

Ascetical Theology of Sport

P. A. McGavin 

Abstract

This paper examines the document of *Giving the Best of Yourself* by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, and presents an appreciation of the document and builds a case for sport as a practice of ascetical theology approached in terms of ‘everyday holiness’. Sports are argued as bringing together discipline and joy, and aesthetics and asceticism. The importance of the mean in diverting pathologies in sport is argued. Appreciation of sports is set in contexts of holistic lifestyles for its transformational and sanctification aspects to be appreciated. Sports are presented as beneficial life-long activity, and not simply for the young and physically advantaged. The article brings sport to theological articulation that is incarnational and christological and that leads to culturally situated implementations as applied ascetical theology.

Keywords

Ascetical Theology, Sports, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, holistic lifestyle, *Evangelium gaudium*, incarnational theology

It is with and through their *human culture*—assumed and transfigured by Christ—that the multitude of God’s children has access to the Father, in order to glorify him in the one Spirit.¹

The above quote from the *Catechism* captures something that is integral to authentic movements in Catholic theology following the Second Vatican Council—namely, the insertion of *culture* into theological practice. Thereby, theological practice is more responsive to incarnational and christological principles. In the context of the current pontificate, we have the further impetus to bring theology to applications that avoid simply ‘desk bound theology’.² These Catholic developments occur in contexts of growing interest in the theology and spirituality of sports, with such writings now forming a substantial literature in focused books, in learned journal articles, and including

¹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, n. 1204, emphasis added.

² *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 133.

contributions at the popular end of print and online literatures that span across ecclesial affiliations.³ Drawing these strands together gives an impetus to bring contemporary cultures of *sport* to theological articulation that is incarnational and christological and that leads to culturally situated implementations. Implementation of our theological convictions across the differing ranges of Christian living brings us to *ascetical theology*, and in our contemporary culture, to an *ascetical theology of sport*.

Some readers may have little interest in sport, or only interests in sport of the spectator kind. This paper presents a Catholic perspective in seeking to widen and inform reader interest and active engagement in sport, particularly in competitive sport, but also in non-competitive recreational sport, as part of holistic lifestyles that are integral to building and sustaining disciplined Christian living and contributing to wholesome everyday cultures and lifestyles for disciples of Christ.

Until recently, the transformational and sanctifying perspectives that are inherent in the brief catechetical quote that heads this essay have in formal Catholic teaching hardly been related to the *culture of sport*. For that reason, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, the 1 June 2018 Document on *sport* under that English title by the reconfigured Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, should be seen as a significant development in official church teaching.⁴ As the footnotes in that Document show, various popes across the second-half of the twentieth century and into our present era have in positive ways addressed the issue of sport, but the Document is the first formal dicasterial teaching from the Vatican on the theology of sport. And the Document includes an acknowledgement of the fact that ‘...the faithful are seldom aware that the Church accepts and perceives sport in a positive way’ n. 5.3.⁵

³ A fine contribution to these literatures is Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Eugene OR: Wipf&Stock, 2014). From a spirituality perspective a useful contribution is Jim Parry, Simon Robinson, Nick Watson and Mark Nesti, *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007). Recent relevant learned journal literatures include, Therese Miller, ‘Sport and Spirituality: A Comparative Perspective’, *The Sport Journal*: <https://thesportjournal.org/article/sport-and-spirituality-a-comparative-perspective/>; Dev Roychowdhury, ‘Spiritual Well-Being in Sport and Exercise Psychology’, *SAGE Open* (2019): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244019837460>; and Young-Eun Noh and Syazana Shahdan, ‘A systematic review of religion / spirituality and sport: a psychological perspective’, *Psychology of Sport Exercise* (46:2020, 101603). A social media magazine example is: <https://www.ru.org/index.php/sport/30-spirituality-the-hidden-side-of-sports>

⁴ <<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/01/180601b.html>> Now referred to as the Document (and in this reflecting the shift from dicasterial ‘Instructions’).

