# SPORTS MINISTRY

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> *"So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one." (1 Cor 9:24-25)*

## SPORTS MINISTRY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Many people who read this article may think that the term *sports ministry* (*pastoral deportiva*) is a recent one, but nothing could be further from the truth. The link between faith and the world of sport goes back almost to the beginnings of our Christian history. When St. Paul had to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles, he used many examples drawn from sport. It is striking how often sporting references appear in his letter to the community of Corinth. The simplest explanation is that in those days, as in ours, sport was an important element of society, and using sport as a pastoral tool allowed many people to pay attention to the message.

But St. Paul was not the only one. Other figures in the historical tradition of the Church used sport as a tool in their pastoral work. St. John Chrysostom used images from sport in several of his homilies (homily 33)[1]. He made special mention of a virtue present in both sport and faith: the spiritual struggle.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, for his part, in his letter to Polycarp of Smyrna, speaks of perseverance in our life of prayer in the face of temptation and compares it to athletic contests, calling Christians "athletes of Christ"[2].

St. Thomas Aquinas does not speak directly about sport, but he refers to the virtue of *eutrapelia* (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 168, a. 2)[3], a middle point between leisure and work, thus stressing the need to know how to devote time both to study and to play. This idea would later be applied by the humanists in the academic formation plans for their students, as the Society of Jesus did in the *Ratio Studiorum*.

The Popes, too, have spoken about the importance of ministry through sport. Through the successors of Peter, the Church has wished to highlight a vision of sport based on the centrality of the person, respect for human dignity, integral growth and relationship with others. Sport, a universal platform, is an instrument for promoting values such as fraternity, solidarity and peace.

As a curiosity, here are the sporting nicknames by which some Popes were known: Leo XII (the swimming Pope), Pius X (the sporty Pope), Pius XI (the mountaineering Pope), John Paul I (the cycling Pope), John Paul II (the multi-sport Pope) and Francis (the football Pope).

If one had to single out a Pope among all the Holy Fathers as a promoter of sport, it would undoubtedly be Pope Francis, because of his private audiences and speeches on the subject. Pope Francis says that there is an intrinsic relationship between sport and holiness: “Giving the best of yourself in sport is also a call to aspire to holiness. During the recent meeting with young people in preparation for the Synod of Bishops, I expressed my conviction that all the young people there, whether physically present or through social media, had the desire and the hope to give the best of themselves. I used the same expression in the recent Apostolic Exhortation, recalling that the Lord has a unique and specific way of calling each of us to holiness: ‘What is important is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts’ (*Gaudete et exsultate*, 11)”[4]. Just as nobody is born a champion, nobody is born a saint. It is on the road of disciplined training throughout life that this goal can be reached.

In our contemporary society, sport presents itself as a universal activity that transcends cultures and generations, promoting values such as effort, discipline and teamwork. One of the clearest examples is the recent Olympic and Paralympic Games held in Paris. The spirit of Baron de Coubertin was once again present, in the desire that athletes from every continent come together with the aim of giving the best of themselves, of surpassing themselves in each of their disciplines and of living together in the spirit of fair play, to be an example and a point of reference for future generations: “Sport is a meeting place where people of every level and social condition come together to achieve a common goal”[5]. For Catholics, however, sport offers much more than physical and social benefits: it is a privileged path for spiritual growth. We were able to see this, with great joy and surprise, in the many expressions of faith by athletes at the Olympic Games that have just taken place. This article explores how sport and Christian spirituality are deeply connected, offering Catholics a unique opportunity to integrate their faith into their daily sporting practice.

As we saw earlier, St. Paul used sporting metaphors to illustrate the spiritual life, comparing the life of faith to a race in which believers must persevere in order to obtain the eternal prize (1 Cor 9:24-27). This analogy not only underlines the importance of discipline and perseverance in Christian life, but also highlights the role of personal effort and community cooperation in the search for spiritual growth. Today, too, the Church continues to support and encourage this way of practicing sport. In September 2017 a sports club was born in the Vatican called *Athletica Vaticana*. It is a club made up of employees of the Holy See and citizens of Vatican City. It began as an athletics club but has grown to include cycling and padel. What the Athletica Vaticana team wants is to offer its service of fraternity on the international sporting scene. At the audience of 13 January 2024, Pope Francis encouraged the members of Athletica Vaticana to keep being a Christian witness on the streets, tracks and playing fields, five years after its founding. The Pope highlights the role of sport as the most widespread cultural expression and recognizes that in “the dark moment we are living, sport can build bridges and break down barriers”[6].

