

The Catholic Athlete #1: Sports Talent

Luis Fernando Aragón V., Ph.D., FACSM
School of Physical Education and Sports
University of Costa Rica

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.

From a very young age you may have been pushed to refine your talents and be successful in your pursuits, as I was. If you were raised in a Christian family, as I was, you were probably told that your talents had been given by God and that it was your responsibility to use them well, for good, not for evil. These include your intelligence, artistic abilities, interpersonal skills, and of course your physical abilities or athletic talents.

The Parable of the Talents, in the gospel according to Matthew, presents an excellent challenge for us. Although it refers to the currency known as a *Talent* (equivalent to six thousand days—24 years—of work), it may well be applied to the talents (skills, abilities) we have received from God.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey who summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, to a third one talent—to each according to his ability. Then he set forth on his journey. The servant who had received the five talents promptly went to invest them and gained five more. In the same manner, the servant who had received the two talents gained two more. But the servant who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long period of time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing an additional five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you gave me five talents. Behold, I have gained five more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Since you have been faithful in small matters, I will give you much greater responsibilities. Come and share your master’s joy.’ Next, the one who had received the two talents also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. Behold, I have gained two more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Since you have been faithful in small matters, I will give you much greater responsibilities. Come and share your master’s joy.’ Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, ‘Master, I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed. Therefore, out of fear I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Behold, I give it back to you.’ His master



replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant. So you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered! Then you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have gotten back my money with interest. ‘Therefore, take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he does have will be taken away. As for this worthless servant, cast him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ (Matthew 25:14-30. NCB).

OK, how does an athlete use his or her talents well? By glorifying God in his or her body. “According to Pius XII, athletes should glorify God and seek God in their own body, temple of the Holy Spirit. The same way the Psalms talk about praising God in the dedicated temple, so the athlete (...) should treat their own body in a virtuous way, because it is there that the Holy Spirit has chosen to dwell.” (Monaco, 2021. P. 553. Free translation).

More recently, we have another papal statement focusing more on the type of sports we should practice, but nevertheless emphasizing the idea of the body at the service of the spirit:

“John Paul II also reiterated: ‘Moreover, the Church appreciates and respects those sports which are truly worthy of the human person. That is the case when they favor an ordered, harmonious development of the body at the service of the spirit, when they represent an intelligent and formative competition, stimulating interest and enthusiasm, and when they become a source of pleasant relaxation.’ (Speech before a water-skiing show, September 14, 1991). Definitely, John Paul II supported sports as ‘gymnastics for the body and for the spirit’ (Cipriani 2021, pp. 502-503. Free translation).

Yes, the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God must be glorified in the body: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). This is a very appealing idea: worshipping God with our bodies, through sports, as a way to use our talents.

An interesting article written by Professor Shirl J. Hoffman (1986) deals with the topic of sport competition and success as a form of worship, given that many athletes claim that they “win to the glory of God”. I have stated before (Aragón-Vargas, 1991) that *Worship* is often used in the Bible with a restricted meaning, related to *service* and *bowing down*. In order to please God, worship must meet several requirements: it must reflect a life dedicated to obedience and the service of God (cf. 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Micah 6:6-8). The worshipper must live in holiness (cf. Psalm 15) and be just (Isaiah 1:11-17). The Bible’s Old Testament is full of prescriptions for acceptable worship. Furthermore, the New Testament states that there is one way to worship God: in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24). It is a bit of a stretch, therefore, to try to fit any sports competition, or sports success in particular, as worship.



Perhaps *celebration* would be a more appropriate description for all that happens around athletic competition. Meanwhile, Christian athletes must remember that honoring God with their athletic talents involves serving him in obedience, living in holiness and justice, and worshipping in spirit and truth.

I can think of a good example in this respect: Gino Bartali, the Catholic Italian cyclist from the 1930's and 40's. Using his athletic talents, he helped save many Jews during WWII, but very few people knew about it until he shared his story with his son Andrea several decades later. When confronted about the secret, he declared: "The good must be done, not said. And some medals hang up on the soul, not in the jacket" (TDM2000 International, 2018). The original quote in Italian reads: "Il bene si fa, ma non si dice. E certe medaglie si appendono all'anima, non alla giacca".

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."
(1 Corinthians 10:31).

References:

Aragón-Vargas, L.F. (1991). *Some Thoughts on Christianity and Sports*. Kérwá Institutional Repository, University of Costa Rica. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10669/416>

Cipriani, R. (2021). Sport e Cristianesimo: storia e sociología. [Sport and Christianity: Story and sociology]. In J. R. Carbó (Ed.), *Cuerpo y espíritu: deporte y cristianismo en la historia*. UCAM Servicio de Publicaciones.

Hoffman, S.J. (1986). "The Santification of Sport", *Christianity Today*, April 4, 1986.

Monaco, M. (2021). La teoria dell'educazione cattolica in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra. [Theory of Catholic education in Italy after World War II]. In J. R. Carbó (Ed.), *Cuerpo y espíritu: deporte y cristianismo en la historia*. UCAM Servicio de Publicaciones.

NCB: *New Catholic Bible*. (2019). Catholic Book Publishing Corp.

TDM2000 (2018). Gino Bartali, the road cyclist who saved 800 Jews. April 26, 2018. Available from <https://www.sportvalues.eu/gino-bartali-road-cyclist/>.

All Scriptures (except where noted) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*[®], NIV[®]. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.[™]. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide, www.zondervan.com

