

***Somewhere Between Active & Contemplative:
The Co-mingling of Sports, Recreation, & Christian Theology***
By Anthony Maranise, Obl.S.B.

Located inside the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City are many breathtaking feats of architecture and design. Chief among these, however, and most likely to inspire conversation is the Cathedral's great 'Sports Bay Window.' From nearly floor to ceiling, the stained glass window depicts various sporting and recreational activities from the more ancient (e.g.: running, chariot-racing, archery) to the more modern (e.g.: football, basketball, soccer, and baseball), and has aptly been described as "one of the best known... examples of the co-mingling of sports and Christianity in modern culture" (Watson & Parker, 35). One may initially find this display an odd facet for a sacred and liturgical space like the Cathedral, however, it becomes less surprising when one considers the ways and means in which sports and recreation have captivated nearly all aspects of human life since time immemorial. In this essay, I will briefly chart the development of Christian attitudes toward sports and recreation from ancient times to present day. From this point, I will set-out to develop a *working theology* of sports and recreation that is not exclusively 'active,' or 'contemplative,' but will instead assert that in sports participation and recreational activity, the Christian may well discover a proper balance of both an 'active' and a 'contemplative' life.

Sports & Recreation in Christian History

Though not Judeo-Christian, it would be irresponsible to neglect the influence of ancient Greek philosophy on the thought and development of sports and recreation in Christian history. Sports are, quite naturally, embodied activities. Human persons animate and "give life" to every aspect of the sporting and recreational world – from the physical actions of training to the execution of play in competition against others. The human body, then, becomes crucial for the very existence of sports / recreation. The ancient Greek philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, however, "regarded the body as unimportant or even as an obstacle in the spiritual life" (Kelly, 63) and prized instead something akin to what Christians might regard as the soul. They felt – similar to St. Augustine's early dealings with Manichaeism prior to his conversion – that the soul was imprisoned within the body and that strict ascetic practices which discipline the

body in order that the soul might prevail were the only means of ‘overcoming the body.’ The soul could encounter “the divine,” in the view of the ancients not only through various ascetic practices (which will become more positive with the advent of Western monasticism in Christianity hundreds of years later), but also by being ‘contemplative.’ The ancient philosophers felt that “contemplation offered a chance at transcendence” and so it “was valued more highly than action” (Palmer, 5). Fast forward several thousand years and as Christian theology further developed, this ancient notion would come to be viewed as holding little weight due entirely to the importance of the Incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Because God deigned to become human in His Son, Jesus, and thus was born, subject to suffering and death in the body, and also rose and ascended in the body, Christianity began to regard the body and the soul as having a substantially important compatibility. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul even writes with allusion to the importance of the Incarnation saying, “For if we have been united with Him in a death like His [that is, in the body], then we will certainly also be united with Him in a Resurrection like His [that is, by receiving a glorified body]. St. Paul never understood Christ’s Resurrection as a purely spiritual one because His death was not purely spiritual. For St. Paul (and all of Christendom who professes faith in Jesus Christ), the Resurrection will occur not only in terms of a spiritual renewal; a being made into a new creation, but also in a very literal sense – in a physical body. This emphasis on the importance of the body was a major theological and historical theme for St. Paul in many of his letters and the source from which much of Christian spirituality and theology related to sports and recreation has established its foundation.

In his book, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, (which, I might add, is one of the few and best recent attempts to construct a theology of sport), the Reverend Dr. Lincoln Harvey writes referring to St. Paul’s impact on Christianity’s embrace rather than denigration of the body, “Paul’s thinking is being shaped by the Incarnation” (p. 27). In one passage, widely known to Christian sports and health enthusiasts, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that your body is a temple... Therefore glorify God in your body” (6:19-20). While he was admonishing the Corinthian to avoid misuse of their body for various immoral activities, this statement among his other numerous *athletic metaphors* (cf. Maranise, p. 44-60) “has

encouraged many Christians over the centuries to draw a straight line between his thinking and a positive view of sport” (Harvey, 26). Today, because of the worldwide cultural phenomena that it has become, “the Church seeks to accommodate sport into its life... by harnessing it to its mission” (Harvey, 46). In recent years, especially within the last two decades, a literature base covering a range of topics at the intersection of Christianity and sports / recreation has emerged as more and more Christian persons seek a sort of “complementary cohesion” between their ‘active’ (be it sporting, recreational, or laborious) and ‘contemplative’ (be it prayer, study, or relaxation) lives.

