

# THEOLOGY OF SPORT IN HISTORY

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## **Abstract:**

The aim of this study is to introduce the theology of sport as an actual topic. It deals mainly with the question of how the issue is viewed by ecclesiastical authorities. The main attention is given to the description of the theological perception of the human body from the historical perspective, including specific approaches and practices. The study was written in the Pontifical Council for the Laity and with its intensive help. It primarily reflects the information provided there.

This topic has been described using the analysis of the literature provided by this institution, as well as on the basis of the interviews with its representatives.

The study assesses which historical period fundamentally shaped today's Christian perspective on sport. It describes some specific elements and moments and based on them it tries to determine the general characteristics of such period with respect to the subject.

The results of this study aim to contribute to the understanding of how the image of the body and sport developed throughout history. On this basis it is possible to assess what significantly influenced the emergence of specific dogmas appearing in the Catholic Church today in relation to this subject.

## **Key words:**

theology, sport, history, platonism, Aristotle, philosophy, popes

## **1. Antiquity**

The aim of this study is a general description of the substantial elements forming the Catholic Church perspective on sport. It seems to be logical to start our research of this view at the beginning of our civilization, the ancient times. Along with the advances in human knowledge also human thinking was shaped, as evident in the works of philosophers of that time, which in certain forms persist until today. Moreover, it was philosophy that later had a significant impact on both the formation of church beliefs and perception of the world and man, and ultimately itself.

### **1. 1 Platonism and its rejection of matter**

Plato, as well as many other thinkers later, apply dualistic thinking of man. This is immediately reflected in the view of the physical component of man – the body is not seen as a less perfect compared to the intellectual component any more. It is difficult to find the roots Plato based his teaching on. Some sources see the inspiration and ideas in various religions of

the East, too. Plato's teaching can be seen also as his effort to oppose the overestimated physical culture of his ancestors. Undoubtedly, this philosopher significantly influenced not only the further development of the body image, but also the entire culture.

Dualism thus remained in his pupils and followers, who were consciously or unconsciously inspired by him and so Plato's ideas have accompanied humanity in various forms for centuries. Although the follow-up thoughts often use different terminology, the core remains largely unchanged. We see the separation of reason or sometimes soul from the physical body and these components are considered in opposition or at least in a strong incongruence.

## **1.2 Aristotelianism as a “return to earth”**

Plato's ideas undoubtedly influenced the whole civilization. Along with their dissemination and interpretation, however, there occurs their misrepresentation as well. Certain elements of this doctrine could have been raised, while others overlooked.

Aristotle, Plato's follower, was probably one of the greatest philosopher in history. In terms of man's duality, he comes with the concept of two constitutive elements of man. Even in Aristotle's eyes man is set into the world through his body, but his soul extends beyond his body. He considers the soul to be the bearer of life, in hylemorphic conception this means that soul must be a form of such matter that is able to take on life or body.

*„Every thing in our universe is constituted of matter (hyle), into which a form (morphe) is imprinted. Along with the adoption of the forms there occurs the emergence of the thing. And thus from a piece of marble (matter) a statue arises when the form is imprinted into the marble.“<sup>1</sup>*

Aristotle's ideas later inspired and strongly influenced also one of the greatest thinkers, Thomas Aquinas. The legacy and influence of Plato and Aristotle's conceptions of man has always been strongly present throughout history. The fact that the Church, despite minor hesitation and fluctuations, inclined to the Aristotelian concept may be considered essential for all further development of theology and philosophy.

## **1.3 Cultures affecting the formation of the Church**

These two philosophical schools have significantly influenced the worldview of Europeans. They also have a major impact on the future perception of human body. Although it is very hard to determine the causality of the effects on the early arising Church, it is apparent that the ideas of these two philosophical schools strongly affected the Church. The shaping of the emerging Christian community, however, was not affect only by the Greek philosophical tradition. Many authors agree that among other important factors belong the Roman and Jewish cultures. All the three together, ie Greek, Roman and Jewish, thus contributed to the formation of Christianity albeit each in a different way.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. *On the Soul*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1997.

### **1.3.1 Greek culture**

Greek culture, as mentioned above, was typical of its philosophical approach to the fundamental questions of man. Many schools, therefore, are at first rather concerned with cosmological, later more sociological themes and provides answers to them. The schools of Plato and Aristotle seem to be crucial for the philosophical and theological study of the body.

Another element of neglectable Greek heritage is *agon*, the contest, which due to its originally ritual meaning referred to pure rivalry and desire to win. This *agon* was omnipresent in the daily life of ordinary Greeks and so it can be understood as a basic feature of the then society. It penetrated the culture of that time and set the direction of the whole civilization in its thinking and concrete manifestations. One of these manifestations was boundless enthusiasm for physical performance and especially the cult of victory, inherent in Greek sports games.