Christian spirituality offers a frame of reference that goes beyond mere competition. In a world where winning can become the only measure of success, Christianity reminds us that true triumph lies in personal growth and in the ability to reflect God's love in all our actions. Prayer, meditation and reflection before and after training, or the help of the sports chaplain and pastoral accompaniment, not only help to focus mind and spirit but also foster an attitude of gratitude.

Sport thus becomes an excellent occasion for encountering God, an opportunity to live faith in a concrete way, since it has a "role as a means of mission and sanctification"[7] and is a tool for fostering the integral development of the person.

## VIRTUES OF SPORT

For Catholic athletes, playing sport is not only an opportunity to develop physical skills and to compete, but also a path for growing spiritually in the Christian virtues.

**Honesty** is the basis of trust and integrity. For athletes, being honest means playing by the rules, admitting mistakes and being sincere in victory and in defeat. This value fosters an environment of respect and fairness in which every participant feels valued and safe. Honesty also means being authentic and acting in accordance with one's personal principles, which strengthens character and credibility both in sport and in everyday life.

**Humility** is crucial for personal growth and true success. In sport, humility shows itself in the ability to recognize one's own limitations, to learn from mistakes and to value the effort of others. A humble athlete does not seek personal glory but appreciates teamwork and the support of those around them. Humility makes it possible to receive constructive criticism and keep improving, maintaining an attitude of service and collaboration.

**Justice** means treating everyone fairly and with respect. For athletes, being just means competing with integrity, respecting referees' decisions and treating opponents with dignity. Justice is also reflected in equal opportunities within the team and in recognizing the effort and merit of each member. A just athlete promotes an inclusive and motivating environment in which everyone feels valued and respected.

**Respect** is fundamental for coexistence and for success in any team or competition. Athletes must respect their teammates, coaches, opponents and themselves. This means listening, valuing differences and acting with consideration toward others. Respect promotes harmony and reduces conflict, improving cooperation and collective performance.

**Perseverance** is the ability to keep going despite obstacles and adversity. For athletes, perseverance means constant effort to improve, resilience in the face of defeat and motivation to reach long-term goals. Perseverance not only improves sporting performance but also prepares athletes to face life's challenges with strength and determination. This value teaches that true success lies not only in victory but in constant effort and dedication.

Finally, **gratitude** is recognizing and appreciating the opportunities, talents and support one has received. For athletes, being grateful means valuing every training session, thanking teammates and rivals for their effort, and acknowledging the support of family, coaches and community. A grateful athlete has a positive outlook and a generous spirit that inspires and is contagious to those around them.

## THE STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY

One of the most important elements in sport is community and teamwork. They are essential not only for success on the field but also for the growth of the athletes. It is important to highlight some aspects of community in the relationship between sport and spirituality.

The first is **mutual support**. In a sports community, members encourage and support one another, especially in times of difficulty and challenge. This support strengthens unity and reinforces the team spirit. In the spiritual life, mutual support is expressed in communal prayer and in accompaniment in faith, where believers sustain one another.

Second, **commitment and responsibility**. Each member must be committed to the team's goals and be responsible for their own performance and behavior. This commitment translates into constant dedication and a willingness to put the good of the team above personal interest.

Other aspects that enrich the team experience are **diversity and unity**. In a sports team, each member brings unique skills and perspectives, which contributes to the strength and creativity of the group. Unity is achieved when everyone works together toward a common goal, respecting and valuing individual differences.

One of the most important calls is to **solidarity and service** which, as pillars of Christian values, are also found in a concrete way in sport. Solidarity implies a commitment to the well-being of all team members, while service is shown in acts of help and generosity toward others.

