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Formation for
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Chapter Three of the Vatican’s Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life document on sport *Giving the best of yourself*¹ is entitled *Significance of Sports for the human person*. Despite a current ‘common in historical studies of sport to characterise Catholic attitudes towards the body as thoroughly negative’ the inverse is the case with the insistence of the Church’s ‘theological and spiritual traditions that the material world (and everything that exists) is good as it is created by God and that the person is a unity of body, soul and spirit’. Seeing ourselves and others as embodied persons shapes a vision of the unity of the human person which underpins the undertaking of sport in terms of its dignity and not utility.² Without this vision of the human person athletic and all forms of human activity are viewed in mechanical terms and assessed without any objective morality. Moreover, ‘the understanding of the human person is also the foundation for the emphasis in Church teaching that there is a spiritual dimension to sport’. Quoting Saint John Paul II, the document asserts that ‘athletic activity highlights not only man’s valuable physical abilities, but also his intellectual and spiritual capacities’. While this spiritual significance of sport is not sacramental in specifically theological terms, it is the foundation for faith in sport within and by the Church.

FREEDOM FOR FAIR PLAY

Sport is a field of human activity where people are free to engage or not. At the same time sport also serves to ‘remind us that to be fully free is also to be responsible’. This responsibility is reflected and realised in a commitment to one’s chosen sport. Referring

1 <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bolletino/pubblico/2018/06/01/180601b> [accessed June 3rd 2018]. This article is a continuation of the earlier article that appeared in *The Furrow*, January 2019, pp10-16.

2 For a fuller account see Pedro Barrajón, L.C., ‘Overcoming Dualism – The Unity of the Human Person in Sport’ in Eds. Kevin Lixey, L.C., Christoph Hübenthal, Dietmar Mieth and Norbert Müller, *Sport & Christianity* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 39-60.

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to Pope Francis' remark about the 'throwaway culture' which compromises persons and their relations not only with things but especially with others, sport symbolises the struggle for excellence which is as much ethical as physical. Employing the biblical image of entering by the narrow gate, sport is envisaged as calling for a commitment which both requires and rewards perseverance. The reason given for running marathons, for example, is that (some) people 'enjoy the challenge to some extent'. A comparison is drawn with the Christian life which 'resembles a marathon rather than a short sprint [where] there are many stages, some of which are very difficult to overcome'.

The phrase 'terms and conditions (or in short form Ts&Cs)', familiar from many radio and television advertisements, applies *a fortiori* to sport. Without regulation sport becomes a free-for-all in which effort is crushed and excellence is compromised. Rules in sport are not a restriction but a requirement for freedom and fairness. Thus 'sports bear witness to justice in that they require obedience to rules... and without rules, the sense of the game and the competition would be lost'. The presence of officials is intended as a guarantee for the fairness of the game and in recent years their adjudications have been assisted by the advent of technology. An example is given in football where 'if the ball does not completely cross the goal line, it is not a goal [when] a small millimetre makes an immense difference'. Thus, 'that rule helps us to understand that justice is not something merely subjective but has an objective dimension, even in forms of play'. However, while goal-line technology in general and Hawkeye in GAA are guarantors of the objective state of play, the subjective element cannot be totally eliminated where interpretation of the rule involves a third party such as TMOs (television match officials). The claim of certainty in the often confined circumstances and highly charged context of sport sometimes creates victors and villains in equal measure, not least in the eyes of fans of club, county and country. Scores are sometimes in the sight of the beholders, especially spectators.

In addition to obedience to the rules, a sense of fair play calls for respect for opponents. To engage in competition with others presumes cooperation and consent concerning the conditions in which the contest takes place. Indeed the word *competition* conveys this meaning, as in its Latin roots, it signifies that the competitors are 'striving or seeking together' for that excellence which is the summit of sporting achievement by the contestants. Moreover, 'it is one's opponent who draws out the best in an athlete'. This solidarity in seeking and, ironically, struggling for superiority is shown in gestures of 'athletes shaking hands and embracing or even socialising or sharing a meal after an intense contest'.

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While the goal of competition is victory its value is diminished or even negated when achieved by a 'win at any cost' attitude. The pursuit and practise of 'fair play allows sports to become a means of education for all of society, of the values and virtues found in sports, such as perseverance, justice and courtesy'.

The vision of the human person that underpins the Church's understanding of sport is relational and social. This is expressed in the statement that 'something very typical of the world of sports is the harmonious relationship between the individual and the team'. While obviously evident in the exercise and enjoyment of team sports, 'even in individual sports such as tennis or swimming, there is always some form of teamwork'. In a 2014 address to a group of Italian young people engaged in sport Pope Francis adverted to the danger of individualism in teams saying that in his country when a player keeps the ball to him or herself, people say that the player 'wants to devour the ball'. The common good of the team is corrupted by the greed for glory of individuals. In a memorable soundbite, 'sport is a school of teamwork that works together toward achieving a common goal'.