### **1.3.2 Roman culture**

Another culture, which significantly contributed to shaping the Church and ultimately also its view of the human body, was the Roman culture.

Like the Greeks, the Romans also manifested great passion for sports. In comparison with the Greek approach, however, the Roman one is considerably different. The difference is most noticeable in the Greek and Roman attitude to games. While the Greeks recognized the participation and victory in the Olympics as the most significant, the Romans indulge in rather passive watching of sport. Gladiators, a characteristic image of Rome, can give us an idea of slaves who stepped into arenas under the threat of death and in front of the euphorized crowd they led bloodthirsty battles with wild animals or with each other. Except for the very nature of this spectacle, it is just the element of passivity that makes the Roman sport so different from the Greek *agon*. Many contemporary authors point to the fact that this active Greek and passive Roman element can be seen in the practice of today's Church as well.

### **1.3.3 Jewish culture**

If our interest is focused on Christianity we must not forget the Jewish tradition. Judaism was typical of a certain distance or even aversion towards these two cultures. Jews reproached the Greeks for the overemphasis on physical aesthetics, which almost passed to the cult of nudity. It is difficult to say how much this nudity cult accompanied the personal life of ordinary Greek people, but for public sports events, a very popular public entertainment, it was more than typical. According to the Hebrew view, nudity was only intended for the eyes of God, so it is not surprising that Greek practices were disposed by the Jews. The approach of Jews to sport can be better described as a dichotomy. Similarly, the Jews loathed the Romans' affection in organized killing of slaves and animals in the form of gladiator games.

However, probably the most important difference, defining Jewish culture over the others, was a strict monotheism. It is the belief in one God, which distinguishes the Jews from the then emerging multiculturalism.

## 1.4 The person of the Apostle Paul

The previous paragraphs briefly describe the main influences that contributed to the formation of the perspective on human body of that time. In these diverse conditions, there also arises a new movement – the Christian Church, which gets inspired by these influences and about three hundred years later it starts to set the course for the whole of Europe.

The key figure in the emerging church is the Apostle Paul. His person synthesizes both mentioned cultures. Paul as a Jew uses typically Greek symbols and images to illustrate the Christian message to the Gentiles. The reason is probably the fact that Paul belongs among a cosmopolitan group of Jews. He could have been in a sense attracted by the expressivity of the Greek way of life. Despite these cultural differences there existed a minority within the Jewish people, that worshipped the Greek lifestyle and games especially and participated in their recognition.

In his work, especially when he mediates faith to the Greeks, he pays a considerable attention to the theme of sport. He often uses purely Greek terms such as *stephanos* (crown), *trecho* (run), *brabeion* (reward), *agon* (contest) and others. Athletic metaphors in the writings of Paul attract considerable attention and invites experts to ambiguous interpretations.

*“You surely know that your body is a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. The Spirit is in you and is a gift from God. You are no longer your own.”* 1 Cor 6, 19-20

*“God paid a great price for you. So use your body to honor God.”* 1 Cor 6, 15-20

*“Athletes work hard to win a crown that cannot last, but we do it for a crown that will last forever. I don't run without a goal. And I don't box by beating my fists in the air. I keep my body under control and make it my slave, so I won't lose out after telling the good news to others.”* 1 Cor 9,25-27

*„Don't you know that your bodies are part of the body of Christ?”* 1 Cor 6, 6-19

Some authors recon that the main reason for Paul's choice of the terminology was pragmatism. For Greeks, especially in Corinth, the center of gladiator games of that time, it was convenient to choose a popular topic. Others, however, talk more about a strange synthesis, which in these words arises between the Christian spiritual and Greek physical spirituality.

## 2. Sport in the Church

From the interpretation of the facts that formed the basis for later reception of body and sport, we will now move on to the sports theory and practice in the Church itself. Paul

was one of the first Christians talking about sport in the context of the new religion. However, there are many other theologians who were influenced by similar ideals and thus they implement sport into the doctrine and religious practice of the emerging religion.

## 2.1 Early Church

The way these terms take on a new Christian meaning, is remarkable. In particular, the term *agon*, which originally expressed purely Greek ideal, and so can be regarded as crucial for the Greek way of thinking, through the person of Paul becomes an expression expressing the Christian struggle.

Despite the fact that we lack full understanding to some of Paul's metaphors we can very well say that together with sport symbols the ideal of Greek athlete becomes an integral part of the early Church terminology. They sound even stronger in the context of the persecution of the Church in the first centuries. Athlete, with all his features necessary for success in a sport arena, is seen as a source of inspiration for a persecuted and oppressed Christian.