⁵ Until recently I was not alert to key words in the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council: ‘May this leisure be used properly to relax, to fortify the health of soul and body...through sports activity which helps to preserve

The following remarks of Pope Francis introducing the *L'Osservatore Romano* announcement of the Document clearly position authentic sports athleticism in terms of *transformation* and *sanctification*: 'For the Christian athlete, holiness will therefore consist in living sports as a means of encounter, personality formation, witnessing, and proclaiming the joy of being Christian with the people around oneself.'⁶ This positioning makes clear that understandings of sport are properly situated under a banner of applied ascetical theology. Without attempting systematically to locate the Document within the emerging literatures on the theology of sport, this article focuses on the dicasterial document *Giving the Best of Yourself* from a viewpoint of ascetical theology in our understanding and enacting our engagements in sport.

Particular Focus in Understanding Sport in Terms of Applied Theology

In an *L'Osservatore Romano* appreciation of the Document, and as an advanced-age athlete, I argue for life-long appreciation of sports athleticism.⁷ *Giving the Best of Yourself* mainly focuses on young persons, although there is acknowledgement of sports as a 'beneficial lifelong activity' (n. 5.3). This latter perspective accords with convictions of *life-long learning* and *life-long lifestyles*—and thus much of what is argued should also be applicable to *all* disciples of Christ across the different eras of life and ministry.

In speaking of 'ministry', I do not simply address 'ordained ministry', since by reason of Baptism, *all* the faithful enter missionary life across differing circumstances that also reflect the particular cultural needs of differing dioceses and parishes and life circumstances, and that differ with the flourishing of differing personalities, endowments and aptitudes as these relate to a focus upon *everyday holiness*.⁸

equilibrium of spirit even in community, and to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions...'. *Gaudium et spes* (Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2009), n. 61.

⁶ Introducing *Giving the Best of Yourself*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 June 2018, page 9. Also, in *Giving the Best of Yourself*, n. 3.4.

⁷ P. A. McGavin, 'Sports as Gospel Encounter', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 36(2562) (2018), p. 8.

⁸ Pope Francis used this phrase in a December 2018 Domus Santa Matha address: <<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pope:-Every-day-holiness-is-being-salt-and-light-for-others-44141.html>> This perspective is very much present in the 2018 Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et exsultate* (nn. 143, 169, 6, 12, 15, 138) which in turn takes up the Second Vatican Council teaching on the universal call to holiness in *Lumen gentium*, n. 50. In the different language of 'from time to time, here and now', the notion also occurs in his June 2019 address on 'Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium*': <<https://zenit.org/articles/popes-full-remarks-at-theology-after-veritatis-gaudium-encounter-in-naples-italy/>> These also amplify the 'the call to holiness in the contemporary world' in the 2018 Apostolic

Giving the Best of Yourself, proposes everyday attentiveness as seen in the presentation of an ascetical theology of *sport* (n. 5.5). The term *ascetical* derives from the Greek word for ‘exercise’ or ‘training’, *askētismos*, as in athletic training—although not occurring in St Paul’s athletic allusions (1Corinthians 9:24). The single New Testament use of the term is in the Lukan account of a Pauline speech. That use is not in an athletic sense—and thus is not usually translated as *training*—and refers to the training (*askō*) of *conscience* (Acts 24:16). The ‘everyday’ significance of this is that asceticism should be understood expansively as embracing the *wholeness* of the human person,⁹ named in *Giving the Best of Yourself* as ‘body, soul and spirit’ or ‘body mind and spirit’ (n.1.1, 3.1).¹⁰

The Document proposes an educational and ascetical perspective of *virtue ethics*, with sport presented as ‘a way to introduce ... the cardinal virtues of fortitude, temperance, prudence and justice and to facilitate growth in them’ (n. 5.2). Although the Document does not explicitly proceed in terms of biblical theology, its perspective is true to the sweep of ethics in the Pauline literature¹¹—and may be read as a proposal for *metropatheia*,¹² where it is *reasonableness* that governs the thinking, feeling, and acting of persons in their various life circumstances.¹³ It is in this perspective that the Document espouses the *transformative* and *transcendental* character of game and play in *sport* and opens athletic competition to human and Christian *joy* (n.3.2).¹⁴

Exhortation, *Gaudete et exultate*, that in turn also takes up the Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, teaching on the universal call to holiness.

⁹ *Gaudete et exultate* specifically warns against a ‘disembodied spirituality’, n. 40.