**Conflict resolution** is another essential skill both in sport and in the spiritual life. Disagreements and tensions are inevitable in any group, but the way these conflicts are handled determines the health and cohesion of the team. In sport and in the spiritual life, learning to resolve conflicts fairly and constructively strengthens relationships and improves performance; reconciliation and forgiveness, likewise, are fundamental to maintaining unity and peace.

Finally, **shared leadership** is a value that distributes the responsibility of leadership among several members of the team, encouraging everyone's participation. In sport, this kind of leadership allows each team member to take an active role in decision-making and in carrying out strategy. Let us now look in a little more detail at some characteristics of this kind of leadership, which is so necessary in the twenty-first century.

# PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP IN SPORTING AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

If we focus on coaches, we can see that, as leaders, they can profoundly influence the lives of their athletes, not only in terms of sporting performance but also in their personal and spiritual development. Although we know that not every context is ideal and that in many schools and clubs secularization is strong, we want to stress that Christian leadership can offer the opportunity to reflect fundamental principles such as service, humility and pastoral care.

The first kind of leadership is **servant leadership**. It is based on the idea that the leader is there to serve the team, not to be served.

*Practical strategy:* Coaches can show servant leadership by making sure their athletes' needs always come first. This may mean being available for one-to-one conversations, offering emotional and practical support and showing genuine interest in each athlete's well-being. Getting actively involved in everyday tasks, from preparing equipment to helping organize events, can also show athletes that their coach is not afraid to "get their hands dirty" for the good of the team.

Second, the value of **humility** is essential for effective, Christian leadership. A humble coach recognizes their own limitations, is open to learning and values the contribution of every member of the team.

*Practical strategy:* It is key to foster an environment in which the ideas and opinions of all athletes are heard and valued. Coaches can create spaces for regular feedback, not only about sporting performance but also about the team atmosphere and training strategies. Admitting mistakes and being willing to change approach based on feedback also shows humility and respect for the team.

A good leader fosters a **sense of community** through teamwork with their whole staff and the sports chaplain, reflecting the principle that we are all members of one body.

*Practical strategy:* Implementing activities that strengthen team cohesion, such as group dynamics, conflict-resolution workshops and community service projects, can help build a sense of unity and shared purpose. Celebrating achievements together and recognizing individual contributions, all of us together.

**Personal example** is perhaps the most powerful tool of a leader. Athletes observe and learn from their coach's actions and attitudes.

*Practical strategy:* Coaches should strive to live by these values in their daily lives, showing integrity, honesty and compassion in all their interactions. Being a model of ethical and moral behavior inspires athletes to follow their example.

**Communication** is key in leadership. A coach must be able to communicate expectations and feedback clearly and compassionately.

*Practical strategy:* Practicing active listening and responding with empathy to athletes' concerns creates an environment of trust and respect. In addition, using positive and constructive language, focusing on development and growth rather than only on performance, helps athletes feel valued and supported.

## SPORTS MINISTRY RESOURCES

The practice of sport is, in essence, a constant search for improvement, discipline and excellence. For believers, however, it extends into the spiritual dimension. Prayer, in all its forms, allows Catholic athletes and coaches to connect their sporting practice with their spiritual life. One of the best ways of seeing God's action in the athlete is to record the fruit of that prayer in a notebook. The athlete's notebook, which we discuss in more detail below, is a privileged place where the athlete records their physical and spiritual progress: advances and difficulties in training and competition, but also the movements received from God and the spiritual battles.

### 1) The athlete's notebook

The athlete's notebook is a simple tool for recording the athlete's journey in their sporting life. It is a private, confidential place to write down movements of the spirit, hopes, frustrations and joys: a place to dialogue, through writing, with oneself and with God.

Not only the content matters, but also the context. When athletes receive the notebook, they should be encouraged to give it quality time, looking for quiet places where they can invest time without haste or pressure. This is not an imposition but a tool for freedom and personal growth.

The notebook is an open space for the athlete that gathers their life during training and competition. Besides writing down sporting records, they should write the emotions that accompany the moments before and after competition or training.

Athletes need to reflect on their own goals and personal motivations after physical effort. The Ignatian examen[8], a key part of the notebook, includes five important points that help us perceive God's passing through their sporting life: asking for light, giving thanks, reviewing the training session or competition, asking forgiveness, and focusing one's energies on the next day.