The bishop of Antioch Ignatius can serve as a great example, he uses these symbols in his letters to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, during the second century AD. Due to the persecution of Christians Polycarp was in danger of martyrdom. Ignatius calls him a "*divine athlete*" in his work and invites him to bear his weakness "... *as an athlete.*" He keeps his hope alive with the final words: "*the great athlete who ... will win.*"<sup>2</sup>

As the other evidence proving the popularity of this terminology we can mention Eusebius of Caesarea, who in his Ecclesiastical History recounts among other things, the life story of some martyrs. One of these suffering martyrs was Blandina, a woman repeatedly tortured in an inhuman and fanatical way. Yet she never wavered in her faith. For her properties Eusebius compares her to a "*noble athlete*". If the author refers to such an extraordinary woman as an *athlete* there can be no doubt about how extremely important this term was.

### 2.1.2 The ideal of monasticism

The information mentioned above shows that the term *athlete* enjoyed considerable importance. This fact can also be illustrated on the attitude of John Cassian. This theologian, living in the fifth century, greatly influenced Western monasticism. Inspiration by Apostle Paul, which is typical of him, probably also predetermines his assessment of the athlete ideal. When interpreting Paul's parable of game he argues that it is necessary to understand correctly the ideal of games itself. That is one reason why the monks under his leadership also get a detailed explanation of the Olympic Games with an increased emphasis on training athletes. Understanding the relationship of hard training and winning the Olympics should help them in their own struggle on the spiritual field.

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<sup>2</sup> KELLY, P.: *Catholic Perspectives on Sport. From Medieval to Modern Times*, Paulist Press 2012, p. 68

### 3. Gnosticism

Let me look at gnosticism from two sides. The first starting point will be the view on this movement through the eyes of the Catholic Church representatives in Vatican, including relevant books.

Throughout its history, the Church was also confronted with the incorrect teaching about the human body. Although Aristotle moderates strict dualism, which is often attributed to Plato, dividing person and the separation of these components is still present in the minds of theologians and other thinkers. Christianity is thus confronted with the ideas of neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and other movements that simultaneously with their arrival in Europe affect Christian attitudes and understanding of the human body.

One of the sources of inappropriate perception of man in both his dimensions was Gnosticism. The key to understanding the Gnostic controversy is the view of the material world as such, to some extent also caused by the fact that the Gnostics did not recognize the Hebrew Scriptures. The passage that seems to be crucial is the one where God deems the created world as good.

Besides God the Gnostics also recognize the perfect Supreme Being, from which God is separated by a series of emanations. In this sense God gets into our world through a certain kind of descent from something higher. All creation is therefore also seen as a consequence of that descent, decline from the "eternal". *Materia*, the mass, which is a part of us, is thus seen as imperfect or even opposed to pure spirituality. Gnostic teaching significantly diverges from the current Christian doctrine in its opinion on the figure of Jesus Christ. Jesus is completely removed from the material world to such an extent that he even lacks his material body (suffering on the cross). In the minds of the Gnostics the human body is not worth of divine person, they also deny conscious death associated with the pain and suffering that was brought as a sacrifice for human sin. The subsequent resurrection, therefore, according to the Gnostics, only took place on the spiritual level.

In the second century and later many theologians raise their voice against the Gnostics. Irenaeus from Lyon seems to be a key thinker in terms of Jesus' humanity. His theory of recapitulation shows that Jesus went through all stages of human life, from birth to adulthood. At the same time he confirms the parallelism between the creation of the first man and the incarnation of the Son.

One possible causes of the conflict between the Gnostics and Irenaeus was the different interpretation of some of the ideas of the Apostle Paul. It seems likely that the Gnostics did not take into account the fact that Paul uses the term *flesh* in different ways<sup>3</sup>.. Another cause may be an overemphasis put on the First Letter to Corinthians 15:50. Based on the this quote taken out of context they might think that Paul understands body negatively.

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<sup>3</sup> KELLY, P.: *Catholic Perspectives on Sport. From Medieval to Modern Times*, Paulist Press 2012, p. 10

Along with other movements such as Neoplatonism and Manichaeism the extreme Gnostics present teaching which significantly influenced the perception of the material world and human body. Their proponents claimed so called dualistic ontology sinking a gap between the immortal soul and passing body.

Although Gnosticism is along with other movements considered very controversial, according to a number of authors we can recognize its tracks even today. It can thus be considered, e.g. by Patrick Kelly, one of the roots of future misinterpretations. It is important to remember that although some of the ideas are considered different or contradictory to today's perception, these often very controversial opinions help to cleanse and lead to a better explanation of the Christian message.

In my opinion, this attitude does not reflect the opinion of Gnosticism in the right light. With reference to Rudolf Steiner, I think that Gnosticism is understood like that just because of its wrong interpretation. Except to extreme positions, Gnosticism recognizes the divine principle in everything. It does not regard matter as bad or declining. On the contrary, it can be seen as a succession of time, when man has not yet been placed into a physical body. The body then becomes something we have in common with the earthly existence. Obviously, body enables soul's transformation and at the same time it is a mediator of such transformation. Although our body can be viewed as a sort of burden in this sense, but necessary and unavoidable. This is the legacy of the past, through which we learn the spiritual shift/growth. It is the best thing that can keep us alive in this world. Love, then, of purely divine origin, gives us a starting point, how to behave in the body, to the body and to other bodies.