¹⁰ The catechetical formula of the human person is ‘as a being at once body and spirit’ (CCC, n.1146).

¹¹ Such as seen in ‘fruits of the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:22-23) or his Hymn to Love (First Corinthians 13).

¹² I adopt this term as proposed by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware in ‘The Spiritual Struggle in the Contemporary World’ in *Theosis* blogspot, 28 March 2012—with *tó meson* [‘a halfway’] being a metaphor for *moderation* of passions, rather than the *suppression* of passions, as in *apátheia*. The term *metrópatheia* does not occur in the New Testament nor in Aristotle—although Aristotelian in its sentiments.

¹³ The phrase ‘in given circumstances’ should be read as redolent of another signature phrase of Pope Francis, ‘concrete circumstances’ (see, for example, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 283), and should also be read as invoking an Aristotelian ethics involving the discernment of *limits* and a *mean* in ethical judgement and practice.

¹⁴ In *Giving the Best of Yourself*, this is adapted from a 2015 Address by Pope Francis to *Scholas Occurrentes* participants (n. 3.2 and footnote 32). The term ‘joy’ and its derivatives is used 44 times in *Giving the Best of Yourself*, and 3 of these are quotes from Pope Francis.

A ‘Balancing’ Note in Promoting Sports Lifestyles

The note of *reasonableness* warrants some amplification. An Aristotelian sense excellence, *aretē*, is necessarily situated in a complex range of virtues that may be differently ranked in differing contexts and that viewed holistically give a mean (*mesaia katastasē metaxu*). What is true of *life* is necessarily also true of *sport*. In life some persons may be drawn in a vocational sense to a particular *religious focus*, such as in monastic life. And the *Rule of St Benedict* certainly gives emphasis to moderation even within that singular vocational focus. Likewise, some persons—perhaps in a vocational sense—may be drawn to a particular *sports focus*. It is here that *reasonableness* needs to be in consciousness and where a lack of moderation leads to *pathologies in sport*. Some examples include: where bodybuilding athletes take banned substances artificially to support growth of muscle mass; where running athletes extend themselves to the degree that muscular injury is to be expected; and high-performance team sports such as spectator sport football codes that heighten the focus on team athletic performance in a ways that weakly support human maturation among team members, and as may be seen in off-sportsground abusive behaviours, including group abusive behaviours. Manifestations of pathologies such as these examples are not inherent to sport, and not even inherent to lifestyles with heightened or occupational focus on sport. The sense of *reasonableness* is true of any lifestyle and is not peculiar to our apologetics for sports within the lifestyles of persons. Nevertheless, the particular positive apologetic for sport that names *transformation* and *sanctification* needs to be presented in a *mesaia* sense that locates sport in a holistic perspective of a life lived under God and expressive of the span of the gifts of God in human living. *Giving the Best of Yourself* is better read with such a note of reasonableness.

Everyday Holiness Focus

The ‘everyday’ focus of *transformation* and *sanctification* entails that the formation and the practice of life and ministry should manifest a cultural fit with relevant contextual domestic and civil environments. For clergy, such a statement is not a covert call to shed a clerical identity and adopt a lay identity. Outside athletic activities a flexible recognition as a cleric may or should be sustained. I say ‘flexible’ because hot-weather and tropical ‘uniform’ appropriately differs from cooler weather clerical dress, and more-formal clerical dress differs from less-formal clerical dress. This is simply an example of environmental and cultural adaptations that also apply in the adoption during sports activities of customary competitive attire. Analogous adaptations of course also apply for the lay faithful who move across differing social settings

and expectations that occur across a variety of sports contexts. It follows that sportswear is adapted to what is generally accepted as the ‘gear’ of that particular sport—as seen in the variation across different civil societies and across different sports in different cultural contexts.

