

Catholics and Sport: An Historical and Theological Overview and Contemporary Implications

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A frequently recurring narrative in the writing of the history of sport tells how Christians up until the time of the Reformation viewed the body only in negative terms, as associated with sin or evil. According to this narrative, because of their negative attitudes toward the body, Christians did not regard physical recreation and sport as important or encourage them. As Eitzen and 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.”¹ The recurring narrative tells us that it was only after the repressive regime of the Puritans in England and America that people began to have more enlightened views about the body. In the nineteenth century reasonable people started accepting games and sports and they began to have a more prominent place in society. The suggestion is that Christians and theologians have only recently, and somewhat reluctantly, embraced sports.

This way of understanding the history of sport in the West has difficulty accounting for some basic things we know about the daily lives of Christians during the medieval period, however. In fact, Christians participated in games and sports during this period on Sundays and on the feast days of the church year. As William Baker put it in his book *Sports in the Western World*:

No puritan pall hovered over Sundays. After the sermon and the sacraments in the morning, villagers lounged or played on Sunday afternoon. For youths, especially, re-creation meant recreation. Nor was recreation confined to Sunday

afternoons. The church calendar of holidays, aligned with ancient seasonal patterns, granted festive occasions at Easter, during harvest season, and at Christmas.

Throughout Europe this basic pattern was followed. . . . Blessed by church leaders, accepted by landlords, and sanctified by tradition, some of these seasonal breaks in labor ran for several days. Wine or ale, music, and dance accompanied the peasant games and frolic.²

It is significant that the feast days were so numerous that they typically accounted for around 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.

When humanists during the Renaissance began running the first schools primarily for lay students in the fifteenth century, they included time for students to play games and sports in the daily schedule. They were influenced in this regard by the medieval traditions just mentioned and also by what the classical authors of Greece and Rome had to say about the importance of the body and sports in the educational process. The early Jesuits followed the humanist lead and incorporated time and space for games 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 because 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 several factors, including an understanding of the material world as good and of the human person as a unity of body and soul (or body, soul and spirit); an understanding of the relationship between faith and culture which tended toward the acceptance of non-Christian customs and cultural traditions which were good

in themselves (or at least not objectionable on moral grounds), and their inclusion in the religious tradition; and the view that a virtuous person should be moderate in his studies or work and take time to engage in play and recreation. For some theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, play was even understood to be related to spiritual values.

The material world and human body

It is true that one can find examples of theologians in the early church and medieval period who encouraged flight from society, and who seemed to regard the body (and sexuality, in particular) primarily as an obstacle or problem in the Christian life. Some of this is due to the fact that almost all theologians were monks or celibate priests. Such emphases often served a rhetorical purpose in their writings about the Christian life and were possibly even helpful with regard to living out their particular vocation. But this was not the only, or even the dominant, perspective in the longer tradition.

Indeed, early and medieval Christian theologians spent much of their time criticizing Gnostics and Manicheans, precisely because these groups associated the material world and the human body with evil. One of the complaints of Christian authors was that Gnostics and Manicheans did not include the Old Testament as a part of the Christian scriptures, and therefore did not accept the account of the creation of the world in the first chapter of Genesis. On the contrary, they constructed elaborate mythological accounts of the origin of the material world, which associated it with a 'fall' or an "evil principle." This is why they regarded the material world as antagonistic to what is truly spiritual. From the Gnostic and Manichean perspective, progress in the spiritual life had to do with extricating oneself from the material world and, indeed, from the body itself. It will come as no surprise, then, that they denied the resurrection of the body.

In response to such views, Irenaeus and other early Christian theologians pointed out that if one reads the first pages of the Old Testament, one learns of a God who created all things in the world and pronounced them “very good”. As Augustine put it,

After each of God’s works, is added, “And God saw that it was good,” and after the completion of the whole series we have, “And God saw all that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” The meaning of this is that there is only one cause for the creation of the world – the purpose of God’s goodness in the creation of good.³

Christian theologians emphasized that if the material world as created by God was good, then it was not possible to regard the human body as non-essential to human existence or the Christian life. Rather, the body was constitutive of the human being as created by God. And they understood the person as a *unity* of body and soul – or body, soul, and spirit. This way of understanding the human person influenced the way Christians understood the resurrection. As Irenaeus put it, Christians “hope for the . . .salvation of the whole person, that is, of soul and body.”⁴