#### **4. Thomas Aquinas**

The extensive work of Thomas Aquinas represents the centerpiece of scholastic theology tradition. Since Aristotle inspired Aquinas, he is strongly present in his works. Aristotle's approach differs from Plato's dualistic conception of the human person as an immortal soul imprisoned in a material body in his vision of psychosomatic unity of each person. In this sense, it is possible to liken Aquinas to Aristotle - as Aristotle brakes Plato's dualism, Thomas in a sense moderates dualistic tendencies of the first millennium by his formulation that man is a harmony of the soul, spirit and body.

But it is not only the human body as such he is concerned with. Especially in his *Summa Theologica* he also addresses specific physical activities, such as games. It is immediately apparent that Thomas's attitude to the physical culture of man was positive. However, if we inspect the question of the right place of physical exercises in the Christian life more deeply we find multiple concepts in Thomas Aquinas.

##### **4.1 Game as a rest**

The first concept is a game as a rest. Ideas that express this attitude can be found for example in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he describes the game as a necessary rest from the exertion of body and soul. This statement may seem trivial today, of course, but it is

appropriate to note that Thomas speaks this way at a time when there are no specialized disciplines that provide these findings today. However, today's medicine, psychology, pedagogy and other scientific disciplines confirm this view. Similarly, in his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Tomáš indirectly indicates that physical exercise can be a cure for the soul, which helps to refresh the tired mind. Likewise, today's studies discover that aerobic activities have a positive influence on the intellectual abilities of man.

#### 4.2 Game as an activity of reason

Like Aristotle, Aquinas highlights reason as the guiding principle of man. Thanks to reason we are able to awaken certain virtues in our behavior such as temperance and others, which then become a benchmark of human life.

The criterion of reason should also be applied to games as well. No doubt games are beneficial to man and bring virtues in our lives, however, if their implementation is inconsistent with reason it is not a virtue any longer, as well as the lack of games: *"In human affairs whatever is against reason is a sin. Now it is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by offering no pleasure to others, and by hindering their enjoyment."*<sup>4</sup>

If play is not directed by the rule of reason, it may even become sin. In this context, Thomas warns of three possible dangers.

The first one is characterized by the words: *"... the pleasure in question should not be sought in indecent or injurious deeds or words."*

The second reads: *"Another thing to be observed is that one lose not the balance of one's mind altogether. Hence Ambrose says (De Offic. i, 20): "We should beware lest, when we seek relaxation of mind, we destroy all that harmony which is the concord of good works."*

Finally, the third danger: *"Thirdly, we must be careful, as in all other human actions, to conform ourselves to persons, time, and place, and take due account of other circumstances, so that our fun "befit the hour and the man," as Tully says (De Offic. i, 29)."*

If the activity meets the following three main criteria, Thomas refers to it as in accordance with the rules of reason and therefore virtuous. Otherwise, as already mentioned, play may even become a sin.

The concept of sin has not always been defined. Throughout history it has been constantly changing, once it was growing and once transforming. Sin in connection with plays was used not only at the time of scholasticism, but many times throughout history. Game used to be and still can be seen as idleness from more meaningful activities, work or prayer. Thomas also deals with this idea when he gives an example of comedians who despite the fact that they devote most of their time playing, they do not sin: *"Further, comedians especially*

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<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, Saint Thomas, Mortimer J. Adler, Laurence Shapcote, and Daniel J. Sullivan. *The Summa Theologica: Volume 2*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2003.

would seem to exceed in play, since they direct their whole life to playing. Therefore if excess of play were a sin, all actors would be in a state of sin; moreover all those who employ them, as well as those who make them any payment, would sin as accomplices of their sin."<sup>5</sup>

In connection with sin and playing games, however, as Thomas explains, it depends on the effect of play on man's relationship to God. Reason in his concept should serve again to detect inappropriate tendencies: *"In all things dirigible according to reason, the excessive is that which goes beyond, and the deficient is that which falls short of the rule of reason. Now it has been stated that playful or jesting words or deeds are dirigible according to reason. Wherefore excessive play is that which goes beyond the rule of reason .. on account of the very species of the acts employed for the purpose of fun, and this kind of jesting ... is stated to be "discourteous, insolent, scandalous, and obscene," when to wit a man, for the purpose of jesting, employs indecent words or deeds, ... these being of themselves mortal sins."*<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.3 Play as an activity in itself**

Thomas Aquinas, however, offers more than mere rational guidelines for plays. In the prologue to the Commentary to Boethius De Hebdomanibus he speaks about the similarities between play and contemplation. This similarity is based on two features.

