



SPORTS AND GOD

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It is my great pleasure to address the Pontifical Council for Culture's International Seminar on Sports on the very important topic of *"Sports at the Service of Humanity: From the "Results-Oriented Culture" to the "Culture of Encounter."* I wish to extend my sincerest thanks to Cardinal Ravasi and Monsignor Sanchez de Toca Alameda for organizing this seminar and inviting me to address you today.

If God is not the reference point for sport, sport will unavoidably devolve into idolatry, worshiping man as a demi-god. This has been our experience over the past many years in sports as all of its problems — such as fan violence (hooliganism), domestic violence, doping (illegal performance enhancement), excessive commercialism — are traceable to the unfortunate de-emphasis and removal of God from sports. Our society incorrectly puts star athletes on a pedestal of fan and media adulation and then feigns surprise and disappointment when the athlete falls or is pushed from that pedestal.

The Church stands ready and able to assist in correcting the many problems of sport. As a preliminary matter, it is good to enunciate the reason the Church cares about sport at all: namely, its preeminent interest in man(kind) and his well-being. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explained, God is interested in Sport because he is interested in man, who is made in his likeness and image. Man is made good but tainted by evil. By analogy, sport is inherently good but also tainted by evil. Further, man is redeemed by the life and death of Jesus Christ and renewed constantly by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Church's "plan" for renewal of sport is simply its plan for the salvation of mankind — the elevation of Christ to the focal point of all activity.

An important point of clarification is in order to calm and quiet fears that this radical proposal is the beginning of an inquisition or crusade to mandate all non-Christians and non-believers conform to the Church's perspective: the Church only proposes its theology; it does not mandate agreement or conformity. Further, the world of sports is currently adrift in a secular free fall and some cogent commentary suggests that sport has become a religion in and of itself. If this sounds hyperbolic, consider some facts. Naming has always carried great

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significance to Christians. Recently, a couple in the United States named their child “ESPN”, in honor of the ubiquitous worldwide sports network. Similarly, from the catacombs to Christian cemeteries, burial of the dead has also carried great spiritual significance. In 2012, NBC sports reported that many sports fan were now being buried in NFL and MLB team logoed coffins. Excessive hero worship of prominent athletes may be fairly equated to deification. An academic study at Murray State University concluded that sport with its rituals and psychological attachments have many of the same effects on spectators as religion does!

Jesus’ teaching often turned the prejudices, customs and traditions of his day upside down to set them right side up. For example, he explained that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Applied to sports, Jesus message is sport is made for man and not man for sports. Towards this end, we need to develop a comprehensive Catholic Theology of Sports, which was a point first raised by my good friend and colleague Dr. William Thierfelder of Belmont Abbey College, at a Vatican gathering on sports we attended together in 2006.

Our Theology of Sports should be premised on sports as being a gift from God. With this perspective, we may begin to take the many relevant Scriptural passages and Papal addresses and teachings and assemble them as the foundation for this Theology of Sports. St. Paul’s epistles, for example, are rich with sporting analogies to prize fights and races, which point to the more important spiritual realities of salvation and eternal life. Further, the many papal statements of the 20th and 21st century on sports provide much value here. Perhaps the best description of sports ever written comes from Pope Pius XII:

“Sport, properly directed, develops character, makes a man courageous, a generous loser, and a gracious victor; it refines the senses, gives intellectual penetration, and steels the will to endurance. It is not merely a physical development then. Sport, rightly understood, is an occupation of the whole man, and while perfecting the body as an instrument of the mind, it also makes the mind itself a more refined instrument for the search and communication of truth and helps man to achieve that end to which all others must be subservient, the service and praise of his Creator.” – Pope Pius XII, Sport at the Service of the Spirit, July 29, 1945

Many pontiffs have discussed the important role the Church plays in the world of sport by providing it with a moral compass and framework. Further, they have noted that sport has great value to mankind through its ability to bridge differences, overcome prejudices and promote peace. Saint Pope John Paul II, who was an avid sportsman, spoke and wrote often on sport with a special emphasis on promotion of peace and brotherhood through sporting teams and events. Pope Francis has also continued this theme speaking on the value of sports to bridge differences and promote peace. Further, with his endorsement of the Interreligious Soccer Game for Peace last night, he has taken a concrete step toward connecting these teachings with the actual event.

John Paul expanded the Church's role in sport when he exhorted us to evangelize the world of sport—a significant expansion of the intersection of church and sports. In other words, he calls us not only to enlighten and civilize the world of sports but to also share the Gospel message in and through athletics. This is a significant mission for us at Catholic Athletes for Christ as we attempt to answer the Saint John Paul's challenge to be both Catholic and evangelical in the world of sport.

Time only permits us to only introduce this important topic of the Theology of Sports today. It is my sincere hope we can continue in further seminars and meetings to develop it. Today I will begin by suggesting some of the key themes and issues to be addressed as we move forward.

As a fundamental and foundational question, we should discuss the question of whether to “play” sports at all. The word “play” suggests, of course, joy and bliss. It is a universal phenomenon as all humans have some experience with play as children. In this sense of the word, the connection with the creator and his love for mankind becomes apparent. I would strongly commend the work of Jesuit theologian Father James Schall and his insightful works in the area of play and sports.

