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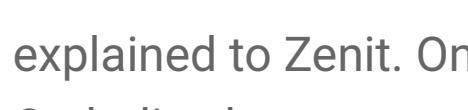


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INTERVIEW: Sports Are Not Only Play, But Are a Way to Sainthood

In Heat of Summer, Jesuit Priest & Sports Expert Discusses St. Thomas, Leisure, and Vatican's New Document

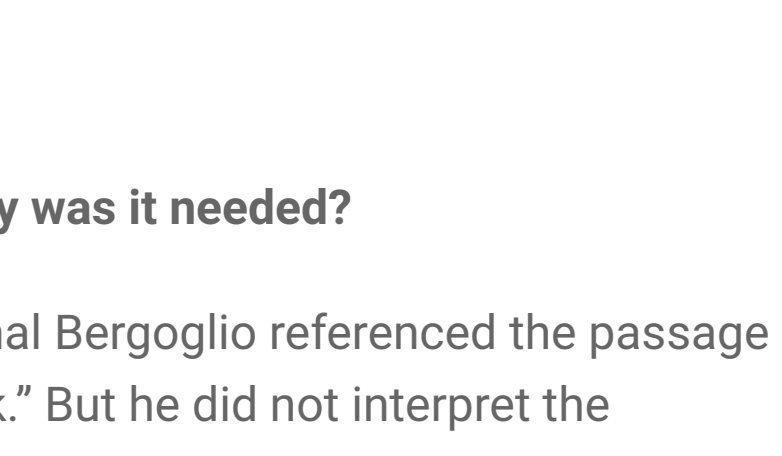
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The recently finished Soccer World Cup showed that sports has a significant impact on human beings and relationships between cultures, nations and religious traditions. And the "universal call to holiness" can involve sports, says Fr. Patrick Kelly, SJ, Ph.D., associate professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University. He contributed as an expert to the revision of "Giving the best of yourself: a document about the Christian perspective and sport and the human person," the Vatican's very comprehensive and first document on sports.

However, it does not mean "uncritical acceptance" of all aspects of sports. But "in order to really understand what is wrong with sport, we have to first understand what it is and its human significance," Fr. Kelly explained to Zenit. One of his areas of research and teaching is the way Catholics have engaged in sport in different historical contexts and how this was related to how they understood Christian life. Fr. Kelly is the author of *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times* (Paulist Press, 2012) and a former American college football player.



The Jesuit priest played and enjoyed several sports when very young and focused on American football and basketball at Bishop Borgess High School in the Detroit area. He also played football at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. He played free safety and returned punts, and was also a captain of the team and an All Conference free safety.

Here is our conversation:

ZENIT: What is the significance of this Vatican document on sports? Why was it needed?

In his talk to the cardinals at the congregation to elect a new pope, Cardinal Bergoglio referenced the passage from Revelations where Jesus says "Behold I stand at the door and knock." But he did not interpret the passage in the usual way. He was imagining Jesus inside the church, knocking on the door of the church *wanting to get outside into the world where people were living their lives*.

In this document, the Church is taking a step in this direction. Many people are engaged in sports or follow them as fans, as we witnessed with the last World Cup. Sport has a significant impact on human beings and relations between cultures, nations and religious traditions.

ZENIT: Therefore, how would you present "Giving the best of yourself" to a reader?

These pages are part of the Church's attempt to continue to live out the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII spoke about a "opening the windows of the Church and le[ti]ng the fresh air of the Spirit blow through." Pope Paul VI spoke of a "rift between the gospel and culture". With the Second Vatican Council, there was a new emphasis on engagement and dialogue with the world. In addition to historians, philosophers, theologians, even a former NFL player, Dave Meggsey, is quoted, certainly a first for a Vatican document.

Genuine engagement and dialogue does not mean uncritical acceptance, however. At times, it is also important to offer a critique of dynamics in sport that do not serve the human person in his or her integral .