The first of these features is joy. There is no doubt that playing brings pleasure. At the same time we can add that the greatest joy one experiences is just in contemplation. The second and equally significant feature is that playing has a purpose just in itself. Whatever man does in a play he does for the play itself there is no other purpose. The same applies to the joy of wisdom. The contemplation over wisdom entails in itself the cause of its own pleasure.

Divine Wisdom compares its delightfulness to play: *"I was delighted for days on end, playing face to face with him."* So does Thomas when inviting: *"Run ahead into your house and gather yourself there and play there and pursue your thoughts."*<sup>7</sup>

In this example, it is evident that Thomas does not consider play just a rest from work, though very beneficial. He recognizes its true depth and charge it carries in itself. I believe that Thomas understood play as a God's gift to lead us closer to him. It's no coincidence that playing is cherished especially by children, who in their purity did not forget the pure beauty and happiness we should experience in this world.

### **5. Impact of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution**

Historical changes in society have obvious impact on the Church as well. An important moment for the whole Church was also the end of the 16th century. The bishops

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid..

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> TUGWELL, S.: *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings*. p. 527-28

who gathered at the Council of Trent, answered many challenges from reformed theologians especially. At the same time they systematize bishops' activities in dioceses so as to ensure adequate training of priests. This act systematically prevented possible diversion from the church doctrine. In addition, the Catechism for laymen and children was written. Many clerics begin to devote more energy to "pagan" elements of commonly practiced religious life. In a sense they try to "cleanse" the moral life of an individual, particularly in the area of sexuality. In response to arguments there arise repeated attempts to discuss a final resolution of issues related to the authority of the Pope, for example, the sacraments, the recognition of miracles and so on.

The challenges towards the Catholic Church, however, do not end up with the Reformation. The gradual recognition of science and methods of enlightenment puts theologians before further questions. In response to science and the Enlightenment they come back to their bases and certainties, and they develop a new discipline called dogmatic theology. They try to fix their position by clear evidence derived from exact premises of faith and reason.

Despite these controversies it is obvious that during the early and medieval Christianity Christians insisted on the unity of the body and soul. Such perception can be seen even on religious practices and specific form of religious ceremonies that pay equal attention to both material and spiritual dimension.

In the early 17th century, however, based on the teaching of René Descartes, there begins to appear a new emphasis on the contrast between the body and soul of man. The body is thus seen by this philosopher as *res extensa*, having a material dimension without the intellectual component. In contrast, the soul, *res cogitans*, is immaterial, but rational, and as such it has a major priority. In this sense, the two components begin to be seen as contradictory. Although Descartes does not further explain how the material body unites with the immaterial soul, his description of the body as a machine, however, breathes life into ontological dualism again. While it is difficult for Descartes and other philosophers to create a model of the mutual relationship and connection of the different *rés*, this distinction begins to spread.

*„This alien anthropology, which takes a false view of the unique body-soul composite that is the human person, is incompatible with Christianity. Yet it persists. It is alive and well—and profoundly destructive—today.“<sup>8</sup>*

There are many authors confirming the influence of Cartesian dichotomy on church vision of person. See for example a study *A Theological Reflection on the Human Body* by the contemporary American theologian, Archbishop John J. Myers. In addition to the statement that the Cartesian view of anthropology was mistaken in its composite of body and soul, moreover, he describes the influences on human life and on the Church, with an emphasis on the intimate aspect.

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<sup>8</sup>A *Theological Reflection on Human Body*, Most Reverend John Joseph Myers FROM [www: http://www.ewtn.com/library/BISHOPS/HUMNBODY.HTM](http://www.ewtn.com/library/BISHOPS/HUMNBODY.HTM)

Although this dualistic ontology repeatedly reawakened by Descartes has already been identified as actually incompatible with Christianity, it still persists in certain forms and Myers confirms that this influence is evident even today.

*„This alien anthropology, which takes a false view of the unique body-soul composite that is the human person, is incompatible with Christianity. Yet it persists. It is alive and well—and profoundly destructive—today.“*

In 1994 Pope John Paul II in his Letter to Families also speaks against a similar separation of man's spirit and body:

*“It is typical of rationalism to make a radical contrast in man between spirit and body, between body and spirit. But man is a person in the unity of his body and his spirit. The body can never be reduced to mere matter.”*

He states that the Cartesian opposition of body and spirit leads among other things to the understanding of human sexuality as a space for manipulation and abuse rather than to the awe and unity. These ideas are well developed in his book *Theology of the Body*.

The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor calls these tendencies "excarntation"<sup>9</sup>, by which he means a stable disembodiment of mental life, which more and more deviates from bodily form. At the same time it is mainly concentrated into head. This excarnation also projects onto Catholic theology, the Church and the thinking of its representatives. The separation of physical activity from purely mental and spiritual activity is a direct result of this thinking.

