



A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

The FURROW

Kevin O’Gorman

Faith in Sport

January 2019

Faith in Sport

Kevin O’Gorman

2018 was a remarkable year in Irish sport. Limerick’s success in winning the All Ireland hurling final after forty five years crowned what for many spectators and pundits was the best season in living memory. (The introduction of a new provincial format intensified interest on and off the field.) The homecoming celebration for the victorious Limerick team expressed the social capital of sport in the city and county. This capital also found expression in financial terms and was expressed with the gift of Euro 100,000 by JP McManus to each of the thirty-two counties in the Association. Colm Keys celebrated this goodwill gesture: ‘Touched by the “extremely heart-warming” reaction across the country to Limerick’s 45-year Mac-Carthy Cup famine ending and the “elevated spirits” the win provided, McManus noted in his letter that “the whole hurling year had been a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ experience”.¹ Limerick’s rivals are hoping this line is prophetic! In Gaelic football the development of the Super 8s Qualifying series and the dominance of Dublin in winning their fourth consecutive All-Ireland Championship gave rise to talk about the elusive Drive to Five. The joy of sport was not confined to winning as scenes from the women’s hockey team at the World Cup throughout the group and knockout stages of the competition testified. The response of the losers with their families and fans lifted the emotional level well beyond the usual spectrum of shock and sadness shown by those who come second. On the rugby front Ireland’s success in winning the Grand Slam in Europe, an away series against Australia and their first ever victory on home soil over New Zealand augurs well for the World Cup in the autumn. Gold medals for both the O’Donovan brothers and Sanita Puspure at the World Championships in Bulgaria offer the prospect of further success in the forthcoming Olympics. These cameos, albeit confined to the achievements of Irish sports men and women, capture something of the passion and pride of sport and its place in today’s world. Listing success in Paralympic sport

1 Colm Keys, ‘Equality of McManus act gives GAA food for thought’, *Irish Independent*, 25th September, 2018.

Kevin O’Gorman, SMA, teaches Moral Theology at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

and junior athletics among the many achievements to date, an aptly named piece in August communicated this sense of community and collaboration: ‘Athletes from different backgrounds united in sporting excellence for their new Ireland’.²

GIVING THE BEST OF YOURSELF

This the title of a *Document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person* published by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life on June 1st 2018.³ Divided into five chapters the first details the motive and purpose for the document which ‘attempts to help the reader understand the relationship between giving our very best in sports and in living the Christian faith in every aspect of our lives’. The intention is to integrate sport into Christian life for ‘the Church approaches the world of sports because it desires to contribute to the construction of an increasingly authentic, humane sport’. This perspective is premised on a theological anthropology which takes its tone and themes from *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. The first quote in this document is drawn from the opening paragraph of the conciliar text: “‘Nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo” in the hearts of the followers of Christ’. This is underscored by the statement that ‘sport is a human universal’ which ‘has taken on a new level of importance in our time’. The ecclesial echo of this experience is both an imperative and an invitation for evangelical, ethical and ecological reflection(s) and response(s). This interest (and involvement) in sport issues from the place of the person at the heart of the Church and its interpretation ‘that sports activity affects the formation, relations and spirituality of a person’. This quote is taken from Pope Francis’ Address to the Italian Tennis Federation in 2015. Its identification and insertion of ‘the whole person’ at the innermost level of the church informs its thinking and talking about all types of sporting activity.

Intending ‘to be a brief presentation of the views of the Holy See and the Catholic Church on sports’ the document dismisses the idea that ‘the Catholic Church has only had a negative view of and impact on sport’. This view is due ‘in part because of the way the history of sport has been written’ with ‘a misunderstanding of Catholic attitudes towards the body especially in the medieval and early modern periods’. Decrying any *fuga corporis* (flight from the body) approach, the Church situates its attitude to sport alongside ‘the other expressions of the person’s natural faculties such as science,

2 *Sunday Independent*, 12th August 2018.

3 <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bolletino/pubblico/2018/06/01/180601b> [accessed June 3rd 2018]

learning, work, art, love and social and political commitment'. Thus, athleticism is part and parcel of the anthropology to which the Church attaches respect and adopts 'an attitude of redemption'. Quoting Francis' *Address to members of the European Olympic Committee* in 2013, the document describes 'the bond between the Church and the world of sports [as] a beautiful reality'. Identifying sport as 'a powerful instrument for the integral growth of the human person' he states that involvement in sports 'raises us to go beyond ourselves and our own self interests in a healthy way; it trains the spirit in sacrifice and, if it is organised well, it fosters loyalty in interpersonal relations, friendship and respect for rules'. This linking of the spiritual and bodily aspects of athleticism gives the lie to any accusation of dualism in the Church's attitude to sport and its structures in the world.