At the Second Vatican Council there was also an emphasis on the "universal call to holiness", meaning that there are not first and second-class Christians (the clergy or religious and the laity). Lay people are called to the fullness of Christian life. It logically follows that it is important to pay closer attention to the experiences of lay people in the world, and to begin to discern there what leads to life and what leads to diminishment and desolation.

Today, in the world, there is much more intercultural exchange than ever before. But there are at the same time movements in the opposite direction of building walls instead of bridges, even demonizing at times those who are different. Therefore sport is important. It can help to build what Pope Francis calls a "culture of encounter" by bringing people of different cultural, ethnic, national or religious backgrounds together, either as teammates or in peaceful competitions, like the Olympic Games and other global competitions. Of course, there are also examples of spectators expressing prejudices and biases against players or fans of the other team, sometimes violently, which the document criticizes.

ZENIT: During the press conference at the Holy See Press Office to present "Giving the best of yourself," you explained how St Thomas Aquinas had interesting reflections...

First of all, it is important to point out that lay Catholics were playing games and sports on the holy days of the church year and Sundays throughout the medieval period. St. Thomas asked in his *Summa Theologica* "Whether there can be a virtue about games?" And he answers, "Yes", because for him, as for Aristotle, virtue had to do with moderation. And so a person should not spend all of his time working or worrying about work. A fully human life also needed time for play and recreation. In response to the objection that every virtuous action has to have an end, Thomas says that the enjoyment of play is directed toward the *recreation or restoration of the human person*.

ZENIT: Is this still true today? How is Thomas' vision relevant after many centuries?

Looking closer for example to my country, the United States, many elements of this heritage were rejected in the early colonies. It is well known that the Puritans rejected all the feast days of the medieval period. Because they associated godliness with the living out of one's calling or work, they also began to regard play as trivial and to associate it with sin in a new way. The emphasis on work was increased with the Industrial revolution and as capitalism continued to grow as an economic system.

Even today, in the US work, business and what makes money are highly valued. In this context, however, play activities such as sport are vulnerable to being viewed merely instrumentally in relation to business and the making of money.

ZENIT: And what are the consequences?

Today in the United States, many parents or children view sport instrumentally as a means to a college scholarship or for the more ambitious, to a career in elite level or professional sport. And this leads many youth to specialize in one sport at a very young age and to train year round in that sport. But their bodies are not mature enough to handle such training and as a result there is something of an epidemic of overuse injuries in youth sport. Another, related problem is that young people are dropping out of youth sport at very high numbers by the age of 13. It is no longer fun, if the play is being marginalized or lost altogether.

ZENIT: How should sport be properly considered?

I don't agree with the T-shirts that espouse the philosophy that "Football is Life"... No! Sport is a part of life. There is more to life than sport. The baseball legend and daily Mass attendee Yogi Berra put sport in perspective in a typically entertaining way when he said: "Love is the most important thing in the world; but baseball is pretty good, too."

If we think not just of elite or professional athletes but of everyone who plays sports, the understanding of *sport as play* is the most helpful explanation for the attraction or appeal of sport. It is true that some people who become very good at their sport may end up being paid to participate in it.

ZENIT: In this case, when sport becomes a profession, is it still play or a game? Even in those situations, it is crucial that they continue to enjoy playing and have a love for the game or their playing suffers. Former Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson, the most successful professional coach ever in the United States, emphasizes that the most important thing that a coach does is to reconnect players with their love of the game.

There is also a gratuitousness about our sports. They don't have to exist. If you think of the playing fields for sports in your city, they don't have to be there in order for people to survive, make a living, have health care, etc. And yet, they are present in most cities because we might say, we don't live by bread alone. We also enjoy engaging in activities that we make up, that aren't necessary.

ZENIT: And many centuries after St. Thomas, who could be cited as someone who illustrates the same concepts?