Descartes consequently inspired other tendencies again separating physical activities from the mental ones, concentrated only in the human head. The consequence of that can be an erroneous pre-understanding that spiritual life is not related, or even in a relationship with physical activities.

It is evident that these are not purely theological formulations or dogmas, affecting the life and situation of the Church. The Church is forced to respond to numerous questions that arise simultaneously with the changes in society, in social area, in sciences etc. Humanities, technological, medical and other theories and concepts interact with each other and the synthesis of all the elements are in some way reflected in theology, it affects theology and forces the Church to keep it living and current science.

Theological exploration of the human body can not be taken out of this cycle, on the contrary, given that it shares the object of its interest, the human body, with many other scientific disciplines, it is forced to approach these sciences, touch their knowledge and serve a common goal. As the Enlightenment influenced spiritual practice of many generations of

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<sup>9</sup> TAYLOR CH., *The Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007

Christians and modern medicine, genetics and many other sciences influence the Church view on the human body<sup>10</sup>.

One of the factors that profoundly shaped the attitude of the Catholic Church to the modern world, was the great French Revolution. Despite all the noble ideas the revolution brought and was driven by, it can be regarded, in fact, as an anti-religious. A possible root of this anti-religious character was apparently the actual discontent with the contemporary practices of the clergy.

Although the fundamental revolution slogan was "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," the Catholic Church, religious organizations in general suffered a lot. The power of the papal office in France significantly declined. There were executions of the clergy, mass confiscation of church property, the expulsion of members of the order, and a lot of freedom violating practices.

The reaction of the Church and especially its authorities was understandable - rather careful and defensive attitude to the world and everything that the French Revolution brought. This attitude is also, often in a dramatic way, expressed in papal documents of the 19th and early 20th century, such as the Syllabus of Errors<sup>11</sup>. Certainly this was not a period of development of theology, especially in terms of the body or sport. Let me note that the suspicion did not come only from the ranks of the Church. The Church, though reorganized with officially permitted activity, was often understood as contradictory to the ideal of the Republic and became the target of "dechristianization" which was to eliminate religion from the French society.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> It's necessary to say, that theologians are studying body and sport not for a long time. This opinion looks like the most logic at the moment.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Pius IX.

<sup>12</sup> From WWW: <http://www.historytoday.com/gemma-betros/french-revolution-and-catholic-church>

## 6. Popes of modern times

After World War I sport again becomes an integral part of the lifestyle of the European population. Not only that, in the postwar period sport can be seen as a bearer of reconstruction and restoration of ideas. In a sense, for part of the population, it replaces the position previously held by the church. This trend results in the criticism that the church does not pay enough attention to the importance of sport.

It was shown that the topic of human body, and figuratively sport and physical activities, was always present in the Church. There often appeared charismatic personalities who brought this subject alive with respect to everyday life practice, the need to experience one's own body and its movement in all its dimensions. However, sport barely got among the dogmas officially disseminated by the Church. Even without an official declaration, however, one's own body is such an internal issue that it will always remain associated with a seeking man - whether in the field of theology, philosophy, or elsewhere.

Before this internal human aspect was emphasized, the Church had to undergo a significant change. Each paradigm shift in the Church brought highlighted ideas and facts only when the time was mature for them, so to speak. Probably the new tendencies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, officially recognized by the Second Vatican Council, bring out the theme of physicality, manifested in the issues of marriage, partnership, sport and others. The confirmation of this tendency can be found in the work of the last century popes, who see some of these issues as key ones and at the same time they become the representatives of the new attitude of the Church, which was officially declared after the Second Vatican Council.

Although the Council opened the door to a full discussion of topics related to human body, it can be seen as the culmination of efforts to declare certain ideas that asserted themselves long before. Let's mention the statements of the popes of the 20th century, which presented the theme of sport, for example, in pastoral and educational documents.

It is possible to claim that although sport was not a central topic for the church of the 1890s-1950s, the vast majority of the Popes shared a positive view on sport and its values. The differences can be seen especially in the emphasis that was put on sport which can be fairly well evaluated based on the frequency of statements and documents dealing with sport. According to this criterion the main attention of this study is focused on three main characters of theology of sport - Pius XII and John Paul II.

Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize that neither other popes did not show a negative attitude to sport. For example, in 1905 Pius X received Pierre de Coubertin, who after visiting the Pope openly declared Pope's responsiveness to sport: *"Unlike most heads of religious establishments, Pope Pius X and Cardinal Merry del Val, the Secretary of State, were not at all prejudiced against sport."*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> LIXEY, K. *Sport in Magisterium of Pius XII*. Unpublished text. Vatican

The tendency to support sport was even stronger in case of Pope Pius XI who as a former mountaineer climbed Monte Rosa. To celebrate his sporting achievements the English Mountaineering Club "*Achilles Ratti Mountain Climbing Club*"<sup>14</sup> bears his name. Despite the fact that these ancestors recognized sport and reflected it in their essays (Pius XI wrote 5 letters concerning sport), it was Pius XII who was given the nickname "sportmen's pope"<sup>15</sup> thanks to his strong interest in sport. Pope Pius XI, for example, protests against the complaint that the Church does not pay enough attention to sport and claims that the Church never rejected the benefits coming from sports activities. In addition, according to his statement, the Church is aware of the potential positive impact of sport on the education and upbringing of man.

