

In a new four-part series, Mgr Vlad Felzmann looks at the links that have long existed between the Church and sport

FAITH IN SPORT

Mgr Vlad Felzmann

Church has always made the case for sport as a key part in society

Today, the word 'sport' – stemming from the Old French expression *desporter* or *se desporter*, which itself is a derivative of the Latin word *de(s)portare*, and means to amuse oneself – stands for many different activities, ranging from ping pong to boxing, rock climbing to swimming.

Thus, it is hard elegantly to define. The best the 2018 Vatican document from the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life could come up with was, '*sports are bodily motions of individual or collective agents who, in accordance with particular rules of the game, effect ludic performances which, on the condition of equal opportunity, are compared to similar performances of others in a competition.*'

The document admits that this is not an exhaustive definition of sport since it exhibits lots of fuzzy edges.

Historically, over the past two thousand years, it's meaning has evolved from gladiatorial conflicts, to archery, jousting, through caid, to cricket and basketball.

As the old dictum puts it '*quidquid recipitur, mode recipientis recipitur*', loosely translated as "we see whatever we see as we are". And as the non-culturally homogeneous members – and authorities – of the Church passed through developing cultures, their take on sports and games evolved.

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.

Underpinning the Church's view on humanity is not only the Genetical conviction that we are 'very good' (Gen. 1,31) but that our bodies are sacramental. As I put it, our lives consist of the PIES – the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual – as we exist thanks to our relationship with God, our soul.

In my role as a sports chaplain, I have come across a number of fundamentalist Christians who say that competitive sport shows a lack of love – a lack of respect – for the opponent as each try to beat the other. However, the word competition comes from the two Latin roots '*com*' –with – and '*petere*' – to strive or to seek. Competitors are "striving or seeking together" for excellence.

The many examples of athletes shaking hands and embracing or even socialising or sharing a meal after an intense contest have much to teach fundamentalists in this



Despite the strong links between sport and military training since Ancient Greek times, the Church has always seen the virtuous benefits of the sporting life

regard. Clearly, honest sport is *Ubuntu* – good for all involved

Consequently, the Church's view on sport has been and still is positive, unless, of course, the activity is, as boxing was before the Marquess of Queensbury rules were introduced, and health and life threatening, or, as with mediaeval ball games between opposing villages, peace threatening. Other than those examples, sport is good.

The genesis of sport in Europe can be traced back to early Greco-Roman military conquests. When the battle finished, the victors engaged in sport-like activities to celebrate. In fact, any training that took place was done for war. The idea of training physically was not connected to sports – or even leisure. Greek philosophers looked at post-war sports and began to philosophise about life, sport, and the athlete. Paul and other early Christian leaders adopted 'sports as a metaphor for life', taking it one step further by comparing it to our spiritual lives.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: '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) 7

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, the 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.' 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.

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. 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.'

Gnostics, who around the end of the first century CE, taught cosmological dualism, strict asceticism and repudiation of material creation – and thus sport – as evil, were rejected as heretical by the Fathers of the early Church.

In his *City of God*, St Augustine (354-430) referred to the apostle Paul as 'the athlete of Christ'.

Thomas Aquinas, like Plato and Aristotle, advocated for the need to cultivate body and soul to flourish as human beings.

John Cassian (360-435), 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.'

The beginning of the medieval era brought about new questions about Christian engagement with sport. As, thanks to the emperor Theodosius I in 380CE Christianity became the official religion in Rome, a new theological priority of pursuing virtuous living began to emerge. This meant looking at things, like sports, and asking questions like 'If we engage in this, either as a spectator or as a participant, over time, will it make us more Godly or less?'

Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1142), in his book *The Didascalicon*, dealt with the theoretical consideration of all human acts, and as a result 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 were 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.

St. Thomas Aquinas was another theologian of the medieval period whose writings would have a significant influence with respect to play and sport.