In an interview before the Soccer World Cup in 1978, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke about the enormous appeal of the World Cup having to do with its play character. Play, he said, is truly free and without an external goal or necessity and yet it harnesses and fulfills all one's energies and personal forces; it is a stepping aside from the "slavish earnestness" of daily life and is even a "foretaste of Paradise." Then the future Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that play has another character, especially for children: it is a training for life. Young people learn while playing team sports, for example, how to be a part of something larger than themselves and respect for mutually agreed upon rules that make games possible. He thought that the fascination of sport "consists in the fact that it unites both these aspects in a very persuasive manner." One can see similarities with Thomas Aquinas' play ethic in Benedict's approach.

ZENIT: For Catholics, who perhaps may not be too 'sport literate,' or coordinated, how can they still partake? Or do those who are not easily good at sports but maybe have other hobbies, should they feel guilty to not participate in sport? What is the takeaway for them?

One of the reasons sports can be considered as a kind of play is because people engage in them freely. People play sports because they enjoy them. And this document is certainly not to make people feel guilty for not participating in sport. We all enjoy different things in life. We should give thanks to God for the activities we enjoy and participate in those.

Let's consider for example, the arts or philosophy. These human and cultural phenomena have a significant impact on human beings, at the level of feeling, imagination and thinking, on the way we understand human existence and its meaning. The Church has engaged with and reflected upon both of these domains over the centuries. And yet, not all Catholics are avid museum goers or readers of philosophy.

Perhaps the parts of the document, on the other hand, that have to do with living a balanced life that includes play and recreation have relevance for all Catholics or all people; or the parts about the unity of the person, body, mind and spirit and the importance of movement and exercise (to the extent that is possible, given one's age and other factors), for our holistic health and well-being.

ZENIT: Pope Francis too, in his message accompanying the document, says that sport could be a way to become a saint. But can sports really be a way to become a saint? How?

I like how Pope Francis puts it when he says that playing sports "*puts us on the path*" that with the help of God's grace can lead us to the fullness of life that we call holiness." The pope is not claiming too much for sport, or too little, with respect to its place in the Christian life. Francis is following in the tradition of other popes who have emphasized that sports can be a context within which a person can grow in the virtues. The Popes recognize that in the process of playing sports, the person can become more temperate, just, prudent, courageous, etc. And that this is a solid human foundation with which God's grace can work.

ZENIT: What would be some examples...

A young person can learn to exercise moderation in her diet while training for her sport. So the notion of fasting during Lent might make more sense to her than it would have if she had not had this experience in sport. And she may be better prepared later to exercise moderation with respect to her appetites in general, making her available interiorly to the working of God's grace in her life. In such a case sports have "put her on the path" that with God's grace have led her to the fullness of life we call holiness.

If we understand the person as a unity of "body, mind and spirit", then this means that embodied activities young people are engaged in such as sport necessarily impacts them also at the level of their thinking or the way they understand themselves and their relationships with others, the meaning of life. This impact can be for good or for ill. It is possible, for example, for the formation a young person experiences in sport to lead them to think that they are only of value if they win, or to be more self-centered or ego-centric. Or a certain kind of "sports pelagianism" (thinking that I pull myself up by my bootstraps – on my own) might close the person off to looking for help from God or others...

ZENIT: Do you play – or in the past did you play – sports? In your life as a priest, was sport useful to you?

I really enjoyed playing several sports when I was young. I focused on (American) football and basketball at Bishop Borgess High School in the Detroit area. I also played football at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. I played free safety and returned punts, and was also a captain of the team and an All Conference free safety. I had some important experiences of God while in college and my faith life came alive in new ways. And after I graduated when I was in my twenties I thought for some time that perhaps I was supposed to put sports behind me – "leave behind me childish things" as St. Paul says. But I realized over time that for me, at least, this didn't work.

ZENIT: Why?

Part of the reason was because I had been too profoundly shaped by my participation in sport. The human formation that I experienced in sport was also influencing my attempts to live the Christian life after college, in positive and negative ways.

When I made the 30-day Spiritual Exercises retreat as a Jesuit novice it became clear to me that God was not calling me to reject or turn my back on sport, but rather to reconnect with all those experiences I had as a young person. Over the course of the retreat, I felt a call to also work in this area as a Jesuit. Every assignment I have had since then has had to do with sport, in one way or another.