Addressed 'to all people of good will' the Church is interested in engaging in dialogue with those 'who have been developing programs to defend the human values that are inherent in sport practice'. While also addressed to all in the Church who are interested in and involved with sport the laity are identified as 'those most in contact with sport as a lived reality'. Among 'those who love and value sport' specific mention is made of 'players, teachers, coaches, parents [and] those for whom sport is a job as well as a vocation'. An ecumenical dimension is expressed in extending 'these thoughts to our brothers and sisters in faith who have been evangelising and promoting Christian values in sport'. A footnote here to 'sport chaplaincy' underscores the importance of ministerial involvement with sports people, both individually and institutionally. The accent on both human and Christian values underscores the underlying anthropology through which the Church analyses sport.

'How could the Church not be interested?' With this rhetorical question from Pope Pius XII to Italian sportsmen in 1945 the Church's involvement in sport is considered inevitable and indispensable. Referring to the Church's sponsorship 'of the beautiful in art, music and other areas of human activity throughout its history' the arena of sport today is seen as a canvas where beauty can be both acted out and appreciated. Accessing the aesthetic in and through the athletic not only affords us 'a chance to take part in beautiful moments or to see these take place' but also 'to remind us that beauty is one of the ways we can encounter God'. As a universal phenomenon today with 'its communicative and symbolic strength' sport is a global experience which 'fully resides in contemporary culture and permeates the styles and choices of many people's lives'. For these reasons the Church feels a need to

be present and active in the world of sport, ‘considered as a modern Courtyard of the Gentiles and an Aeropagus where the Gospel is announced’. Reference to Aeropagus recalls Saint Pope John Paul II’s mention of ‘the modern equivalents of the Aeropagus’ in Athens where Paul ‘proclaimed the Gospel in language appropriate to and understandable in those surroundings’.⁴ While sport is not singled out as a specific field or frontier for the Church’s missionary activity its spread *ad gentes* is a sign of the times that calls for attention and apostolate. Indeed mention of ‘international organisations and meetings proving increasingly important in many sectors of human life’ could include sporting bodies and competitions. The Church’s engagement with such entities and events is not only ethical but evangelical.

In ‘*The Church and Sport until now*’ the history of dialogue with sport is described briefly. Beginning with Paul’s predilection for sporting metaphors drawn from the Greek world to proclaim the Gospel through Thomas Aquinas’ application of virtue to games to ‘the inclusion of play and sports in educational institutions in the Western world’ (and beyond through missionary activity), the Church’s perennial interest in and involvement with sport is pointed to. Indicating the indexical relation between modernity and sport the hope is expressed that, in the rapidly changing environment of sport, ‘sport experts not only “manage” change but also do so by seeking to understand and hold firm to the principles so dear to ancient and modern sport: education and human promotion’. This humanism is the hinge on which ‘a Christian vision of sport’ hangs. Given his own engagement (at different stages of his life) with soccer and skiing it is not surprising that Saint Pope John Paul II established ‘the Church & Sport office, which since 2004 has been studying and promoting a Christian vision of sport that emphasises its importance for the building of a more humane, peaceful and just society as well as for evangelisation’.⁵ After the hosting of a youth gymnastics event in the Vatican in 1904 a priest posed the question of where it was going to end to which Pope Pius X replied ‘in Paradise’. (Hopefully there will be hurling in heaven!)

Chapter One closes with a statement of the purpose for the publication of the document. Reference to sport ‘as an arena of human activity’ where virtues can be both represented and realised at all levels and across the world means that it is ‘something the Church is passionately interested in’. This passion seeks both to

4 *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, par. 37(c).

5 The publication of papers from conferences organised by the Pontifical Council for the Laity are worth noting: *The World of Sport Today – A Field of Christian Mission* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006); *Sport, Education, Faith – Towards a New Season for Catholic Sports Associations* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011).

THE FURROW

promote the positive value(s) of sport and protect it ‘from the drifts that threaten it every day, particularly dishonesty, manipulations and commercial abuse’. This brief reference to ‘the bright spots and shadows’⁶ for sport today raises the need for discernment by all those involved. A useful list indicates many of those ‘who work in sport in paid roles or the vast majority who are involved as volunteers, as officials, coaches, teachers, administrators, parents and the athletes themselves’. Owners of and investors in sports clubs and franchises, sports commentators, pundits and writers could be added to this. The chapter concludes with the acknowledgement that ‘there are more topics related to the possibilities and challenges of sport that are not discussed in this document’. The goal is not to give ‘an exhaustive summary of the theories and realities pertaining to sport’, rather seeking ‘to articulate the Church’s understanding of the sport phenomenon and its relationship to faith’. Theologically this method of correlation aims to treat the intrinsic value of sport and how ‘it speaks to our greater search for ultimate meaning’ which ‘from a Christian understanding is the ultimate happiness that is found in the experience of the all-encompassing love and mercy of god as realized in a relationship with Jesus Christ in the Spirit which takes place in and is lived out in the community of faith’. This raises the question: are there sporting saints?