These theological sensibilities influenced Christian religious practices, which engaged the material world and involved the body in an integral way. Theologians such as Thomas Aquinas explicitly referenced these themes in his writings about the sacraments. “That one might not believe visible things evil of their nature,” he wrote, “it was fitting that through the visible things themselves the remedies of salvation be applied to human beings.”⁵ John Damascus also referenced these themes in his argument for the use of images in worship. “You despise matter, and call it contemptible,” he wrote to his opponents. “So did the Manicheans, but the divine Scriptures proclaim it good, for it says, ‘And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.’ Therefore I declare that matter is the creation of God, and a good thing.”⁶ In

addition to participating in the sacraments, which made use of water, fire, oil, bread and wine, and using images in worship, medieval Christians went on pilgrimages; participated in processions; put on mystery and morality plays; sculpted—and venerated—statues; fingered their rosary beads; blessed themselves with holy water; lit candles; crawled to the cross; put ashes on their forehead; prayed in churches and cathedrals with stained glass windows and woodcuts; and engaged in corporal works of mercy. In other words, they engaged in a whole variety of bodily activities, which they believed (and the priests, theologians, and bishops gathered at church councils concurred with them) were also spiritual.

The recurring narrative in the writing of the history of sport, which emphasizes that Christians loathed the flesh prior to the Reformation, is not able to account for the prevalence of play and sport in medieval and early modern periods or its association with religious feast days and its depiction in the religious art of the time. On the other hand, an accurate understanding of mainstream Christian views of the material world and the body does provide us with the beginnings of an explanation for how a religious culture could have emerged in medieval and early modern periods in which bodily practices such as play and sport were so easily accepted.

Faith and Culture

Christian attitudes toward games and sports were also shaped by their understanding of the relationship between faith and culture. One of the most important decisions made by the leaders of the early church was that the Gentiles did not need to undergo circumcision and adhere to other prescriptions of the Mosaic Law — essentially, become Jewish — before they could be baptized as Christians. Theologically, this decision was based on the doctrine of creation—on the teaching that God “made from one the whole human race,” as St. Paul put it. (Acts 17:26) For St. Paul, just as all people were created by God, so too all people were affected by the sin of

Adam. Most important, *all* who believed in Jesus Christ were likewise redeemed through this faith. This theological position was confirmed by the experience of the outpouring of God’s grace in the lives of Gentiles, which the leaders of the early church themselves had witnessed. As the author of Acts put it, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.” (Acts 10:45-46) The decision to accept Gentiles into the Christian community without requiring them to adhere to Jewish law would have a significant influence on future developments in the Christian church. For the purposes of our topic, it is important because it set a precedent—recorded in scripture—for accepting peoples from diverse cultures, along with their traditions and customs, into the Christian community.

One of the more immediate consequences of the decision regarding the Gentiles was that Christian theologians began to think through the various aspects of their faith in dialogue with, and sometimes in opposition to, Greek philosophical thought. This is a well-known phenomenon about which much has been written. But not as much has been written about the relationship between Greek athletic culture and early Christian spirituality. This relationship is evident in the writings of Paul himself—a Greek-speaking Jew—who used athletic imagery as a matter of course to describe the Christian life in his letters to the Greeks living in places like Corinth and Phillipi. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote, for example:

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 Cor 9:24-27)

St. Paul's opening to and engagement with the Greeks influenced early Christian theologians, who often used athletic imagery as a metaphor for the Christian life. Such images appear frequently in writings about the martyrs and monastic life, in particular. For example, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, used athletic imagery when writing to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, during the persecutions of Christians at the beginning of the second century. He exhorted Polycarp, who would eventually experience martyrdom, to "bear the infirmities of all, like a master athlete."⁷ After all, he wrote, "it is like a great athlete to take blows and yet win the fight." He encouraged Polycarp, "as God's athlete," to be level headed and calm, for the stakes are immortality and eternal life.⁸ Likewise, the account of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne of the second century depicted the persecution and suffering of a woman named Blandina and tells how she, "like a noble athlete," renewed her strength in her confession of faith.⁹ According to this account, Blandina "although small and weak and greatly despised, had put on the great and invincible athlete Christ, and in many contests had overcome the Adversary and through the conflict had gained the crown of immortality."¹⁰

In the fourth century John Cassian, one of the most important figures for the development of Western monasticism, also used athletic imagery in his writings about the monastic life. For Cassian, it is "only by comparison" that one can know what St. Paul wanted to teach Christians by the example of this world's games. And so it was important to understand the games themselves if one wanted to understand the meaning of the comparison. This is why Cassian gave his fellow monks a detailed explanation of the Olympic games, with a special focus on the training of the athletes. "If we have grasped the example taken from fleshly combat," he wrote, "we ought also, by comparisons with it, to understand the discipline and the order of the spiritual contest."¹¹

When Christians moved from being a persecuted minority into a position of influence in medieval Europe, theologians began thinking about the proper place of play and sport in society. Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1142) was one theologian who did so in his book *The Didascalicon*.¹² Because, for Hugh, philosophy dealt with the theoretical consideration of all human acts, it is not surprising that he included enjoyable activities that provided recreation in the curriculum he was proposing for the schools in the newly developing urban areas of his time. The significance of Hugh's book is primarily in his insistence that recreation and sport have a legitimate place in society and therefore also among the arts to be studied. His arguing for their inclusion in educational curricula is important because of the level of influence his work would have on education throughout medieval Europe.¹³

Thomas Aquinas was another theologian of the medieval period whose writings would have a significant influence with respect to play and sport. Because he is the most influential theologian who wrote about the relevance of "ludi" for a virtuous life, I will treat his thought in the next section.

