

Living a life of purpose in God's will

SPORT

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This article is an invitation to you, dear reader, to work out something similar in your life, to that of the headline.

The world is passing through tumultuous times, evolving – I hope and pray not – onto global disasters as just below the surface, there are many festering hatreds leading to inevitable conflicts.

However, whatever the context of my life, whatever job, responsibility and relationships, I have my Christian vocation to live as I journey on to eternity. Everything worthwhile, like climbing a mountain to enjoy the view, requires not just words, but sacrifice.

I know little about the lives of others. However, I am convinced that my spirit is meant to develop until I become, before death, *capax Dei*.

So far, born in 1939, I have been blessed with surviving World War 2 in Czechoslovakia and enjoying life in England - 1946 to 1965; in Rome from 1965-69, Barcelona from 1969-70 and now, since 1970, life back in London.

Within me, there is the ongoing game between the lower against the higher Vlad. Vices have probed – and keep on probing – my commitment to God, there ever since my experience of God's love in 1954 on Eriskay. That experience catapulted my desire to live a virtuous life to the top of my agenda. I decided to get down to becoming a saint. Appointed 'sports chaplain' in 2011 by the Cardinal, that quest was transformed into a foil fencing competition between virtues and vices, a game I called Vifoil.

Wondering which sport to compare with my struggle for morality, I chose the foil, which in fencing is a lighter sword than both the epee and sabre and is the weapon of choice for most beginners. A foil fencer scores only by hitting the opponent's torso with the blade tip. As the foil is lighter and has fewer targets than both épée and sabre, it demands better techniques and strategies. I chose this weapon as it must protect my heart against all the strokes – all the vices – of my opponent, the lower Vlad. Besides, it's fun to be able to say that I aim to foil the attacks of vices by parrying with my virtues' foil.

When the lower Vlad chooses a specific vice for the next bout, I use its opposing virtue – or another vice – to parry the attacks. When a vice does get through, I use my defeat to understand the weaknesses of others and thus my failure makes me more merciful, more Christ-like. The victory of



Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady celebrates with the 2021 Vince Lombardi Trophy after Tampa beat the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl LV

that vice backfires. Seeing my spiritual life like a Vifoil game makes life more entertaining.

St Paul said: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good." (Rm. 12: 21)

Lower Vlad uses not only virtues but also vices like a swordsman, uses all the tricks he can to score by touching the chest of his opponent. Upper Vlad does all he can to parry these attempts. Providentially, the chest padding is tough enough to prevent the enemy's foil becoming lethal.

Underneath anything I am doing, there is a competition, more of a conflict, between the capital virtues and vices. There is Humility v. Pride. Generosity v. Covetousness. Chastity v. Lust. Meekness v. Anger. Temperance v. Gluttony. Friendship v. Envy. And Diligence v. Sloth. The foils of pride and fear have parried all temptations to access any pornography.

Vices, as opponents not competitors, try to trick me by manipulating, seducing – nowadays called grooming – into behaving in destructive rather than creative ways. The trick is to use vices to play other vices – as Churchill, hating Stalin, was happy to team up with him to beat the man he hated even more, Adolf Hitler.

While vanity fights gluttony, pride tends to beat all the other vices. I dare to be different. Lust, sloth, and all the others stand little chance against the proud noblesse oblige of a son of God whose best friend in Yeshua.

There's no glory, no satisfaction in drifting through time. The beauty of life lies in overcoming challenges and realising your own potential in the process. At its deepest level, life is not about competing with others. It's about becoming the best version of yourself: fulfilling your potential. No one can beat you at that.

You have to rely on your work ethic to get ahead in developing your potential across your PIES: the physical, intellectual emotional and spiritual dimensions of your life. It is never about the talent or cognitive skills; it is about the non-cognitive skills such as the virtue of courage, discipline, teamwork, vision, and grit.

When, early in the morning sloth whispers: "You are tired, you need to look after yourself, no need to do those exercises- the 85 push ups or squats," the only answer is to pronounce a word unprintable by a priest, and I get on with them, motivated by remembering obese folk, priests unable to genuflect and men and women bowed over and limping along the street or Victoria Station concourse.

At its core, it seems to me that life is a game, not against any external competitor but the opponents within myself, whose spectator is only God. My aim is to become the best version of myself. If I achieve that, I will be the winner of the Journey to Eternity Cup.

"If you aren't going all the way, why go at all?" asked Joe Namath, American Football quarterback inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1985." If you are going to try, why not give your best? A half-hearted

approach never helps. If you raise your standards, become a stronger and better person in the process. A mediocre goal is boring, dull, and doesn't create any value for anyone."

"There may be people that have more talent than you, but there's no excuse for anyone to work harder than you do," mused Derek Jeter, baseball player who spent his entire 20-year career with the New York Yankees. Working on your relationships, helping your family and friends is always rewarding.

"I don't run away from a challenge because I'm afraid. Instead, I run toward it because the only way to escape fear is to trample it beneath your feet," said Nadia Comaneci (born 1961), five-time Olympic gold medallist Romanian gymnast.

Blaming others for anything wrong in your life is the easiest way never to reach your dreams and goals. Taking 100% responsibility for everything in your life will give you the power to change it.

Caring for a 91-year-old with dementia has presented me with an ongoing fencing academy session in which to develop the virtue of patience. Getting there. Still a long way to go.

Primo primi, instinctive responses, to events, do get through and help foster my humility, and understanding of the mistakes of others.

Never forget you are a relational creature, part of a global whole. As Andre Agassi (born 1970) – resonating with the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 25:40 – put it: "Remember this. Hold on to this. This is the only perfection there is,

the perfection of helping others. This is the only thing we can do that has any lasting meaning. This is why we're here." These are words of a former No 1 tennis star, eight-time Grand Slam champion, 1996 Olympic Gold Medalist, as well as a runner up in seven other Grand Slam tournaments.

The purpose of life is to be of purpose. In the end, the greatest wealth you'll ever have is the impact you had on others. Ask yourself: "How am I changing others' lives for the better?" Daily, I ask myself: "Am I living the virtue of generosity rather than the vice of selfishness?"

"If you want to be the best, you have to do things that others aren't willing to do," challenged the swimmer Michael Phelps, most decorated Olympian of all time, with a total of 28 medals.

Falling down in a game – even losing a fencing bout – is not as important as getting up, learning from my mistakes and preparing for the next one.

Virtues lived, rather than words spoken, are tangible signs of life in the Kingdom of God.

God is not a dictator. I am free to make choices and, thus, be responsible for my results.

Your struggles shape your life. In life, you can be both reactive and proactive. In both these you might fail to achieve your goal. However, as the boxer Muhammad Ali (1942-2016) put it: "He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life."

If you are tempted to give up, remember Tom Brady (born 1977) – a top American football quarterback – and his conviction: "If you don't believe in yourself, why is anyone else going to believe in you?" Tom believes in himself because he had put in the work.

Let me ask you, "are you believing in yourself enough?" If not, is it because you haven't put in the work? Is it because your habits don't align to achieve your desired level of success? Is it due to a lack of Vifoil practice?

As Michael Jordan, who played 15 seasons in the National Basketball Association from 1984 to 2003, winning six NBA championships with the Chicago Bulls, made clear: "Obstacles do not have to stop you. If you run into a wall, do not turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it or work round it."

Seeing my life like a foil fencing game has helped me slow down my inevitable ageing process. It might help you too, dear reader.