

A Study on Christian Perspective on Sports: Focusing on “Giving the best of yourself”^{*1)}

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Abstract

“Giving the best of yourself: a document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person” was published on June 1, 2018. This document is the first official view of the Vatican regarding sport. In general many people tend to think that the Church and sport are irrelevant to one another and that the Christian Church has a negative attitude toward the body and sport. But the truth is very different. In this paper we examine the contents of this new document and identify the Christian understanding and perspective on sport according to the Catholic Church. The result is as follows:

Traditionally Christianity has believed that the person is a unity of body and mind (soul, spirit) which are inseparably coupled. Therefore the Church has been engaged in dialogue with sport from the earliest years of its existence and in the formation and development of modern sports. For example, the original aim and motto of the Olympic Games are influenced by Christianity and also the opening ceremony, the award or closing ceremonies and the actual enactment of the Games also are influenced by Christianity. This document evaluates that sport is a very rich source of values and virtues that help us to become better people and helps us to discover our limits without fear and to give of our best. But sport can also be used for other interests, e. g. for political power, financial profit and nationalist self-assertion. Sometimes sport can also be abused and used to harm the human person. The human body can be debased by sport. Drugs are sometimes used to cheat at sport. There can be corruption in sport organizations and sometimes fans of sport and spectators of sport can have a negative influence on sport. Therefore this document states that the role of the Church is to provide pastoral guidance to sport so that it is conducted correctly and contributes to the human development of people everywhere.

1. Introduction

The Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life^{*2)} which is a department of the Roman Curia of the Catholic Church published the document, “Giving the best of yourself: a document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person” on June 1, 2018. The document is the first official view of the Catholic Church on sport. (Mark, 2018) Pope Francis

(2018) stated that “it will highlight the role of the Church in the sporting world and how sport can be an instrument of encounter, formation, mission and sanctification.” He also said that “sport can be a very rich source of values and virtues that help us to become better people and help us to give of our best, to discover our limits without fear and to struggle daily to improve.” So the document reveals the essence and reason of the Church’s interest in and commitment to sport and contains theological, philosophical and spiritual reflection on sport.

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), the Christian population is 31.4% of the world population, that is, nearly one-in-three of the world population.^{*3)} So Christian thought has a substantial influence on the world including the sport world. So this document on the Christian perspective on sport is worthy of review.

On the other hand, there is a tendency to think that the Church had a negative view of and impact on sport, especially in the Middle Ages, because of negative attitudes towards the body. Regarding the difference of mind-body theory of the East and the West, the Japan Society of Physical Education (2006, p. 405) points out that “the thinking of the East and the West is very different. In the case of the West, there is a strong dualism that traditionally divides the mind and the body, and its origin is based on that dualism in Christianity.” With respect to the negative attitudes of the Church towards sport, Nakamura Toshio *et al.* (2015, p. 432) notes that “since the Middle Ages, especially the time of the Reformation, the Christian perspective on sport has changed greatly, and sports became a target of rejection by recognizing that it disturbs one’s faith, and degrades the working spirit.” In this way, the Church tended to emphasize the mind (soul, spirit) and to disregard the human body. But this document notes that “there was the problem of the way the history of sport has been written, as it misses the positive influence of theological, spiritual and educational traditions on sport as an aspect of culture.” (p. 2) But this attitude of the Christian Church, as is noted by some physical education scholars note, is limited to some extremely conservative or puritanical sections of the church which emerged with the Reformation.^{*4)} With respect to the perspective of Puritans on sport, Kim, O (2012, p. 41) notes that “the Puritans had a generally negative attitude to sport due to their utilitarian orientation, although they participated in sports activities.” There are studies focused on the relationship of sports and the Church, (Kim, O, 2012; Parker, A. and Watson, N. J., 2013a; 2013b)^{*5)} but little attention has been given to “Giving the best of yourself: a document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person”

which is the first official view of the Vatican on sports.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to (1) examine the contents of this document, and (2) identify the Christian understanding and perspective on sport displayed there.