The reader may think ‘What’s this got to do with ascetical theology?’ Well, it is just one aspect and an illustration of discerning choice for building and sustaining personal identity across a variety of fields in varieties of civil and ecclesial societies. And it underscores discerning and observing boundaries of flexibility and adaptability that need to be recognised and respected across differing performance contexts. The point that I am making finds place in *Giving the Best of Yourself* where cultural change and variations are appreciated in the mention of ‘new sports’ (n. 2.1, 3.6, 5.3 and *passim*). That is, the Document recognises that contemporary sports may be outside the earlier-established sporting codes.¹⁵ The transformational nature of sport becomes evident where people notice the healthfulness and poise of a Christian athlete that, in a manner of speaking, places him or her in a ‘modern Courtyard of the Gentiles’ (n. 1.1),¹⁶ where healthful engagement in sport serves as ‘... an instrument of human elevation toward the supernatural goal to which we are called’ (n. 5.5).

Such past and present athletic achievements are not simply due to disciplined life and applications of the ascetical theology as here advocated—rather, the chief testimony must be to *divine blessing*. *Giving the Best of Yourself* thus locates sport in a life of *grace* (n. 3.4, 3.9), and a life of grace is not attained by sitting around waiting, nor by living too crowded a life. Grace strengthens and elevates our actively engaging the gift of life given us—gifts that are ‘human’; gifts that are ‘spiritual’; gifts that are ‘pastoral’; and gifts that are ‘intellectual’ that are variously enfolded in athletic living. The note of ‘intellectual’ may perhaps be amplified by briefly remarking that attention to training activity in any area of athletics displays close cognitive attention. Observe a boxer under training and notice how finely noticed and reasoned is the guidance of the trainer. This observation applies to any disciplined sport, whether team, duo, or singular (such as solitary sprinting).

¹⁵ This also implies development in understanding of the term ‘wholesome pursuits’ as named in the Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, *Personae humanae* (Vatican: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975), n. XII: <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html>

¹⁶ The phrase ‘Court of the Gentiles’ (arēopágus, Acts 17:22) derives from a department of the Pontifical Council for Culture created in 2009 by Pope Benedict XVI, and from the address by him to the ‘Courtyard of the Gentiles’, a forum for dialogue between believers and non-believers launched in March 2011: <<https://imagejournal.org/article/courtyard-of-the-gentiles/>>

Understanding Athletic Sports Engagement as Bringing together Discipline and Joy

In earlier eras, the term *ascetical theology* was generally applied only to prayer and to physical penances adopted in religious life. Ever since the Pauline analogy of runner competing for the prize,¹⁷ there may be noticed a line in ascetical literature drawing upon analogies with sport. But the important point in terms of received theology texts is that these present *analogies*, and rarely presented positive encouragement to sports engagement as Christian or Catholic ascetical discipline. Indeed, such analogical examples often convey a dichotomous sense of humanity, where ‘flesh’ is not understood in the holistic manner arising from canonical reading of Old and New Testament scriptures, but where the severe discipline of the ‘flesh’ is portrayed as the means of advancing the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’.¹⁸

We encounter a different perspective in *Giving the Best of Yourself*, where the identification of all Christians as ‘disciples of Christ’ gives a holistic generality to our understanding of ascetical theology, since Christian living necessarily entails discipline and joy. Like Christian living in general, sports do not rise to athleticism without physical and mental *discipline* (n. 3.4) (and as mentioned, there also is an intellectual discipline in sports), and do not rise to athleticism without *joy* (n. 3.2). Those who are not attracted to sports may be disciplined in other aspects of their lives, but engaging athletic discipline lends a roundedness and robustness to our asceticism. Athleticism is not achieved without serious discipline, whether in single-person activity such as daily running, or in group activity as in team sports, or one-on-one sports such as boxing.

Those who through disciplined training have crossed the barrier in building aerobic athletic strength and/or anaerobic athletic strength know the exhilaration and joy of bodily vigour and the camaraderie of competitive athleticism. *Giving the Best of Yourself* enfolds this combination of discipline and joy in speaking in the sense of *game* and *play* (n. 3.2)—understanding ‘game’ not only in the sense that we would say ‘game of basketball’, but in the sense conveyed where we speak of the joy of children who with spontaneity ‘play a game’. That is, the rigour of discipline and the joy in disciplined athleticism also extends to ‘game’ and ‘play’, whereby spontaneity and playfulness are affirmed as part of the human nature that flourishes in gracious living.¹⁹ Whether

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:24 that is also alluded to in Philippians 3:14.