THE SPORT PHENOMENON

The ‘universal phenomenon’ that is sport is a feature of human exercise and enjoyment ‘in playing games’, through people ‘perfecting their physical abilities or in competing with each other, fascinating ‘so many people as athletes or spectators’. This phenomenology of sport is the preface to Chapter Two which is divided into three parts. ‘*The Genesis of Modern Sport*’ traces the emergence of sport as a ‘typical phenomena of the modern era... [a] “sign of the times” spread to every corner of the world’, in the words of Pope John Paul II. While acknowledging that ‘of course, still local forms of sport exist and they rightly enjoy a growing popularity’ (one can think of hurling in Ireland and talk of ‘a game that still gives’, especially after the majestic matches of summer 2018), the focus here is on ‘*global sport* which – like a global language – can be understood by almost every human being’. A feature of this globalisation of sport is its compatibility ‘with almost all cultural settings [which] has overcome older demarcations of culture and nation’. The nexus between nationalism and sport needs both historical analysis and actual attention. Thus the comment of Eamonn Sweeney is both a celebration and a caveat: ‘Why do

6 Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1981), par. 4.

these Irish triumphs mean so much to me? I'm not a great fan of nationalism because I know the damage caused by the creed's more virulent political manifestations. Sporting nationalism, on the other hand, seems largely benign when applied to those sports which don't attract huge crowds. Victories in rowing and eventing don't engender a flag-waving orgy of national self-congratulation'.⁷ The evolution of sport in the modern era expresses its globalisation, evident especially in the case of the Olympic Games which for its re-founder Pierre de Coubertin enjoyed the status of a '*religio athletae*'. Due to its high levels of performance and achievement, especially at 'events such as the Olympic Games or World Championships' sport 'is often used to communicate political, commercial or ideological messages'. As 'a highly expressive but at the same time highly-undetermined sign which cannot serve for its own interpretation' sport is in grave danger of being hijacked to serve interests and interpretations which 'can be ideological or even amoral and inhuman'. These comments serve as a stark reminder that sport should not be seen, shown or spoken about simply in sentimental terms.

'*What is Sport?*' looks at sport as ludic and legislated activity. Sport is primarily ludic and if it loses this 'intrinsic purpose we would no longer speak of play but simply would call it work or labor'. As the 'human body in motion' sport is not random activity but ruled by norms governing the game or goal. Reference to game/goal raises the 'competitive element of sport' which in many cases is 'developed so that we may state that competition is also an indispensable characteristic of sport'. This element demands an '*equality of opportunities*' so that competition is not completely one-sided. While the competitive nature of (much) sporting activity is acknowledged here, there is a need to complement it with communion. If prizes are promoted at the expense of participation will sport be seen increasingly as a province of the elite? Is excellence achieved at the expense of elimination, especially of others? For those outside the actual field of play sport invites insights and comparisons with other human aesthetic and artistic activity. The 'multi-interpretability' of sport is, how ever, double-edged, involving the danger of its meaning being manipulated for ulterior and underhand ends. '*The Contexts of Sport*' identifies the '*sport system*' as the structure for organising and overseeing sport from playgrounds to stadia. The reliance on this system for finance brings up issues of public and private funding. Sport can be seen as a product sold to the highest bidder where 'potential benefactors can use sport to communicate their particular messages'. Dependence

7 'Heroes measuring up on world stage', *Sunday Independent*, 23rd September 2018.

THE FURROW

of sport on outside resources for its maintenance can result in its meaning being manipulated to serve these ‘particular messages’.

The first two chapters of the document are devoted to a historical and hermeneutical presentation of sport. While at times this may appear detailed and dense (with many footnotes) there is no denying the desire of the Church to dedicate itself to the support and service of those involved in sport, particularly on the ground. This ethical interest and evangelical involvement is explored and expanded and deepened in the remaining three chapters.

Christ and the Word. Not only is Christ speaking when we articulate the Scriptures, but his person is rendered truly present as in the holy Eucharist, though in a different way, one appropriate to the form and manner of language. Hence just as he is on the altar as the real heavenly manna in the form of ordinary bread and wine, so he is there at the lectern as divine Wisdom in the form of ordinary human speech. As truly present indeed as when he appeared as Lord and Saviour of the world in the form of ordinary human flesh.

– OLIVER TREANOR, *Speaking on God’s Behalf*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 31.