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY OF SPORT

While Rowan Williams wrote witheringly of spirituality as 'that emasculated word'³ Michael Downey referred to the 'spirituality sprawl'⁴ in recognising the range of spiritualities represented in many sectors of contemporary culture. However, more than a mere buzzword spirituality is a significant marker for human wellbeing, as mentioned by The Royal College of Psychiatrists: 'Spirituality involves a dimension of human experience that psychiatrists are increasingly interested in, because of its potential benefits to mental health'.⁵ The classical adage *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body) with its corollary *corpus sanum in mente sana* (a healthy body in a healthy mind) articulates the integrity of mind and body and its implications for an approach to spirituality in sport. The American Jesuit Patrick Kelly's comment that 'many people in the United States are beginning to think about and discuss sports in relationship to the spiritual life'⁶ can be seen and heard all over the world. Sport is a vibrant and vital *vehicle of value* for many in society. The major part of Chapter Three is devoted to the development and discernment of this dimension

3 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 124.

4 See his *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

5 *Spirituality and Mental Health*, Leaflet produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group Executive Committee (London: under review April 2018).

6 Patrick Kelly, 'Experiencing Life's Flow – Sports and the Spiritual Life, *America*, 20th October 2008, 19.

in the lives of sports men and women. Within this dimension six values/virtues are identified – sacrifice and joy, harmony and courage, equality/respect and solidarity.

The statement that ‘people who participate in sport are very familiar with the notion of sacrifice’ sets the tone for the treatment of this topic. The acquisition of athletic and aptitude skills in all areas and at all levels of sporting activity demands asceticism. Saint Pope John Paul II’s words about ‘the feats of the great athletes who sacrificed themselves for years, day after day, to achieve these results’ not only recognised sacrifice as ‘the logic of sport’ but referred to it as ‘also the *logic of life*’. Noting that ‘sacrifice is a familiar and well used term in the real world of sport’ the document declares that it is necessary to see how ‘the Church too uses this word and often in a very direct and specific way’. A Christian commitment to love of God and neighbour through sacrifice and suffering shows a striving ‘for the kingdom here on earth and in the world to come’, making it easier ‘to understand what St Paul had in mind when he demanded that we prepare ourselves to “fight the good fight” (Tim 6:12)’. While the reference to (1) Timothy here stops short of mentioning that the apostle had the faith and not boxing in mind, ‘all of the noble sacrifices we make are important in the Christian life, even when they take place in seemingly insignificant human activities such as sport’. Despite an initial impression this does not downplay the importance of sacrifice in sport as the following example illustrates. The supreme sacrifice in sporting terms was shown by Alistair Brownlee who stopped short of crossing the winning line first in the race at the world triathlon event in Cozumel, Mexico in 2016 in order to help his brother Jonny complete the event. Valentine Low reported how, ‘in a supreme act of brotherly love, Alistair put his arm round his ailing younger brother and they jogged to the line’.⁷ The sacrifice and even suffering experienced in sport are not supposed to finish in a state of endless frustration. Sport is not meant to be an endurance test but a time of enjoyment. As the document states, ‘ultimately sport is called to bring joy to those who practice it and even to all the passionate followers of a sport throughout the world’. This brings out two very important aspects of sport and the joy attached to it. Firstly, the exuberance of exercise enables self-expression to such an extent that sport can be simply defined as passion at play. Secondly, sport is never intended as a solitary affair that shuts out others from enjoying it, even in the case of individual sports. When sport becomes such an obsession that it excludes others it is no longer enjoyable. Noting that Pope Francis has highlighted

7 Valentine Low, ‘Sporting sacrifice of brothers in arms, *The Times*, September 20th, 2016.

that Christian joy is not something to be jealously guarded but 'a gift to share with everyone', so too 'sport only makes sense as long as it promotes a space of common joy'. Nevertheless, it could be interjected that joy and sorrow are intertwined as one team's victory inevitably involves the other's loss.