Clearly, modern sport at the professional level hardly resembles “play” in its childlike form. Players, coaches and owners are handsomely compensated for “playing” and fans pay often great sums to watch the contests. In this light, I would respectfully submit we begin to consider professional sports as “work” and not play and the participants as workers as opposed to players. At this point we can refer to the Church's considerable teaching on labor and better grapple with the issues of professional sports from this prism. Viewing sports as labor introduces a whole bevy of other issues for us to examine in the development of the Theology of Sports such as the issue of refraining from work on the Sabbath.

Prayer, for example, would be another fundamental issue as it applies to sport for our Theology of Sports to consider. American professional football player Tim Tebow created a major controversy a few years ago by kneeling in prayer during the games. While he was most likely attempting to provide a strong witness to his Christian faith, fan reaction and some media coverage of his prayer on the field focused on the efficacy of the prayer. For the Church and our Theology of Sports, this discussion presents a teachable moment on prayer. Asking whether prayer leads God to favor one team or player over another in a contest reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose and value of prayer. It implicitly reduces prayer to petition (asking God for a gift) and ignores the other significant purposes of prayer — worship, thanksgiving, and forgiveness. Clearly, there is much here to be developed and shared.

Another significant issue for our Theology of Sports is that of “role models.” U.S. basketball player Charles Barkley famously opined that athletes are not and should not be viewed as role models. Yet, we at CAC have the privilege of working with many elite professional athletes such as Mike Piazza, Mike Sweeney, Jeff Suppan (who has addressed a previous Vatican gathering), Phillip Rivers, Matt Birk, and of course, Linda Del Rio (who is with us today) and her husband

coach Jack Del Rio, to name but a few. All of them are excellent Catholic Christian role models. Unfortunately, all the media attention and focus is on the athletes who engage in disreputable activity. This tricky issue of “heroes” or role models is another important topic for us to explore.

I close by returning to the topic of sports evangelization, which is simply telling the world the good news of Christ or put even more simply, that God is good! There are numerous uplifting and inspiring witness stories from sport that have vast potential to dynamically share the Gospel message. One such story comes from the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany. One of the most brutal and reprehensible tyrants of all time, Adolf Hitler, attempted to hijack the games for his racist and horrific purpose of promoting his hateful anti-Semitic views. You may be familiar with the uplifting story of how U.S. Olympic legend Jesse Owens, who was black, succeeded on the track and field of Berlin in 1936 to actually embarrass Hitler and demonstrate the fallacy of Hitler’s myth of white and Aryan supremacy views by capturing four gold medals. You may however not be familiar with the role Christian charity (which is another name for love), played in this famous episode.

As brilliantly recounted by CAC Board Member Bill Thierfelder in *Less than a Minute to Go*, Owens historic achievements almost never came to pass because of the difficulties he encountered in qualifying for the Long Jump finals. Although, Owens was the world record holder in the event, Olympic rules prevented him from following his traditional warm-up routine. This change so rattled Owens that it caused him to so underperform and foul in the preliminary qualifying round that he was in danger of not even making the finals of the event as he was about to attempt his last jump. Owens knew failure to qualify for the finals would not only end his hopes for gold in the event but also be interpreted to provide some credence to Hitler’s horrific racist views.

In his autobiography, *Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler*, Owens wrote:

I walked back to the broad jump area. As I did I heard a name called. Mine. ... Almost instinctively, I began to drop down on my knees. Pray. Must pray, I whispered to myself. Oh God, I pleaded wordlessly with everything that was inside me. Help me to pray. But I couldn’t. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

The hand belonged to his German competitor long jumper Luz Long, who was required to wear the Nazi Swastika — one of the most perfect representations of hatefulness — on his uniform.

*The way the hand rested on my shoulder, the vibrations I felt as he looked at me and smiled, made me know somehow that, far from being my enemy, he was my friend. “I Luz Long,” he said introducing himself. I nodded. “I think I know what is wrong with you,” he went on. “You give everything when you jump. I the same. You cannot do halfway, but you are **afraid** (emphasis added) you will foul again.”*

“That’s right,” I said. ... “I have the answer. Same thing happened to me last year in Cologne.” Luz told me to simply re-measure my steps and jump from six inches in back of the takeoff board — giving it all I had. That way I could give 100 percent, and still not be afraid of fouling. He even laid his towel down at exactly the place I was to jump.

The simplicity of the advice was pure brilliance. Owens jumped almost a full foot behind the board and still jumped 25 feet to make the finals! It was also pure charity (or love) coming from all places that of a competitor, one who did not even believe in God. From that point, Long and Owens became close friends and confidants. The finals proved equally, if not more interesting, as Long and Owens traded new Olympic records five times as the finals seesawed back and forth between them. Ultimately, Owens won the competition by setting a new Olympic record. Long was the first person to reach Owens to congratulate him.

Jesse Owens encountered almost overwhelming fear and responded by praying to God. God’s answer came in a most unexpected and unlikely manner — the advice and encouragement of his main competitor. While winning the four Olympic gold medals made Owens one of the most famous athletes and people of all time, he opined that all the medals and fame paled in comparison to the friendship he developed with Long. Luz would be shortly killed on the battlefield in World War II, but not before he wrote to Owens telling him that he had come to believe their Olympic encounter and subsequent friendship was not a random occurrence, but rather the will of God, in Whom he now believed. Owens poetically describes this incredible friendship and story in his autobiography so beautifully: *“Together we had shared the greatest gift of all, which comes from God, the gift of brotherly **love**, which neither competition, nor war, nor even death could annul.”*

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