

The Catholic Athlete #9: Witnessing vs. Privacy

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This series of short reflections addresses athletes who profess the Christian faith, in an attempt to bring together sports and Christianity. I write as a Catholic, hence the title of the series. I trust, however, that athletes from other denominations may also find spiritual profit in these texts.

The Catholic athlete who lives as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ naturally desires to be a witness, to share his or her faith with others. Wouldn't it be wonderful to coin a phrase that would be remembered by many? I can think of Michael Jordan's "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take" (... or was it Wayne Gretzky's?). But that was not a specifically Christian quote. How about U.S. gymnast Gabby Douglas' "I give all the glory to God. It's kind of a win-win situation. The glory goes up to him, and the blessings fall down on me"? I am sure you are familiar with many more examples, but let me share another one: Keylor Navas, the outstanding goalie from Costa Rica who won three consecutive UEFA Champions League titles with Real Madrid, is known and criticized for witnessing by kneeling and praying before each and every game—not in the locker room, but on the field.

At the same time, Jesus himself exhorts us to pray and do our charities in private:

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

(Matthew 6:1-6)

Wow! The first few verses are clearly in contrast to what we see happening with some popular athletes and artists who love to show off their generous contributions to charity. I expect there must be many more who are doing exactly what Jesus says in Mathew 6, but they are doing it so well... we do not see them!



Are there any other witnessing options for the Catholic athlete? A pastoral letter from the Italian Episcopal Conference gives us a few important ideas. Quoting Pope Pius XII, they explain how the cultivation of virtues can make a difference:

“Sports education aims also to form youth in those virtues belonging to this activity, namely, among others: loyalty which prohibits resorting to subterfuge, docility and obedience to the wise orders of those who guide team drills, a willingness to not shine if necessary but to be in the shade for the benefit of the team, fidelity to all commitments, humility in victory, generosity towards the defeated, serenity in the face of adversity, patience towards the not-always-moderate public, justice if competitive sports are tied to openly agreed financial interests, and chastity and temperance in general, already recommended to the ancients. All of these virtues, although having as their object a physical, exterior activity, are genuine Christian virtues, which cannot be acquired without a religious intimate spirit and, may we add, without frequent recourse to prayer.” (Church Committee for the Ministry of Leisure, Sports, and Tourism 1995, pp. 184-185. Free translation)

That certainly adds a new dimension to the training program! Furthermore, Pope Paul VI—also known as *Papa Montini*—said, on occasion of the VIII anniversary of the Italian Sports Center:

“Be, particularly in such a delicate and promising area, the yeast which makes the dough ferment (cf. Matthew 13:33), be the pleasing aroma of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:15): your presence, beyond contributing to the improvement of the technical aspects of Italian sports life, should be a sign, a reminder, a light; it must elevate and cheer up; it must establish fraternal connections of Christian friendship among athletes; it must facilitate the sacramental encounter with Christ the Savior; it must courageously uphold human and Christian values in all aspects of sports practice.” (Pope Paul VI 1965. Free translation)

These two cherished popes suggest that there are multiple ways for us to work on our character. Beyond simply wearing a T-shirt with a Bible verse (forbidden by most sports leagues) or saying a memorable phrase during an interview, the Catholic athlete lets Christ and the Holy Spirit work in him or her in such a way that their lives are transformed and their faith transpires.

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