Action & Contemplation: A Synthesis

The fifth century founder of Western monasticism, St. Benedict of Nursia, penned a Rule for the daily lives of those who sought deeper communion with God in their daily lives. Ultimately, he believed that prayer and work were not separate from one another, but inextricably and indissolubly bound up together. Further, his Rule for monasteries espoused the thought that “the combination of both action and contemplation led to a balanced, fulfilling, peaceful, and generally good life” (Maranise, 35). It is not too far a stretch to assert that, for our purposes in this essay, prayer can be likened to contemplation and sports / recreation to action. Given this set of similar terms, I would like to pose a question: Have you ever considered why writers dedicate their books to the persons they do? At the surface, the answer to this question may seem rather obvious. Most do so because they wish to honor, in that way, a person or persons whom they admire. However, I contend that there is a much deeper dimension to such dedications. Moving beyond merely expressing admiration, the author synthesizes, in a very personal way, both the ‘active’ dimension of themselves (in that they physically, intellectually, and willingly researched, wrote, edited, and revised their work) as well as their own ‘contemplative’ nature which is evident in that the author wished to offer the results of their action to or for the sake of another. They, arguably, thought about and reflected on (“had someone in mind”) to whom and why their hard work should be ‘offered-up.’ Before proceeding further, let us take in turn, what is meant when referring to the ‘active life’ and the ‘contemplative life’ in the larger Christian anthropological context.

The ‘active life’ refers to “a life devoted to the service of God through service to His created beings” (Holmes, Lecture). Fundamentally, this sort of ‘lived-spirituality’ is at the crux of what Jesus meant when He explained, “Whatever you do to these least of mine, you have done also to me” (Matthew 25:40). This sort of life lends itself towards explicit interaction with other persons and might be best encapsulated by the phrase, “love of neighbor.” Conversely, if one is ‘contemplative,’ it consists in “a life of prayer, meditative readings, and a more reserved, intimately personal spiritual formation” (Holmes, Lecture). This sort of life does not exclude a sense of community or interaction with others, but focuses one’s attention inwardly toward a heightened experience or deeper, almost mystical, communion with God. Christian theology and history has been generally in-debate over which life-path is truly a better means of coming into deep relationship with and experience of the Blessed Trinity. It is in a moving scene from the Gospel of Luke (cf. chapter 10) wherein readers witness an interaction between Jesus, Martha, and Mary. Martha (representing the ‘active life’) is busy tending to household chores as Jesus is speaking to those gathered around Him while Mary (representing the ‘contemplative life’) is resting there at His feet, listening attentively. Jesus ultimately lauds Mary saying that she has “chosen the better part” (Luke 10:42) which ultimately “reflects an ancient bias” (Palmer, 6) of the time period in which, as previously mentioned, contemplation was lauded above action. By no means do I mean to trivialize Jesus’ emphasis on the contemplative, but merely wish to point out that even in Mary’s contemplative act of listening to Jesus’ teaching, she was ever engaged in an activity – that of listening itself. Theologically speaking, contemplation is so valuable because only through it are human persons ever able to ascribe any significance or value to their activities. *What theological significance, then, can we ascribe to our participation in sports and/or recreation?*

Towards a Working Theology of Sports & Recreation

Any constructive theology necessarily includes “our being, our relationship, and our actions for these three constitute our humanity” (Holt, 22). As we have already explored, we are embodied human persons. Apart from our body, we would have no interaction of a physical nature. For our purposes, in the attempt to construct this theology of sports and recreation, the interplay of our physicality is paramount as without a physical body, we have nothing with

which to animate sport and its activity. Essential, then, to our being are our bodies, for which we must care. In his book, *Fit for Eternal Life*, eminent psychologist Dr. Kevin Vost writes, “God has built into our natures the means to improve ourselves” (p.185) so that we may serve to assist in bringing about the reign of the Kingdom of God on earth by “developing our bodies as instruments of charitable works” (p. 187). Moreover, our own participation in sports and recreational activities “engages us not only in body, but in mind and in spirit as well” (Watson & Parker, 126) such that we may both serve, experience, and glorify God in a holistic sense.