## 6.1 Pius XII

After World War II Europe is in a very unstable condition. This instability has a particularly profound impact on the social situation of the then population. In some countries it often leads to extreme political positions mainly in various revolutionary movements. In Italy we see in this context the development of non-Catholic or anti-Catholic movements bringing secular and secularizing program.

One of the first tasks of Pope Pius XII was to cope with prevailing view on the understanding of physicality by the Church. It was in fact a continuation of the previously outlined criticism. Some authors consider these views on the Church neglecting human body to be prejudiced<sup>16</sup>. I think, however, that a large part of these prejudices reflected the disembodiment of the Christian doctrine and current practices the Church used in a negative sense to promote itself. As an encouraging counter-argument, however, we may mention for example pope's quote from 1942, which prevents physical culture:

*" We live in an era marked by a "physical culture", which accuses the Church of giving too little importance to this. An unfounded accusation! The Church has never condemned the natural, healthy, and useful aspects that physical exercise offers. In fact, it can even improve (when it is not impeded) successful results in the education and discipline of youth. It also affirms and puts into practice the principle that the things of the body must be subordinated to the spirit, and provides a dyke against the assaulting waves of the cult of the flesh, that has no soul or conscience. "*<sup>17</sup>

He regards sport as a form of training the body and this way is, according to him, closely connected with morality. Therefore, the Church must pay attention to this issue. At the same time, however, the Pope demurs to materialism, and although he also recognizes the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. Kevin Lixey, personal communication, November 19, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> LIXEY, K.: *Sport and Christianity*, CUA Press 2012, ISBN 0813219930

beauty of the human body, he does not consider materialism in its higher sense, higher framework, which is immortality originally ordained by God and corrupted by sin. The body, made of the earth clay, once has to return back to ashes. However, God will again return it to life. This is the way how the Church should respect the body, even reduced to ashes, because it will rise again in another form.

## **6.2 John Paul II "Athlete's Pope"**

Nothing does illustrate the positive attitude of Pope John Paul II to sport better than the term "athlete's pope" under which he is known among theologians. This relationship is even more valuable, because it comes from the Pope's own experience. He himself was an active sportsman since his childhood and did not give up this hobby throughout his entire active life. As a curiosity we can mention that he had the landing heliport in the Vatican rebuilt to the tennis court, which he often used for this purpose. His assessment of the sport is also reflected in many of his speeches he gave when opening numerous sporting events. He found sport a great way how to cultivate man and society, particularly his or her physical and mental abilities.

When studying these sources we evidently find several aspects that he highlighted and attached them the highest value.

### **6.2.1 PHYSICAL LEVEL OF MAN**

Today, sport is in general terms construed as a reference to the physical level of man. It serves to improve one's health, enhance physical endurance and cultivate skills. If we are created in the bodily form, it is necessary to take care of this gift. Ignoring the signals our body is sending us means to disregard the order, according to which God made us in his own image. But it is important to realize that each feeling, desire, emotion coming from the body arises for a reason. Succumbing to the pure physicality can lead to misunderstanding of oneself and to the consequent diversion from the inner voice, the reflection of his order that God placed in us. At the same the long-term ignoring of the signals and phenomena coming from ourselves, can only lead to degeneration of the entire unit, which otherwise lies in perfect harmony of all individual parts. And thus the Pope primarily appreciates this element of sport activities.

### **6.2.2 EDUCATIONAL COMPONENT**

The pope, like his predecessors, denies that the Church does not pay sufficient attention to the human body. Moreover, he himself declares why the human body deserves a full interest. He often emphasizes as well that not only from the side of Magisterium, but from his predecessors the body is given a considerable attention. According to the Pope, the Church appreciates everything that contributes to the development of man's soul and body and thus leads to harmony. In this spirit he draws a strong inspiration from the apostle Paul. He refers to the First letter to the Corinthians:

*"You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. "*

He also explains that in this sense sport has a moral and educational potential. It becomes a training ground of virtues, self-control and inner balance. In connection with 1 Corinthians 9:24, however, he also stresses the hierarchy in which the first is the care of the human soul created by God and reborn to a new life through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