ZENIT: And as a Jesuit priest, the role of sports for you today?

I still love playing basketball and I have played through much of my Jesuit life. About twelve years ago, I started to have neck pain which curtailed my basketball playing. But I try to stay active in other ways by jogging, swimming, using the elliptical machine at the gym. For me, though, it is important that exercise be fun. So while at the moment I can't play full-fledged basketball games, at times I will just dribble around and shoot at the gym. For me that is still a form of *play* and I look forward to it. It keeps me coming back.

ZENIT: Anything further you would like to add, to invite people to read "Giving the best of yourself"?

I think it is also important to say that "Giving the best of yourself" is not just a document where the hierarchical Church is standing outside of sports as an observer and saying "No" at certain points or setting limits. It really tries to understand the experiences of people participating in sports and sports' internal goods or intrinsic rewards. This is very important in our time, because there is a tendency to view most human activities, including sport, only in relation to their market value. And we thereby miss their human meaning.

Some scholars focus only or primarily on what is wrong with sport, or its corruption. But I think in order to really understand what is wrong with sport, we have to first understand what it is and its human significance. This reminds me of a debate Augustine was having with the Manicheans, whom he thought tended to see sin and evil everywhere. He said in this context that in order to know what sin is, we have to know what human nature is. The situation is analogous with respect to sport. In order to know how sport is corrupted, first we have to know what sport is and what its human or internal goods are. Then we will be able to say in a more accurate and meaningful way when it is being corrupted.

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Deborah Castellano Lubov is Senior Vatican & Rome Correspondent for ZENIT; author of 'The Other Francis' ('L'Altro Francesco) featuring interviews with those closest to the Pope and preface by Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin (currently published in 5 languages); Deborah is also NBC & MSNBC Vatican Analyst. She often covers the Pope's travels abroad, at times from the papal flight (including for historic trips such as to Abu Dhabi and Japan & Thailand), and has done television and radio commentary, including for Vatican Radio, Sky, and BBC. She is a contributor to National Catholic Register, UK Catholic Herald, Our Sunday Visitor, Inside the Vatican, and other Catholic news outlets. She has also collaborated with the Vatican in various projects, including an internship at the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and is a collaborator with NBC Universal, NBC News, Euronews, and EWTN. For 'The Other Francis': <http://www.gracewing.co.uk/page219.html> or <https://www.amazon.com/Other-Francis-Everything-They-about/dp/0852449348/>

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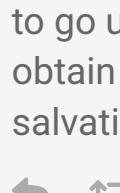
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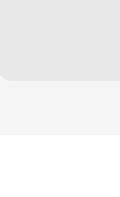
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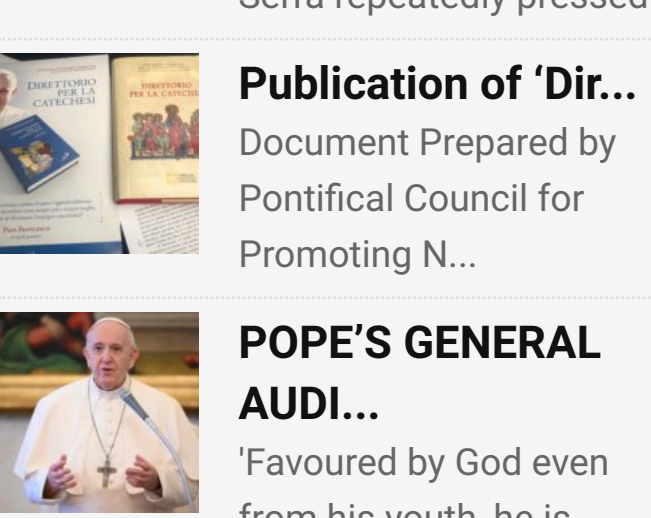
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#OurLadyOfMountCarmel, our mother, help us to have innocent hands and a pure heart, and not to utter lies or speak ill of our neighbor. Then we will be able to go up to the mountain of the Lord and obtain His blessing, His justice, and His salvation.

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