2. What is “Giving the best of yourself”

The document, “Giving the best of yourself” consists of five chapters and conclusive remarks. Here we will examine the contents of this document. We have used the English translation of Vatican Press data, N. 180601b. This translation consists of 30 pages. The pages cited in this study are the pages written in the English translation, Press data, N. 180601b. The main content of each chapter is as follows. The first chapter is about the motivation and purpose of publishing the document and the reasons for the Church’s interest in sport. The second chapter concerns the contexts of sport and deals with various characteristics of sports. The third chapter is about the significance of sport for the human person and deals with how sport can form personality and spirituality. The fourth chapter is about the specific challenges to the promotion of sport, such as the debasement of the body, doping, corruption, spectators or fans who can use a sport event to spread racism or extremist ideologies. The main fifth chapter is about the Church’s role and efforts to contribute to the humanization of sport. Finally, it presents conclusive remarks by which the Christian perspective on sport is summarized.

2.1 The motivation and purpose

The first Chapter articulates the motivation and purpose of publishing the document, and the reasons for the Church’s interest in sport. With respect to the motivation and purpose of publishing, the document notes that “there has been a tendency recently to think that the Catholic Church has only had a negative view of and impact on sport, but it’s because of the way of the history of sport has been written.” (pp. 1–2) In fact, the Church has been engaged in dialogue with sport from the earliest years of its existence. Concerning the history of church and sport from the earliest years to the present, the document summarizes as follows:

“St. Paul used sports metaphors to explain the Christian life to the Gentiles. In the medieval period, lay Catholics played games and sports on feast days, which

accounted for a good deal of the year, as well as on Sundays. Such play found theological support in the writing of Thomas Aquinas who argued that there can be “a virtue about games” because virtue has to do with moderation. The humanists of the Renaissance and the early Jesuits made use of Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of virtue when they decided that students needed time for play and recreation during the course of the school day. In 1904, Pius X opened the doors of the Vatican to sport by hosting a youth gymnastics event. St. John Paul II put engagement and dialogue with sport at its highest level of importance with respect to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. After the Jubilee of 2000 where he preached in front of 80,000 young athletes at the Olympic Stadium in Rome, he decided to create the Church & Sport office, which since 2004 has been studying and promoting a Christian vision of sport that emphasizes its importance for the building of a more humane, peaceful and just society as well as for evangelization.” (p. 3)

As shown above, Christian thought was the original rationale for the inclusion of play and sports in educational institutions in the Western world. The Church has been engaged in the formation of sport and the development of modern sport. So it is clear that one of the primary motivations and purposes of the document, “Giving the best of yourself” is to correct the misunderstanding of the Christian perspective on sport.

The document notes that the Church is interested in sports because the ultimate purpose of the Church and sport is similar. The similarity of the ultimate purpose of the Church and sport is explained as follows: (1) the physical effort necessary for the athlete to be able to express; (2) the moral qualities that must support his commitment; and (3) love for peace, brotherhood and solidarity. (Salt and Light Media, 2018) The document, therefore, notes that “the Church values sport in itself, as an arena of human activity where the virtues of temperance, humility, courage, patience can be fostered and encounters with beauty, goodness, truth and joy can be witnessed.” (p. 4) The document recognizes sport as a truly modern global phenomenon and believes that sport can form personality and give growth to spirituality. In this way, the Church evaluates sport as an instrument of encounter, formation, mission, and sanctification which can be a very rich source of values and virtues that help us to become better people, to give of our best, to discover our limits without fear, and to struggle daily to grow and improve.