*Practical suggestion:* The coach can set aside the last minutes of training, after the stretching and the final instructions, so that each athlete takes out their notebook and writes down what happened that day.

### 2) Spiritual reading

Reading spiritual, personal-growth and motivational texts can provide inspiration and guidance. Coaches can set aside time to suggest readings that help athletes keep growing as whole persons. Reading the lives of athletes who have been role models throughout history, as well as the lives of

the saints, adapted to today's context, can be a source of inspiration for the values and strength of character they showed in their lives.

*Practical suggestion:* Creating a weekly habit of spiritual reading can be very beneficial. The coach can share with the team some relevant reflections or teachings (and the athletes can do so among themselves). These conversations help build bonds of trust and motivation that are important in the athlete's formation process.

### 3) Accompaniment by the sports chaplain

Pastoral care means guiding and supporting athletes in their integral development, attending to their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. This is especially important in the formation of young athletes, who are at crucial stages of their personal development. Being accompanied by a chaplain strengthens the spiritual life. We need a space of complete trust in which to speak, share and let ourselves be challenged.

The sports chaplain is a "refuge" for the athlete, a place to speak with complete trust and confidentiality. The chaplain is not a coach, a teammate or a relative. He or she is a person who, from complete freedom and indifference, accompanies the athlete in triumphs and defeats, in achievements and difficulties, and teaches them to live everything with the eyes of faith.

*Practical suggestion:* Gradually integrating moments of prayer before training and competition can help believing athletes connect their sporting life with their faith. The chaplain can organize spiritual retreats and meditation sessions adapted to the realities of the season. Coaches should be attentive to signs of stress, exhaustion or personal problems and offer support or referral to professionals when necessary.

Facilitate the chaplain's weekly presence at training sessions and official matches. The chaplain is one more member of the staff and should be involved in team activities. Besides celebrating the sacraments, the chaplain should accompany every member of the team.

## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHES

Integrating spirituality into sport offers a unique opportunity to enrich both the personal development and the performance of athletes. Attending to certain aspects of Catholic spirituality can be a source of strength, motivation and purpose in sport, promoting an environment in which certain values guide the conduct and growth of every member of the team.

The first aspect of any spirituality is **prayer or meditation for the team**. As we said before, coaches should introduce moments of prayer and reflection before and after each training session, which can center athletes and strengthen their spiritual connection. Establishing rituals such as a short team prayer (for example, an Our Father) or a moment of meditation can help create an environment of calm and focus, aligning the mindset of the group with personal desire and so

growing in values such as perseverance and gratitude. It is not about spending a lot of time, but about brief, quality moments.

Second, coaches should take advantage of everyday situations in sport to **teach and reinforce virtues** such as those mentioned above, for example honesty, justice and respect. Examples such as recognizing and rewarding fair play or addressing conflicts ethically can help athletes integrate these values into their behavior, both on and off the field.

The power of narrative is great, and so **sharing stories** of athletes who have successfully integrated their faith into their careers can serve as motivation. All the athletes who showed their faith during the Paris Games can be very helpful, for example the gymnast Rebeca Andrade or the athlete Nicola Olyslager. Coaches can present these examples in team meetings or formation sessions, showing how the strength of spirituality can be a source of inspiration and direction in sporting life.

Fourth, it is important to **encourage healthy competition**. Educating athletes about the importance of competing with integrity and respect is crucial. Coaches can give talks emphasizing that the goal is to improve and to give one's best, not simply to beat others. Putting all one's talents into the game is an obligation, not a whim, but always respecting and accepting what the other person can give.

Fifth, we must highlight **"24/7 availability"**: coaches must lead with humility and a service-oriented approach. This means being available to support athletes, listen to their concerns and act with integrity. Leading takes time and dedication. Serving athletes wholeheartedly can inspire similar behavior in the team.

Finally, coaches must **care for their own spiritual life**. This personal dedication strengthens their ability to guide others and provides a solid foundation.