¹⁸ An example is seen in the *Institutes* of John Cassian (Book V, Chapter 1), where an implicit Stoicism dualism of ‘soul’ versus ‘body’ is present, as also seems to be present in the ‘pommeling of the body’ in 1 Corinthians 9:27.

¹⁹ It is interesting that Abraham H. Maslow, writing from a perspective of the psychology of personal integration that is both objective and subjective three times mentions *play*, and

as laity or clergy and religious, we have need of the human qualities of comprehensive discipline, of joyful engagement, and the attractiveness and flexibility of persons who are at ease with surprise—all elements encountered in sports athleticism. A great quote from his introduction to the Document by Pope Francis is:

Challenge yourself in the game of life like you are in the game of sports. Challenge yourself in the quest for good, in both Church and society, without fear, with courage and enthusiasm. Get involved with others and with God; don't settle for a mediocre; *give it your best*: spend your life on what really matters and that lasts forever.²⁰

Exploring Further Aesthetics and Asceticism

Whether lay or clerical or religious, formation for developing our lives of discipleship and the exercise of ministry should also engage the development of aesthetical discernment.²¹ Everyone is edified when the sacred liturgy is celebrated in a participatory way that elevates and forthtells the beauty of God and the beauty of divine Providence in our lives. Sports also involves beauty arising from disciplined practice as manifest in aesthetic appreciation of the human body—including among person with some physical handicap who compete under the 'physically challenged' category.²² There is the beauty of the speed, ease, and coordination of athletic movements in the various sports as practiced 'naturally'.²³ There is the beauty of the camaraderie among athletes who bring together the rules specific to the varieties of sports as well as the spontaneity of practiced athleticism. These words express an identification of a stream of aesthetical theology²⁴ that should be present across all components of formation and practice of the life as a disciple of Christ—a stream of aesthetic sensibilities that flow also into a stream of ascetical theology as one of the joys of Christian life that celebrates the Creator.

the first mention is in the language of a 'godlike gaiety' as expressive of our created human nature, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton NJ: Van Nostrand, 1962), pp. 100, 134, 171.

²⁰ From the lead-quote by Pope Francis introducing *Giving the Best of Yourself* in the PDF version of the Document on the Dicastery website—and a quote that has given the Document its title: <<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/documenti/dare-il-megliodi-se.html>>

²¹ Deriving from *aisthētikos*; pertaining to the sense and perception of beauty.

²² This is recognised in *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nn. 3.6, 3.8, 5.2.

²³ For example, the tag 'naturally' applies with all recognised competitive sports in Australia, where officials of the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (ASADA) may present at any time and conduct testing for use of banned substances.

²⁴ Aesthetics or beauty of the body finds mention in *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nn. 2.2, 3.3, 4.3, 5.2. Hans Urs von Balthasar is an example of this theology as seen in his magisterial *The Glory of the Lord*, which is subtitled 'a theological aesthetics'.

What is proposed in *Giving the Best of Yourself* is the formation and practice of ascetical theology that engages a *whole-life discipline*—discipline in prayer, discipline of intellect, and discipline of body. We may think of the Pauline use of an athletic metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9:24. However, as already noticed, the only New Testament use of training (*askētikos*) is in Acts 24:16, where Luke voices St Paul's speaking about the training of the conscience.²⁵ That scriptural usage makes clear that we should think about 'ascetical theology' as being about the *whole* human person; that is, body/mind/spirit/soul—and thus of a 'holistic' asceticism supported by a holistic and incarnational ascetical theology. It is in this perspective that we can more directly speak theologically about sport, and we can appreciate sports athleticism in terms of a contemporary applied ascetical theology. This is the perspective that supports the reading in *Giving the Best of Yourself* of sport as 'transcendental' and 'transformative'—that is, properly understood, sport elevates our human living, and can anticipate and point toward our eternal destiny as a state of *joy* (n. 1.1, 5.3).