Harmony is hailed as the hallmark of a balanced life that brings out the best in people. Vital for 'well-being and essential for true happiness' such harmony results from the development and dovetailing of physical and psychological dimensions of the person. Identifying sport as 'one of the most effective contexts within which people can develop holistically' the document quotes the Second Vatican Council on the contribution of sport to creating harmonious communities and societies which 'foster friendly relations between people of all classes, countries and races'. Sport is so much more than the materialistic and mechanistic presentations that are mediated and manipulated for profit. Spirituality is a horizon for sport as it opens a path for the person to perceive and move beyond a superficial understanding of what they are undertaking and undergoing. Sporting activity is a vehicle for experiencing and even embodying transcendence as a select quote from Saint John Paul II expresses: 'You are *true athletes* when you prepare yourselves not only by training your bodies but also by constantly engaging the spiritual dimensions of your person for a *harmonious development of all your talents*'. Courage (traditionally classified as one of the four cardinal virtues) is a vital component of participation and competition in sport. Endurance, in the face of difficulty or especially in the wake of defeat, is an essential trait for both individuals and teams. The following sentence merges motivation and morality and could serve as a magnificent mission statement in dressing rooms: 'To keep going when the odds are stacked against you or your team, to try to do the right thing, morally and physically when you are losing badly, to hold the group together as a team when being seen as underdogs – these occasions can all offer convincing evidence that sport is replete with moments of great courage'.

The value of respect has been highlighted in sport in recent years. 'Give respect and get respect' is a mantra that is communicated from jerseys to television advertisement. Rooted in the equal dignity of persons, respect is meant to ensure that 'everyone has the same right to experience and be fulfilled in the multiple dimensions of culture and sport'. The diversity of talents and abilities demands that this fundamental attitude is related to the capacity for participation and competition in sport. A particular focus has been the campaign against racism as the multi-lingual insert involving individual players before soccer's Champion League games indicates so

impressively. The importance of such a strategy is seen in the success of the sports boycott against apartheid and the shift to multi-racial sport in South Africa. Moreover, respect is the recipe for right relations between groups and communities, societies and nations. In the context of sport solidarity is a more important value than victory. In an important declaration the document asserts that ‘athletes, especially those who are most renowned, have an unavoidable social responsibility’. By promoting and even personifying solidarity sports men and women can play a huge part in ‘helping to overcome the many divisions that our world still experiences today’.

SPORT AND ULTIMATE MEANING

To speak of spirituality in sport is to seek and find signs of transcendence in the finitude of exercise on the playing fields and the experience of fans in the stands and on digital platforms. Connecting sport and spirituality is increasingly an issue in the context of contemporary culture. This connection needs to be cognisant of the drive to success and the demand of sacrifice, balancing the competitive instinct with a compassionate imperative. A Christian spirituality (and its corresponding morality) will concentrate on the call to ongoing conversion offered by the Gospel through the church. The final part of Chapter Three reflects on the quest for ultimate meaning revealed in and through sport. Operating within the parameters of strength and weakness, freedom and common rules, individual and community, body and soul, open to the possibility of beauty sport offers ‘an integral anthropological view [which] can indeed be seen as an extraordinary field where the human being experiences some significant truths about him- or herself on his or her quest for ultimate meaning’. This account and analysis of formation of sporting activity is founded on an underlying theological anthropology. In understanding the quest for ultimate meaning from a the perspective of Christian faith the document refers in part to the classic axiom of Saint Thomas – *gratia naturam presupponit et eam perficit* – grace presupposes nature and perfects it. This transcendental approach correlates human experience with faith, hope and charity, envisaging a continuity and completion which ‘lifts us up into communion with God who is Father, Son and Spirit and into communion with one another’. Another theological approach, which might be termed transformational, adds elements of discontinuity and redemption to the equation. If theology is, adapting Saint Anselm’s adage – *conversio quaerens intellectum* – conversion seeking understanding, (and added by moral theology) – *et mores* – and undertaking, there is a tension between these two theological approaches as articulated by James P. Hanigan: ‘I am

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suggesting that a conversion that is not in principle open to the future and the need for human growth in all dimensions is as little a Christian conversion as one that is in principle not open to the Cross'.⁸ Do the Beatitudes have any bearing on sporting activity, administration, adulation? Has gambling become the new gospel and betting firms the new evangelists? To adapt something Kurt Vonnegut once wrote, will 'Blessed be the losers' ever be placed in the dressing rooms of Croke Park and the Curragh, Wembley and Wimbledon, Eden (Auckland) and Ellis (Johannesburg) Parks, to mention some major sporting venues?

- 8 'Conversion and Christian Ethics', in eds. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, *Introduction to Christian Ethics – A Reader* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 242-251, here 247.

A different perspective. The age that we apparently live in is the reign of neoliberal capitalism. Time is segmented by quarterly profit reports. Space is obscured by global supply chains. In the parables of Jesus we find enigmatic stories that test, probe, and puncture the totalized imagination of this economic system. For all its valorization of competition, the language and thought-world of neoliberal capitalism aspires to monopolistic status. It presents itself as the true account of things, the only realistic way to think about trade, prosperity, and development. Yet the register in which Jesus speaks is radically different.

- KEVIN HARGADEN, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age*, (Oregon: Cascade Books) p. 160.