2.2 The various contexts of sports

In the second Chapter, the document articulates the reality of sport from its origin to its modern context: the phenomenon of sport, the genesis of modern sport, the definition and contexts of sport. The document summarizes as follows:

“In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many sport activities in the West disengaged from the religious and cultural contexts they formerly had belonged to. Modern sport can be traced back to two sources, that is, on the one hand, the games and competitions that came up at English public schools in the first half of the nineteenth century and, on the other hand, the exercises and gymnastics which emerged from Philanthropinism (an educational reform movement) and which were later developed by Swedish educators. Philanthropinism was also a pedagogical ideal advocating a holistic education. This idea was taken up in Sweden where gymnastics became a part of the school system. By the end of the nineteenth century, Pierre de Coubertin merged the different traditions together and linked them to the Olympic idea...The first Olympic Games of the modern age took place in Athens in 1896. Since that time Olympic sports have made an unprecedented progress. Women were allowed to take part in the Olympics in 1900. Thanks to the mass media and to the internet, sport is a global phenomenon today to which most nations and peoples of the world have basic access.” (pp. 5–6)

So modern sports, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, started to walk their own road beyond the religious color. The document mentions that the original aim and motto of the Olympic Games “*citius (faster) – altius (higher) – fortius (stronger)*” had been taken over from Henri Didon (1840–1900) who was a famous French Dominican priest, an educator and a promoter of youth sports. So the Olympic motto which expresses the aspirations of the Olympic Movement was influenced by Christianity. For example, we can see from the highly-ritualized opening ceremony as well as from the award and closing ceremonies that the actual enactment of the Games perfectly underscores their pretended religious nature. The document, therefore, notes that “Olympism was decisively a this-worldly religion.”

It also mentions five features of sport and the definition of sport. The five features are (1) The concept of sport is associated with the human body in motion; (2) Sport is not

an activity in order to achieve an external purpose but has its purpose in itself ; (3) The performance of sport is normally subjected to certain rules; (4) Sport has a competitive character.; (5) Sport is actually a competition regulated by particular rules and so the equality of opportunities has to be warranted. The document summarizes the definition of sport as follows:

“Sports are bodily motions of individual or collective agents who, in accordance with particular rules of the game, effect ludic performances which, on the condition of equal opportunity, are compared to similar performances of others in a competition.” (p. 7)

Although the document defines sport, it is not an easy task to provide a generally accepted definition of sport. Because sport is subject to historical change, what we consider to be sport today may not be seen as sport tomorrow and vice versa. So, there will never be a final definition of sport. (p. 6) Because of this multi-interpretability which makes sport so attractive to people from all parts of the world, it also makes sport prone to external functionalization and even ideologization. (p. 8)

In addition, the document divides the sport system into external and internal factors. Internal factors are player, playgrounds, training program, competitions, the transportation of athletes and sports equipment, referees, results documented, a sports jurisdiction and doping monitoring programs. On the other hand, external factors are voluntary workers, political supports or financial donors - particularly customers who are willing to purchase tickets, merchandising articles or TV programming. In this way, sport exists in a way that fits with the various interests of the potential benefactors. The document, therefore, points out that “the sport system itself can be easily available to serve as a vehicle to mediate ideological, political or economic purposes.” (p. 8) As shown above, the Church has influenced the establishment of sports directly and indirectly. While sports are useful for human growth, sports also can be used for ideological, political and economic purpose. Therefore, the role of the Church is to provide pastoral guidance so that sports can move in the right direction.

2.3 The significance of sports for the human person

The third chapter articulates the significance of sport for the human person. Sport leads to balanced human growth. But how specifically do sports lead to human growth?

The document then in the third chapter dives deeper into an anthropological understanding of sport and its importance specifically for the human person as a unity of body, mind (soul, spirit). Then the document treats how sport speaks to our search for ultimate meaning and promotes human freedom and creativity. It notes that “the experience of sport is one that involves justice, sacrifice, joy, harmony, courage, equality, respect, and solidarity in this search for meaning.” (p. 4) The main contents of chapter 3 are as follows; (1) The human person as a unit of body, soul and spirit; (2) Freedom, rules, creativity and cooperation; (3) Individualism and team; (4) Sacrifice; (5) Joy; (6) Harmony; (7) Courage; (8) Equality and respect; (9) Solidarity; (10) Sport reveals the quest for ultimate meaning.