Amplifying with Examples

The 'warm' feeling of the body that is not simply *sweating* is part of the joy and exhilaration of practised aerobic sports where over time aerobic strength is built. Similarly, the 'warm' feeling of the body after a solid anaerobic workout also is part of the joy and exhilaration of practised anaerobic sports where over time anaerobic strength is built. Both these aspects of sports act to diminish aging—aerobic strength in *maintaining heart health* across the eras of life, and anaerobic strength *reducing muscle wastage* and *reducing the loss of bone-density* across the eras of life. Further, both aerobic and anaerobic exercise increase body production of the hormone *serotonin* that gives rise to the emotional 'feel good' from sustained athleticism across the eras of life.

There is also the pleasure of 'sportsmanship' that is encountered with fellow-athletes—we compete, but we compete with a good spirit, and we really respect the performances and the achievements of others. And where the sport is a team sport, we really respect and appreciate the *team performance*, including the team performance of the team with which we are in competition. That is, authentic sport both affirms ourselves *and* takes us out of ourselves—that is part of the 'transformative' aspect. Thus, where properly understood, sport contributes toward making us better, more robust in health, more relaxed, more generous, more giving persons, and less self-centred persons.

²⁵ This is not generally seen in English versions, as translators do not seem to have noted etymological connection with asceticism that can extend to athleticism.

I am talking about competitive sport, not just on-and-off sport,²⁶ but sustained genuine achievement in sport—sport so understood involves *discipline*: one has to train, and train hard and consistently. Even an older person can have the legs of a runner from running hard for a very long time; even an older person can have ‘gun’ biceps from consistent over time use of dumbbells. My examples are perhaps masculine because that is my personal experience. But, on observation, the transformative effects of consistent training on female physiognomy and health are also evident, especially where moderation that minimises injury is observed. Yet further—and speaking about sport in terms of a holistic asceticism—this urges an understanding of sport as part of a *whole-life discipline*: discipline in eating; discipline in sleeping and rising regimes; discipline in reading and study; discipline in prayer; discipline in charity toward one’s neighbour; discipline in exercise—exercise as sport.

When ‘sport’ is put in such a holistic perspective,²⁷ it makes sense to speak of a ‘theology of sport’, and to set that theology in an *understanding* and a *practice* of what the Gospel and our whole Christian life is about: ‘Behold, I make all things new!’ (Revelation 21:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Our ‘ascetical theology’ becomes a practical proclamation of and witness to newness of the Gospel. Does a sleepy person give such a witness? Does an obese person give such a witness? Does a drunkard give such a witness? Does someone who fights to bash-up give such a witness?²⁸ Does someone who is obsessed with sport give such a witness? The answers to the questions about witness evidently are *No!*

Addressing Sports Athleticism as Supporting the Discipline of Celibacy in Ministry

This section of the article begins as an aside to those readers whose lives involve celibacy, but then moves to more generality. We are sexual creatures, and it is natural for us to act-out our sexuality.²⁹ This does not imply an acting-out our sexuality in whatever way we please, but in a proper acting-out of our sexuality. This means those whose state of life is celibacy have to act-out our sexuality according to that state. As

²⁶ *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nn. 3.10, 4.1, 4.2, makes recognition of spectator sports, and, while recognising this, my emphasis is on athletic engagement and discipline, whether at high-level or at more everyday-level.

²⁷ *Giving the Best of Yourself* expresses this as the ‘multi-faceted reality’ of sport, n. 4.2.

²⁸ On the sport of boxing, I notice that boxers at the gym are not pick-a-fight types.

²⁹ As expressed in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: ‘Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul’ (n. 2332). The ‘his’ of catechetical language obviously should be read as ‘his or her’.

a personal witness, I affirm that *sport* has been very important for me in wholesome acting-out my sexuality as a celibate.

We cannot be a good or healthy celibate if we try to suppress our sexuality. Earlier regimes of formation and of expectations: (a) narrowly focused upon the content of the faith in the sense of formulations;³⁰ (b) and weakly addressed human sexuality and/or conveyed an implicit sense of celibacy as sexual denial; (c) and thereby created conditions in youthful and vulnerable persons for later emergence of immature and covert sexuality. With youthful persons of certain vulnerabilities, the deficiencies of such regimes of formation need to be understood as part of the complex causalities involved in the unfolding of recent and contemporary manifestations of covert behaviours and cultures of clerical abusive behaviours.³¹