These six recommendations can help coaches create a context in which the athlete's formation is not focused only on external aspects such as winning a competition, but in which athletes can learn to focus their formation time on the playing fields on what is important for their body, mind and spirit. In today's world we know that priorities are measured by results and that the spiritual dimension is not considered a "practical" value for achieving goals. But let us not let the trees keep us from seeing the forest. We know that the human being is a totality, a holistic being that requires body, mind and spirit. To the extent that all three aspects of the person are cared for, the person will have a fuller and more productive development.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

As we have seen, when we speak of sports ministry we are speaking of the intersection between sport and spirituality, and that is where we find fertile ground for personal growth, character development and the manifestation of values that transcend victories and defeats on the field. The relationship between these two worlds is not merely a matter of mutual inspiration, but of a deep

connection that reveals how the practice of sport can enrich the spiritual life and how faith can light the way toward sporting excellence.

Sport, with its focus on effort, discipline and perseverance, provides an ideal context for living Christian principles. Athletes who integrate these aspects into their routine not only seek to improve their physical performance but also to cultivate a mind and heart centered on values such as humility, gratitude and respect. These principles, when well anchored, help athletes keep perspective and find meaning in every challenge, whether a triumph or a defeat. That is why in Christian spirituality we learn that true success goes beyond visible, material achievements. In sport, this translates into the development of character and the pursuit of excellence with integrity.

When we speak of sports ministry we are speaking of the positive impact of faith on sport. Top-level athletes who show their faith demonstrate that they have not only achieved success in their respective disciplines but have also relied on faith to face challenges, overcome adversity and remain humble. Their lives and careers are a testimony that spirituality not only provides strength in moments of pressure but also inspires ethical conduct and a genuine commitment to others.

In the end, sport and spirituality are intrinsically connected in their search for truth, integrity and excellence. For coaches, athletes and everyone involved in the world of sport, integrating faith into sporting practice offers a way of aligning physical effort with spiritual purpose, creating a balance that enriches both professional and personal life.

The integration of these two worlds is not simply a matter of coincidence, but an invitation to live more fully and meaningfully, and that is where sports ministry makes more sense than ever. In doing so, athletes seek not only to reach personal and professional goals but also to reflect the values of the Gospel in every action, every decision and every interaction. Thus sport becomes a living manifestation of Catholic spirituality, showing that true victory lies in the union of body, mind and spirit, in the pursuit of a crown that does not fade (1 Cor 9:25). Yet we acknowledge the difficulty of this integration because of the prevailing secularization in the West. Faith is not always present in Catholic schools among teachers, coaches and students, so it is not an easy task. Finding a language that can convey the Good News of the Gospel to young people today is always a challenge, but in sport we find an ally. Institutions such as Athletica Vaticana help us be witnesses of the Gospel and witnesses of faith without words, only with deeds: “Concrete closeness to the most vulnerable is fully part of your mission: I am thinking of the initiatives with young people with physical or intellectual disabilities, with prisoners, with immigrants, with the poorest families. And it is pleasing that everyone takes part in these encounters with the same dignity, including Olympic and Paralympic champions, diplomats and members of the Curia”[9]. We see how Pope Francis recognizes the strength of sport as an integrating element that protects the dignity of the person.

Coaches have a fundamental role in helping athletes live their time of “play” as a gift and as a mission. The Olympic Games, as we said above, have been the perfect platform for the free

expression of athletes. It is work that has long been hidden and that now seems to be starting to emerge. Sports ministry is more alive than ever.

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## Notes

1. Daniel Ruiz Bueno and Inmaculada Delgado Jara, *Obras de San Juan Crisóstomo*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2007), 470.
2. J. B. Lightfoot, *Los Padres Apostólicos* (Barcelona: CLIE, 1990), 94.
3. Santo Tomás de Aquino, *Suma de teología*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos 31, 35, 36 (Madrid: Ed. Católica, 1988), 3238.
4. Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, “Giving the Best of Yourself”, June 2018, 6.
5. Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, “Giving the Best of Yourself”, 5.
6. “Audience with the Sports Association ‘Athletica Vaticana’”, accessed 17 September 2024, press.vatican.va.
7. Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, “Giving the Best of Yourself”, 6.
8. *Obras Completas de San Ignacio de Loyola* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963), 208.
9. “Audience with the Sports Association ‘Athletica Vaticana’”.