It is common to characterize the Christian attitude toward the body as thoroughly negative. According to this document however, this thought is due to the misunderstanding of Gnostics and Manicheans who associated the material world and the human body with evil. But this document insists that “the material world is good as it is created by God and that the person is a unity of body and mind (soul and spirit). Sport is a most striking example of the unity of body and mind.” (p. 16) The harmonious development of persons physically and spiritually contributes to psychological health and human flourishing. (p. 13) Regarding the characteristics of sport, St. John Paul II says that “You are true athletes when you prepare yourselves not only by training your bodies but also by constantly engaging the spiritual dimensions of your person for a harmonious development of all your human talents.” (p. 14) As such, sport has spiritual aspects. This is one of the reasons why the Church pursuing spirituality is interested in sports.

Sport is also based on freedom, rules, creativity and cooperation. Therefore practicing sport helps the human being to grow, because he or she becomes capable of generating an environment that combines freedom and responsibility, creativity and respect for rules, entertainment and seriousness. And this environment comes about through cooperation and accompanying each other in the development of individual talents and character. (pp. 10–11) The document, therefore, emphasizes the harmonious relationship between the individual and the team in team sports. Though each member is unique, individuals are not lost in the whole because they are valued in their particularity. This is a kind of sacrifice. These encounters with sacrifice can help people who participate in sports form their characters in a particular way. (p. 12) There is also joy, suffering, mental and physical effort, courage, equality, respect and solidarity in sport. These all help

us to form our characters. In this way, the document in the third chapter contains the Church's theological, philosophical and spiritual reflections on sport.

2.4 The specific challenges to the promotion of sports

While the immense opportunities and possibilities in sport, such as the physical, educational and spiritual aspects, the dangers, threats and challenges it poses are also considered. (p. 20) The fourth chapter explores the specific challenges in the promotion of a humane and just sport, including the debasement of the body, doping, corruption, and the negative influence of fans or spectators. (p. 4) In this regard, sport also can be turned against human dignity and the rights of people. "The great importance of sport for many people can degrade it into becoming a vehicle for other interests, for political purpose and demonstrating power, for the blind pursuit of financial profit or nationalist self-assertion." (p. 17) When it does so, it risks contaminating sport and human dignity.

Sport also has a multifaceted reality, such as participants or athletes, families, coaches and assistants, doctors, managers, spectators and persons connected with sports in other sectors, including sports scientists, political leaders and media representatives. The document, therefore, emphasizes the responsibility of each person and sports organizations and institutions in the sporting world and appeals to one's conscience to engage in the promotion of humane and fair sport as much as possible. (p. 18) Especially, sports organizations and institutions must serve the interior goodness of sport and the human person. The document presents four specific challenging developments that the Church sees as particularly serious challenges for sport in our time, such as the debasement of the body, doping, corruption and spectators. While participation in sport can be a positive way of experiencing one's physicality, it can also be a context in which human body is reduced to the status of an object or is experienced solely in material terms. That is, sports that cause serious harm to the human body cannot be ethically justified. (p. 19) Today, doping is practiced by individual athletes as well as teams and even nation states. It does not correspond with the values of health and fair play. It is also a good example of how a winning at all costs mentality corrupts sport by leading to the violation of its constitutive rules. The problem of doping cannot be assigned only to the individual sports person, no matter how much that individual is to blame. This is a wider problem, because in the globalized world of sport, effective and coordinated international efforts are needed. (p. 19) Sport must not appear to be a space without rights in which the moral

standards of loyal and human coexistence do not apply. (p. 20)

There are also spectators and fans in sport activities and games. In some cases, spectators and fans can despise the opposing players and their supporters or the referees. This behavior can deteriorate into violence either vocally (by singing hateful songs or hurling abuse) or physically. Hooliganism can be experienced at football games. That is, an exaggerated identification with an athlete or a team can exacerbate already existing tensions between different cultural, national or religious groups. (p. 20) Therefore, the document notes that the dignity of all persons participating in or attending sporting events is to be respected and all spectators and fans have a responsibility to ensure dignity and respect.