The argument is that we need a strong sexual identity for us properly to live-out our sexuality, whether as a married person, a single person, or as a celibate. Thus, the emphasis in this article is on the positive role of athletic sports in the development of robust sexual identity and manly character or womanly character in practical appropriation of our state in life and in growth in personal and ministerial holiness.³² The development and sustaining of robustness of masculine or feminine identity is a good thing that comes with serious athleticism, with serious engagement with sport. This is so because it necessarily leads to feelings of health, of wholeness, of manly or womanly stamina, and

³⁰ This is captured in *Fides non terminator ad enuntabile sed ad rem*: Faith is not directed toward a formulation but rather to a reality—as cited by Msgr Pierangelo Sequeri, President of the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences, in an address on the Institute Charter and revised By-Laws, ‘Understanding Faith and Reality’, *L’Osservatore Romano*, 2607 (30) (2019), p. 8. The citation is named as ‘a famous Thomistic adage’. The original *Summa Theologicae* formulation is *Actus autem credentis non terminatur ad enuntabile sed ad rem*, which in the edition to which I referred is drawn from Hugh of St Victor, *Fides est certitudo quadam arumi de rebus absentibus supra opinionem et infra scientiam constitute*: ‘Faith is a form of mental certitude about distant realities that is greater than opinion and less than science’: T. C. O’Brien (Ed.), *Summa Theologicae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), Vol. 31, (2a2ae.1-7), p. 12. The Hugh of St Victor citation is given as *De Sacramentis I*, x, 2. PL176, 330 at page 11 of O’Brien and footnote c.

³¹ The phrase ‘abusive behaviours’, rather than ‘abusive sexual behaviours’, is intended to encompass behaviours that are not overtly ‘sexually abusive’, but whose roots are in deficiencies in sexual identity.

³² Pope Francis, speaking in the context of safeguarding probity in clerical sexual conduct, made the important point of moving away from *negative* approaches in the selection and training of candidates for the priesthood, and focusing on *positive* approaches: ‘...providing a balanced process of formation for suitable candidates, fostering holiness and the virtue of chastity’ (and referring also to *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 64, of [Saint] Pope Paul VI): ‘Pope’s appeal at the conclusion of the Meeting of Provincial Bishops on the Protection of Minors’, *L’Osservatore Romano*, 1 March 2019, 2486(9), p. 10. The remarks remain apposite to the formation of persons across the spectrum of discipleship living, and not only to those destined to ordained ministerial life.

of self-respect.³³ Committed athletes do not have to go around ‘proving that they are a man, a “real man” or a “real woman”’. This obviously excepts from obsessiveness and addresses sports athleticism that naturally enhances a robustness of masculine or feminine identity—a ‘feeling good’ about oneself, about one’s masculine or feminine identity and manly or womanly performance and moral character.

Across the wide canvas of life, we notice that those who have robust personal identities do not need to go around proving who he or she is. Everyone who encounters an athlete / sportsman / sportswoman implicitly recognises an encounter with a ‘real man’ or a ‘real woman’. We know that this can be done in a ‘worldly’ way and that sports cultures are not exempt from sexual scandals and bullying (the earlier mentioned ‘pathologies of sport’). But the address is not about a ‘worldly’ way. The address is about a Christian way—about a way that the sportsmanship / athleticism / masculinity or femininity of a man or a woman forms a part of a whole life of good living across the various dimensions of our lives. Jesus did not blush when the woman wiped his feet with her hair (Luke 7:38). He was not being stiff or unresponsive; he was not being sensual; he was not looking-down upon the woman—his response was a ‘who he was’ / ‘who I am’ response. That is, Jesus was a man (a *sexual* man) who had integrated sex and sexual identity into his overall identity as ‘Son of Man’.³⁴

As far as we know, Jesus did not play sport. But he was a ‘carpenter’, a manual craftsman; and he walked over vast areas of the Holy Land during his 3-years of public ministry. The Jesus who was tortured before and during his Passion was a strong and robust man. If we do not see this in images of Jesus that show him looking somewhat effeminate or emaciated, we certainly see the robust man in the typical image of the Victorious Resurrected Christ—Jesus as a ‘real man’ Figure 1.³⁵

