

The Catholic Athlete #6: Ideals

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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.

Sports are a wonderful inspiration for many of us; nevertheless, we can find that athletes are SO removed from us normal folks, so much better, younger, faster than us, that we are stopped in our tracks after admiring them. We realize that it is impossible to emulate them! Unless, unless... unless we can imitate them in the way that sports support their Christian ideals. Christian leaders, Popes and early Church Fathers saw this opportunity.

For one thing, as we work or study, we can look up to athletes in the way they train and compete. Matteo Monaco (2021) writes about an Italian movement from the mid-twentieth century promoting principles or guidelines for the Christian athlete; these may well be modified for anyone as they perform their duties. Monaco quotes Giovanni Pinto's 1962 decalogue or group of ten commandments under the title *L'atleta cristiano ha la sua legge*:

“The *law* of the Christian athlete:

- I Glorifies God with his or her body.
- II Places sport at the service of the soul.
- III Condemns sports when contrary to religious, family, and professional duties.
- IV Practices sports to become virtuous.
- V Uses sport as an instrument for the apostolate.
- VI Respects sports law and those representing it.
- VII Is chivalrous and fair with everyone.
- VIII Loses and wins with serenity.
- IX Competes engaging all of his or her energy.
- X Loves his or her own sport society.”

(Monaco 2021, p. 563. Free translation).

In the same vein, we read the following exhortation to all Christians from St. John Chrysostom (347-407), inspired on the athlete:

“Who will be capable of fighting since no one trains for the fight? Can any athlete defeat his opponent and obtain the prize in the Olympic Games without having trained in the art of fighting from his teenage years? Shouldn't we perhaps train every day, fight and run? Don't you see that the athletes, expecting to confront their competitors, train themselves carrying a bag full of sand, thus testing all their strength? Many train also through fake fights with their companions, to



prepare for the real fights with their adversaries. Imitate these athletes and train in the battle for virtue (...) Let us not be lazy in the race of virtue, but rather let us prepare with all determination and fervor for these noble and glorious battles. We shall grow weary and suffer for a brief time, but in the end, we will conquer crowns which do not wither and last forever” (Commentary to the Gospel according to Matthew 6.33). (Cipriani 2021, pp. 485, 486. Free translation).

Any comparison between the highest sports ideals and the Christian calling must include the first three verses of Hebrews chapter 12. The “great cloud of witnesses” refers to a list of biblical heroes from the previous chapter, not to athletes, but the text clearly uses sports language to inspire the reader:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

(Hebrews 12:1-3)

Another dimension of life that we can all relate to is suffering. This message from Basil of Caesarea, an early Church Father, intended to encourage athletes to endure suffering, not for its own sake, but with their sight set on greater things:

“Basil the Great (330-379), in a *Homily on thanksgiving* (1-3) exhorted: ‘The valiant athlete, having done his utmost in the fight of the pious life, must bear with courage the hits of his opponent, in the hope of glory and of victory. Also in the gymnastic competitions, those who are trained to the fatigue of the gymnasium, in fact, are not discouraged by one hit, but immediately attack their adversary out of desire for celebrity and despise their suffering. So, if any event strikes the fervent man, it does not obscure his joy precisely for this reason: suffering produces patience; patience leads to approval and approval to hope and hope does not lead to disappointment (Letter to the Romans 5:3-5)”

(Cipriani, 2021, p. 483. Free translation).

Now, in the preceding text, suffering may mean anything from a stomachache to serious injury. But for the true Christian, persecution because of his or her faith, and even martyrdom, IS always a possibility. Tomás Bolaño unearths a text from St. Cyprian in the year 252 A.D., the 58th letter to the faithful of Thibarisis, where the Bishop of Carthage makes a sound, inspired exhortation comparing the *agonem secularem* (the contest, conventional sports competitions at the time) and the *agonem sublimis* (a sublime championship for the Christian



in his or her fight of faith) (cf. Bolaño, 2021). The following paragraphs are but a short sample from the letter:

“Men are tried and prepared for the secular combat and think it great glory of their honor if it happens to them to be crowned with the people looking on and the emperor present. Behold a sublime and a great and a glorious contest for the reward of the heavenly crown, that God looks upon us struggling and, casting His eyes upon those whom He has deigned to make sons, He enjoys the spectacle of our combat. God looks upon us fighting and battling in the assembly of faith; His angels look on, and Christ looks on. How great is the dignity of the glory, how great is the happiness to fight and to be crowned with God as Protector and Christ as Judge?

Let us be armed with all strength, dearly beloved Brethren, and let us be prepared for the struggle with mind incorrupt, faith whole, courage dedicated. Let the camp of God proceed to the line of battle which is indicated to us (...) If the day of persecution comes upon us thinking and meditating upon these things, the soldier of Christ, trained by His precepts and warnings, does not shrink from the fight, but is prepared for the crown. I trust that you, dearly beloved Brethren, are always well.”

(Saint Cyprian 1964, pp. 169,171)

Even if you cannot relate to the ideas of martyrdom or persecution, all Christians are called to fight, to persevere, to endure. You may want to check out the powerful song *Fight the good fight of faith*, written by John Flaherty in 1985, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSh421ebApY>.

Well, most people enjoy thinking and discussing. Today we find too many people writing, texting, tweeting, and talking about all kinds of important—and not-so-important—matters. Athletes, particularly those in team sports, are used to discussing strategy, analyzing their opponents’ games. But we have reflected on this topic—ideals—long enough! There comes a time for action, a time for competition, a time for the actual test. These are words from Pope Pius XII in 1956 to the men from Catholic Action, referring to the great Italian cyclist Gino Bartali; Matteo Monaco quotes them:

“The time for reflection and projects is over. It is time for action. The tough race mentioned by St. Paul is in progress. This is the hour of intense effort. Even a few instants could decide victory. Look at your Gino Bartali, a member of Catholic Action: he is the one who has conquered the coveted jersey most often. You too run this ideal championship, in such a way that you may conquer a much more noble applause; *Sic currite ut comprehendatis* (1 Cor.9:24).”

(Monaco, 2021, p. 551. Free translation. The Latin text stands for “Run so that you may obtain”).



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