2.5 The Church's role and efforts to contribute to the humanization of sports

The fifth chapter presents an overview of the Church's ongoing efforts to contribute to the humanization of sport in the modern world and the role of the Church as a protagonist in this path of humanization through sport. (Salt and Light Media, 2018) The main contents of Chapter 5 are as follows; (1) The Church is at home in sport, because the Church desires to enter into dialogue with sports organizations and governing bodies to advocate for the humanization of contemporary sport. The Church is involved in the development of sport and its fate. The Church attempts to help everyone, including the downtrodden, the marginalized, the immigrant, the indigenous, the rich, the powerful and the poor and all who are interested in sport to participate in sports fairly, because the human person is created in the image and likeness of God; (2) Sport is also at home in the church, such as sports and catholic education, sports to create a culture of encounter and peace, sports as a work of mercy, sports to create a culture of inclusion. We must not forget that the human person is more important than sport. That is, the person does not exist to serve sport, but rather sport should serve the human person in his or her integral developments; (p. 21) (3) The Church is responsible for environments of sports pastoral ministry, such as parents as first teachers, parishes and oratories youth centers, schools and universities, amateur sports clubs and associations, professional sport, media as a bridge, specialized sciences, the new places of sport; (4) The Church must take care of sport pastoral workers, such as sport educators, family and parents, volunteers, priests and religious; (5) The Church should pay attention to the fundamental elements through sport, such as the beauty of sport at the service of education, sport to rebuild the educational

pact, sport at the service of humanity, play as the basis of sport, teamwork against individualism, sport for all and an ecological vision of sport.

Finally, the document presents some conclusive remarks. Here the Christian perspective on sport is summarized. The Church traditionally does not deny the body but sees the body and mind as one. The Church believes that sport is one context, in which people with different cultures and religious traditions learn how to give their very best. These kinds of experience can serve as a “signal of transcendence” which is beyond ordinary human experience, and can form personality and grow spirituality.

3. The understanding on the mind and body

As mentioned above, the Church is wrongly thought to emphasize the mind (soul, spirit) and to disregard the human body. The understanding of the mind-body is one of the most important factors in understanding the Church and sports. Here, we identify the Christian understanding on the mind-body. The ancient mind-body problem is how the mind (soul, spirit) is united with the body. In Hebraic thought not normally opposed to the mind (soul, spirit), the body is conceived as the material aspect of a living person. (Darton, p. 1438) On the other hand, the mind (soul, spirit) is conceived as the principle of life and activity in human beings, given by God and withdrawn by God. (Darton, p. 1448)

As for the origin of the body, in Genesis 3:19 the Bible says as follows: “God tells Adam, “for you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Darton, p. 7) Adam was fashioned from the dust of the earth. We are, however, also possessed of mind: we can think, feel, and exercise our will, as Eve did when she ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Donald, 2006, p. 258) The doctrine that mind (soul, spirit) is distinct from the body and existing prior to the body, is found in the writings of Plato (428/427–348/347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). For example, in the *Phaedo*,^{*6)} one argument of Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) for immortality is that the mind (soul, spirit) is not made of parts and cannot come apart. (Donald, 2006, p. 258) This idea was embraced by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 C.E.), a major figure in the development of the Christian doctrine of an immaterial, immortal soul. (Donald, 2006, p. 258) But as to how mind and body are united, Augustine said that “the manner in which spirits are united to bodies is altogether wonderful and transcends the understanding of men.” (Haldane, 1994, p. 335)

This idea of Augustine of Hippo was embraced by many theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas (1224/6–1274), Jean Calvin (1509–1564), and Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638) in traditional Christian thinking. (p. 3) Since Augustine’s time, this thought has remained in the Church tradition.

The document, therefore, says that “the person is a unity of body and mind (soul, spirit).” The Church, in general, uses the words ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ rather than the ‘mind’. This means that the embodied experiences of sport necessarily also involves and impacts young people at the level of the mind. For this reason, sports can be a part of the education of the whole person. (p. 21–22) In this way, it is clear that in Christian thought mind-body are inseparably coupled.