Of course, human beings cannot survive and thrive successfully alone. We do not exist in a vacuum, and thus, interaction which necessitates the development of a relationship is part of what it means to be authentically human. While relating to other human persons is certainly necessary in sporting life, relationship to God is the “lens” only by which other human relationships can be properly viewed. All Christian traditions, regardless of denomination, acknowledge that human persons possess “an inherent, inviolable dignity that is imprinted in our being by God” and one “that must be respected and never taken away” (Wadell, 77). Bearing this in mind, we must acknowledge “that sport is a means of celebrating our own human identity, an occasion to realize ourselves as women and men fully alive” (ACSJC, 14). Participation in sports and recreation, then, afford us an opportunity not only to relate to other human beings, but to experience a ‘divine foretaste’ of the glory to come in the next life by relating contemplatively to God. As Drs. Watson & Parker explain in their book, *Sport & the Christian Religion*, “[Sports] help focus our attention on the reality of God and our humanness in a way that ordinary life often does not; they can also lead to moments of personal transcendence in which God communicates with us” (p. 130).

Our actions make up the final facet of any constructive spirituality. Operating off of this view of a ‘divine merger,’ between the ‘active’ and the ‘contemplative,’ I would assert that sports and recreational activities provide this ‘happy medium’ or this long sought after balance between both realms of the lived-spiritual-life. Consider this: Whenever we have become completely ‘caught up’ in something we enjoy (the phrase, “time flies when you’re having fun is appropriate to consider here), we may have lost track of time, or even been unaware of what else has happened around us. These quasi-phenomena occur because in those moments of deep

interest in our action (whether playing a particular sport, watching it as a spectator, praying, or simply laughing with good friends), we have experienced the heights of contemplation. And to that I would add, we have experienced that heightened contemplation within the performance of an action. In those moments wherein we ‘lose ourselves’ in the performance of an activity, we transcend the reality of the actual moment and it is as if though “we can glimpse what the vision of Our God must be like that takes us outside of ourselves into the very Trinitarian depths of God while allowing us to remain the human persons that we are” (Schall, 86).

Closing Considerations

In the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of prayer and action” (p. 151). In sporting and recreational activities, given the ways in which we are able to discover our true human identities, relate to God, and consecrate our work of training, play, or physical exertion to a cause greater than our own, I feel as if though it is safe to say that there is a blessed unity of that very prayer and action. This is but one *very* brief theology of sport, but other, much more elaborate and detailed works do exist, and I recommend further research and study of this sorely neglected area of Christian thought, ministry, and new evangelization. To close, allow me to leave off with a quote from Rabbi Abraham Heschel, which I believe best succinctly captures the harmonious union of both the ‘active’ and ‘contemplative’ life in sports and recreation. Very simply he said, as should we all enact, “I pray with my legs as I walk” (Greenleaf, 253).

Bibliography

Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. "A Crown That Lasts Forever." *Striving for the Best in Our Sporting Nation*. Sydney: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2014, p. 15.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. New York: Macmillan, 1972, p. 300.

Greenleaf, Robert. *Servant Leadership*. New York: Paulist Press, 1977, 253.

Harvey, Lincoln. "The Early Church's View of Sport." *A Brief Theology of Sport*. Eugene: Cascade, 2014. 26, 46.

Holmes, Emily A. "The Active & Contemplative Life in Christianity." *Christian Spirituality*, RS

324 Undergraduate Course. Christian Brothers University. Kenrick Hall, 208, Memphis, TN. 19 Oct. 2008. Lecture.

Holt, Bradley P. "Spiritual Formation." *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005. 22.

Kelly, Patrick. "The Spirit Is Bound with the Flesh." *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times*. New York: Paulist, 2012. 63.

Maranise, Anthony. *Sport & the Spiritual Life: The Integration of Playing & Praying*. Charleston, SC; Amazon Affiliate Publishing, 2013, p.

Palmer, Parker J. "Spirituality in Action." *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990. 5-7.

Schall, James V. "On Play and Sports." *Reasonable Pleasures: The Strange Coherences of Catholicism*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013. 86.

Vost, Kevin. "The Virtues of Fitness." *Fit for Eternal Life: A Christian Approach to Working Out, Eating Right, and Building the Virtues for Fitness in Your Soul*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 2007. 66-67; 103.

Wadell, Paul J. "Every Person's Truth." *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. 77.

Watson, Nick J., and Andrew Parker. *Sport and the Christian Religion: A Systematic Review of Literature*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014. 35; 126-130.

About the Author

Anthony Maranise, Obl.S.B. is with the Master of Arts in Catholic Studies Program at Christian Brothers University in Memphis and is the author of the book, *Sport & the Spiritual Life: The Integration of Playing and Praying*. He is a certified sports nutritionist, sports life coach, sport chaplain, and is an Oblate of the Order of Saint Benedict in the Catholic Church.

