kind of scholarship that can be done in this field, rather than to be exhaustive. As the Catholic Church is in the process of truly becoming a global church, there is need for inculturated reflection from parts of the world not represented in this journal, especially from African countries and other parts of Asia and Latin America. More explicit reflection is also needed on how the experience of girls and women in sport can lead to their integral development, foster the common good, the unity of the human family, and social inclusion. Some attention has been paid to this (Lavoie 2015; Lobo, this volume), but more work needs to be done. There has been some progress made with respect to inclusion of persons with disabilities in sport and important scholarship has been done in this area, including by Protestant theologians (Watson and Parker). This is

another area Catholic theologians and scholars should be paying more attention to and reflecting on in the future.

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