Moderation as central to virtue

In the ancient world, and in particular in the writings of Aristotle, moderation was regarded as central to a life of virtue. Living virtuously involved trying to find the "mean" between excess and deficiency. The virtue of courage, for example, lay somewhere in the middle between foolhardiness (excess) and timidity (deficiency). This way of understanding virtue influenced how Christian theologians thought about play and sport. According to Thomas Aquinas, 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 puts 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*.¹⁴

Thomas cautions that the enjoyment of play should not be sought in ways that are harmful to persons, or indecent. Also, one needs to take into account the persons, time and place so that our fun “befits the hour and the person”. If our play is excessive, this can be sinful. But Thomas also insists that *it is possible to sin by having a lack of play in one’s life*. As he puts it:

In human affairs whatever is against reason is a sin. Now it is against reason for a person to be burdensome to others, by offering no pleasure to others, and by hindering their enjoyment. Wherefore Seneca says “Let your conduct be guided by wisdom so that no one will think you rude, or despise you as a cad.”¹⁵

While Thomas does write about the importance of play in relation to work, it would be a mistake to understand his view of play merely as the “pause that refreshes” so that one can return to work and be more productive. This would imply that play is significant only as a means to the end of enhancing one’s productivity at work. Rather, for him, “playing has no purpose beyond itself; what we do in play is done for its own sake.”¹⁶ Indeed, according to Thomas, play is similar to contemplation because both activities are enjoyable and done for their own sake.

The humanist educators of the Renaissance were influenced by Thomas Aquinas’ emphasis on the importance of moderation in a virtuous life. When they deliberated about the amount of time students should devote to their academic pursuits, they emphasized that students should not be excessive in their studies, which would lead them to regard school as a burden. They also needed time for recreation and relaxation. 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 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.³⁸

According to Philippe Aries, the early Jesuits also played an important role in introducing games and sports as a part of the school day in the western world.¹⁷ In the first schools they opened in the late 16th century, the Jesuits made use of buildings already existing that did not have any space for the students to play games and sports. In the school buildings the Jesuits themselves built, however, they included a courtyard in the middle of the structure that opened out onto the classrooms. They did so to provide a space for students to play games and sports.

The Jesuits also provided time for recreation in their schools. An hour of recreation was introduced after the noon meal and other shorter periods for recreation were introduced in between classes. On one free day in the middle of the week students would take a walk into the countryside and play games and sports. In the summer months students would walk to a villa owned by the Jesuits and play board and card games and less vigorous sports. Students had vacation days on most feast days and longer vacations at Christmas, Easter and in the summer.

The approach of the early Jesuits can be traced back to their founder, Ignatius of Loyola. The third part of the “Rules of the Colleges” that were written for the first colleges where young Jesuits lived and studied is dedicated to “Conserving the Health and Strength of the Body”. One part of the document pertains to

Some honest bodily recreation. There will also be some hours for honest bodily recreation, as after lunch or dinner for a while; between the hours of study

some relaxation is as useful for the body as for the studies, to which one returns with more of a disposition to make progress, when preceded by some honest bodily exercise.”¹⁸

In the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus as well Ignatius emphasized the importance of moderation in studies for young Jesuits, writing that “it is not good to continue to work for a long time without some proper relaxation or recreation.”¹⁹

This emphasis on moderation in one’s studies found its way into the detailed instructions regarding recreation and vacation days in the *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599, the formal education program for the Society’s schools. “A nice balance should be maintained,” the authors of the *Ratio* wrote, “between study time and recreation periods.”²⁰ Because the *Ratio* was the plan of studies for all Jesuit schools, it became common to set aside time for recreation and sports in the vast network of Jesuit schools throughout Europe and in other parts of the world.

Conclusion and some reflections

Contrary to a recurring narrative in the writing of the history of sport, Christians prior to the Reformation did not have an unremittingly negative attitude toward the body. On the contrary they emphasized the goodness of the material world as it had been created by God and that the body was constitutive of human personhood. They also emphasized the unity of the human person, body and soul – or body, soul and spirit. These emphases were related to the emergence of a religious culture in which the body was integrally involved in religious practices, such as the sacraments and the use of images in worship. Having an accurate understanding of mainstream Christian attitudes toward the material world and the body in these periods provides

us with the beginnings of an explanation for how play and sport could have been incorporated into the religious culture so easily.