4. Conclusion

In general, we might think that the Church and sports are unrelated and that the Church has a negative attitude towards the body. But the truth is different. In this paper, we examined the contents of the document and identified the Christian understanding and perspective on sport. The result is as follows:

Traditionally, the Church believes that the person is a unity of body and mind (soul, spirit), and they are inseparably coupled. Therefore, the Church has been engaged in dialogue with sport from the earliest years of its existence, and in the formation and development of modern sport. For example, the original aim and motto of the Olympic Games are influenced by Christianity and the opening ceremony, the award and closing ceremonies and the actual enactment of the Games also are influenced by Christianity. The document evaluates sport as a very rich source of human values and virtues that help us to become better people and it helps us to discover our limits without fear, and to give of our best. But there is also the possibility of sport becoming a vehicle for other interests such as political and other power, or the blind pursuit of financial profit or nationalist self-assertion. There are also some instances of setbacks to human growth through sport through the debasement of the body, doping, corruption, and/or the negative influence of fans or spectators. Therefore, the document notes that the role of the Church is to provide pastoral guidance to help sport move in the right direction, and to contribute to the humanization of sport. Furthermore, the document presents an accurate history of the relationship of the Church with sport and emphasizes the educational and spiritual aspects

of sport in the development of a human being. The document is an excellent text to inform us of the Church's mind-body theory and the Christian perspective on sport.

Notes

- *1) Dare il meglio di sé. Documento sulla prospettiva Cristiana dello sport e delle persone umana del Dicastero per i Laici, La Famiglia e la Vita, 01.06.2018. English version translated it as "Giving the best of yourself: A document on the Christian perspective on sports and the human person". We used English translation.
- *2) It takes over the functions and responsibilities of the Catholic Church Family, and has also responsibility for the promotion of the life and apostolate of the lay faithful, for the pastoral care of the family and its mission according to God's plan and for the protection and support of human life. Wooden, C. (2016). Pope names Dallas bishop head of new office for laity, family, life. National Catholic Reporter.
- *3) The world population in 2010 is 6,895,850,000, and the population of major religious groups is as follows: Christians 2,168,330,000 (31.4%), Muslims 1,599,700,000 (23.2%), Unaffiliated 1,131,150,000 (16.4%), Hindus 1,032,210,000 (15.0%), Buddhist 487,760,000 (7.1%), Folk Religions 404,690,000 (5.9%), Other Religions 58,150,000 (0.8%), Jews 13,860,000 (0.2%). (p. 8) And Pew Research Center analyzed that the world's Christian population is expected to grow from 2.2 billion in 2010 to 2.9 billion in 2050. Nearly one-in-three people worldwide (31%) are expected to be Christian at mid-century. (p. 59) Pew Research Center. (2015). The future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050. Pew Research Center.
- *4) The Church which Nakamura Toshio *et al.* note is Hutterites who are an ethnoreligious group that is a communal branch of Anabaptists. Hutterites rejected sports as a bad thing that led to corruption and an act of delightful physical activity. (p. 432) Nakamura Toshio, Takahashi Takeo, Sougawa Tsuneo, & Tomozoe Hidenori. (2015). Encyclopedia of modern Sport. Taishukan.
- *5) For example, Parker, A. and Watson, N. J. (2013a, p. 2) examines the historical and theological development of muscular Christianity and how this has impacted the relationship between sport and religion in twenty first century Britain and North America through the academic literature concerning the relationship between sport and religion. Parker, A. and Watson, N. J. (2013b, p. 62) identifies primary research and initiatives on the relationship between sport and Christianity primarily from 1850 to the present day. Parker, A. and Watson, N. J. (2013a). Sport and Religion: Culture, History and Ideology. Movement and Sports Sciences. (pp. 71–79) Parker, A. and Watson, N. J. (2013b). Sports and Christianity: Mapping the field. Routledge. (pp. 9–88)
- *6) The *Phaedo* is one of the most widely read dialogues written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/phaedo/> (see, May 14, 2019)

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