If we want to understand the perspective of John Paul II on the human body we should read his book *Theology of the Body*, a set of catecheses he presented at general audiences in 1979- 1984. The centre of his thoughts lies in a human person and his dignity in the light of the mystery of Christ. Again, he follows the ideas of St. Paul, while stressing that the human body allows us a free selfdonation as well as providing the good to others. Everyone has an opportunity to make a gift of his body for the other and by becoming "one body" we fulfill God's delight in marriage manifested by the creation of male and female body. Our body is a tool for unity and communion. If we want to fulfill God's purpose, we have to realize this unity. In order to broaden our view of the body, the Pope also applies the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. We are to see ourselves as divine masterpiece to which also enables us to see and I would add that even experience the invisible - the purely spiritual and divine. The Second Vatican Council sees man in this light. Man as the image of God, having a beautiful potency to make unity only through "sincere gift of self"<sup>18</sup>. John Paul's thoughts thus offer us a way how we can influence our mutual attitude to each other and being in the love of God and neighbor and realize unity. However, it is clear that, rather than questions of modern sport, he pays attention to topics related to human intimacy here.

### 6.2.3 INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

The attitude of Pope John Paul II to sport, however, does not stop on the personal level of a particular participant. He notes that the inherent phenomenon of modern sport is its interpersonal overlap that also occurs on the transnational level. The meetings of millions of people in the name of sport performance are seen by John Paul II as a great opportunity to spread the Christian message. When such a meetings is held on the international level, says the Pope, it becomes a favorable element for overcoming many obstacles and strengthens the unity of the human family, which includes all the differences of races, cultures, politics and religion. "Just now in the time of much violence sport can become a means how to achieve peace in unity," he says, for example, in his speech on the occasion of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Championship of Europe, Africa and the Mediterranean in waterskiing in 1979.

*„The unity of Europe, for example I am speaking of it since you are nearly all from this continent will not, of course, be brought about around the spherical or oval football, as its problems are set at another level, a very complex one; but sport can certainly contribute to helping the participants get to know one another better, appreciate one another, and experience a certain solidarity beyond frontiers.“<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> FEENEY, R.: *Catholic Perspectives on Sport, From Medieval to Modern Times*, Paulin Press 2012

<sup>19</sup> *HUMAN AND SPORTING QUALITIES MAKE MEN BROTHERS*. To the Representatives of the UEFA Meeting In Rome. Rome, June 20, 1980. Ve MULLER, R., SCHAFER, C. *The Pastoral Messages (Homilies, Angelus Messages, Speeches, Letters) of Pope John Paul II That Refer To Sport (1978R2005)*, Pontifical Council for the Laity

*„The unity of Europe, for example I am speaking of it since you are nearly all from this continent will not, of course, be brought about around the spherical or oval football, as its problems are set at another level, a very complex one; but sport can certainly contribute to helping the participants get to know one another better, appreciate one another, and experience a certain solidarity beyond frontiers.“*

This is the reason why he repeatedly calls sport *„the largest mission field“*.

#### 6.2.4 DANGERS OF SPORT

In his reflection on sport, however, he does not forget to exhort to caution. The mentioned positives are not automatically assured and there is a danger of losing them. People must constantly strive to keep the clean face of sport and pass its pure message of genuine harmonious development of the person. Fraudulent practices such as doping, bribery or manipulating results come from fundamental misunderstanding of the idea of sport. If we succeed in keeping this idea pure and tie it with the Christian spirit, this malignancy will stop occurring. The Pope calls for continuous cleaning up the image of sports in order to fulfill its specifically human purposes, that is the optimal development of both the human body and the spirit in unity with God and our neighbours.

## CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church it is still typical for its pastoral evaluation of sport, when reducing sport to a means how to reach new believers. It seems the necessary to submit such an opinion to a critical examination. It is also one of the purposes of theology of sport focused primarily on the man and his movement, physical and mental, inherently connected. For a long time, there sound voices calling for reflection of sport as an activity having a value "in itself". The massive expansion of sport, along with a sort of "breaking barriers" brought by information technologies, however, hides a negative potential as well. This trend can lead very easily to the misrepresentation and damage to the original ideals of sport and all the positives that come with it. If „*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.*,<sup>20</sup>" it mustn't close its eyes face to face these dangers and it must again purify the dust that mankind have piled up on sport for millennia.

Theology of sport along with the study of ethics can become a useful tool how to deal with sport newly as an imaginative, non-utilitarian activity filled with humor and spontaneity. In the words of Moltmann sports game with its earnestness becomes an intermezzo of everyday life. For a Christian such sport will demonstrate a disappearing hope, gratitude and celebration. In its potency to absorb the whole person, it is not in the opposition to earnestness, on the contrary, it is often taken like that. This study can be understood as a rough outline of the issues and pointing out some of the influences that affected the formation of the Christian view on the human body.

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<sup>20</sup> Vatican Council II, "*Gaudium et Spes [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World]*," in The Vatican Collection: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery, vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996)

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