Another reason that Christians tended to be accepting of play and sport had to do with the way they understood the relationship between faith and culture. The opening of the early church to the Greeks played an important role in this regard. Following St. Paul's lead, Christian writers used athletic imagery as an analogy or metaphor to describe the Christian life and the experience of martyrdom and the monastic life, in particular. The opening of the church to the Greeks also provided a precedent for accepting the customs and other aspects of non-Christian cultures into the life of the faith community. This influenced the way Christians engaged with the customs and cultural traditions of other peoples in the medieval period. The Greek heritage itself became important again with the humanists and early Jesuits, who drew inspiration for their own schools from ancient Greek schools, in which physical exercises and sports went hand in hand with intellectual exercises.

Thomas Aquinas was influenced by Aristotle's ethics, which emphasized that moderation was central to a life of virtue. With respect to our topic, this meant that a person should not be studying or working all the time. Such a life would be immoderate. He or she also needed to have time for recreation and relaxation. Thomas went even further than this, however, and saw a relationship between play and spiritual values. Thomas' approach provided a rationale for play and sport on Sundays and the feast days of the medieval period. Thomas also influenced the humanists and early Jesuits, who insisted that it was important for their students to take breaks from their studies from time to time and engage in play and recreation.

This heritage has relevance for Christian theologians today. Christian theologians are justified in paying attention to sport in our time, not only because they are trying to be relevant in

a world in which sport is so popular, but because Christians see the world in a particular way. From a Christian perspective, the material world is good and the body is constitutive of human personhood. If the person is a unity of body, soul and spirit, then this means when persons are engaging in bodily activities such as sport, they are also being impacted in their mind (their understanding of themselves and the meaning of life, etc) and spirit (their capacity for relationship with the Holy Spirit). Sports are indeed, as John Paul II has said, “a form of gymnastics of body and spirit.”²¹ As a reading of the daily sports pages makes clear, in our time the impact of sport participation on the minds and spirits of persons can be for good or for ill.

The Catholic heritage is distinctive in its acceptance of *play* and tendency to take it seriously intellectually and even to understand it in relation to the spiritual life. This is an important resource for reflection on sport in our contemporary context. Because sport has become connected in most societies of the world to external goods such as money and fame, there is a tendency for sport to be viewed merely instrumentally; it quickly turns into work and is engaged in with deadly seriousness. Without traditional sources of community or religious faith to know of one’s dignity and worth, the illusion sets in that one’s worth is only to be found in performance; winning does become everything. The ongoing scandal of athletes cheating by using performance enhancing drugs is just one manifestation of the negative consequences of this mindset. In such a context, it is important to ask what has happened to the play element in sport. Are there any enjoyable activities left that we engage in for their own sake? Or has everything become merely a means to the end of money and fame?

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- ² William J. Baker, Sports in the Western World (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 45.
- ³ Saint Augustine, City of God, Henry Bettenson, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 455.
- ⁴ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in Irenaeus of Lyons, Robert M. Grant, ed., The Early Church Fathers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 172.
- ⁵ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 4: Salvation, trans. Charles J. O'Neil (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 247.
- ⁶ John of Damascus, On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 60-61.
- ⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, "To Polycarp," in The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, trans. James A. Kleist, S.J. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1961), 96.
- ⁸ Ibid., 97.
- ⁹ Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 277.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 282-283.
- ¹¹ John Cassian, The Institutes, Dennis McManus, ed., Boniface Ramsey, OP, trans., Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press, 2000), p. 124.
- ¹² The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961).
- ¹³ Jerome Taylor writes that a crude index of the influence of The Didascalicon on its own and later ages is that it was found in nearly one hundred different manuscripts of the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, preserved in some forty-five libraries throughout Europe from Ireland to Italy, Poland to Portugal (Didascalicon, 4).
- ¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Vol. 2, Pt II-II, Q. 168, art. 2. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947).
- ¹⁵ Summa Theologica, Vol. 2, Pt. II-II, Q 168, art. 4.
- ¹⁶ Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings, trans. and ed. Simon Tugwell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 527-528.
- ¹⁷ Phillipe Aries, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 88.
- ¹⁸ Monumenta Paedagogica Societatis Jesu/ penitus retractata multisque textibus aucta, ed. Ladislaus Lukacs, vol. 92, nos. 107-108 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Jesu, 1965), pp. 68-69.
- ¹⁹ The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms. A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts, ed. John Padberg, SJ, no. 15 in Series I: Jesuit Primary Sources in English Translation (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 127.
- ²⁰ The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum of 1599, trans., with intro and notes by Allan P. Farrell, SJ (Washington, D.C.: Conference of Major Superiors of Jesuits, 1970), 12.
- ²¹ John Paul II, "Pope to Milan Football Team," L'Osservatore Romano (May 28, 1979), 4.