³³ *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: guidelines for education within the family* uses the descriptor ‘a healthy culture of the body’ (Vatican: Pontifical Council for the Family, 1996), n. 106. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html>

³⁴ In current usage the phrase ‘sexual identity’ can be read as ‘gender’. The difficulty however is that people nowadays confuse *sex* and *gender*, and the term *gender* often takes a lot of political and ideological loading—thus I have preferred the term *sexual identity*. The *Catechism* (n. 2333) probably uses the term ‘sexual identity’ differently from above, and likely contrasts with what is now addressed with the term ‘sexual dysphoria’—or now more often and mis-named as ‘gender dysphoria’. Issues concerning *gender dysphoria* are sagaciously addressed in Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘*Male and Female He Created Them*’: *Toward a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (Vatican City, 2019): <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf>

³⁵ With adaptation to sports, the text of 2 Corinthians 4:11 is apposite: ‘For while we live [and in the aspect of sport we see athletic encounters that show]...that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh’. This scriptural quote may be placed alongside the observation

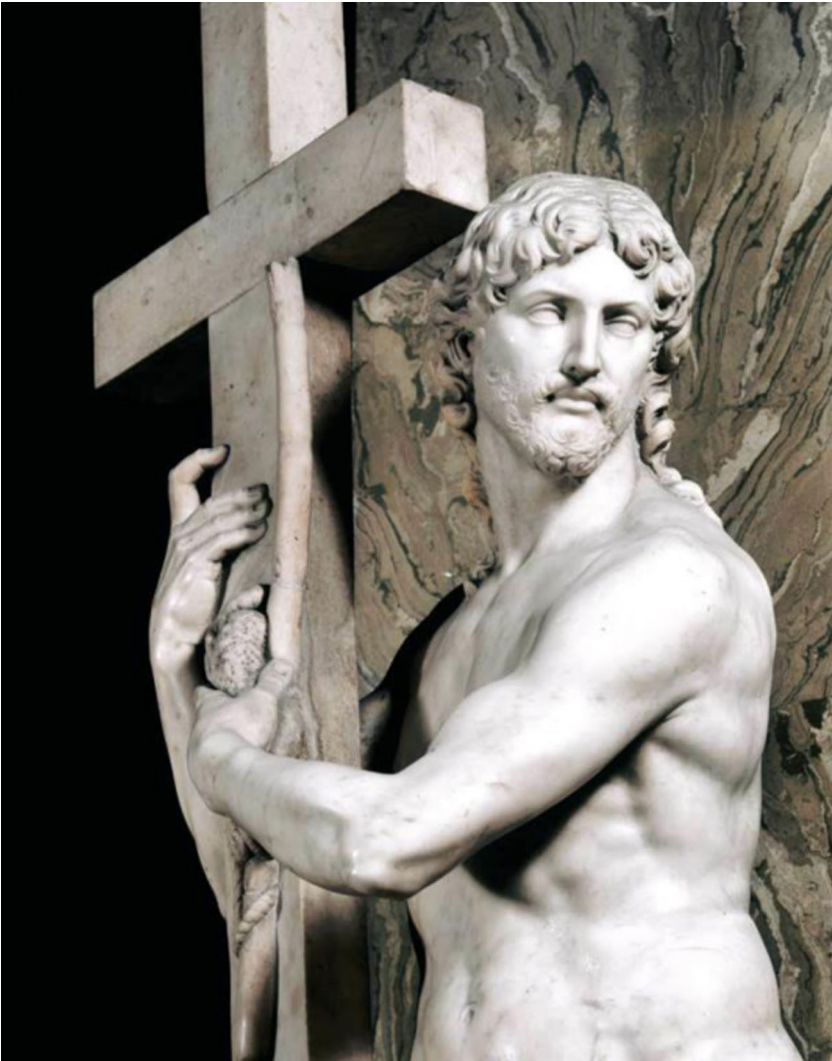


Figure 1. Cut image of statue of the Risen Christ, *Christus Victor*, by Michaelangelo in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, Rome. <https://www.michelangelo.org/risen-christ.jsp> [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Sport is Not the Sum of our Asceticism

We are to be a ‘real man’ or a ‘real woman’—after all, *that* is what the Gospel is about—‘real’ in this life, and ‘real’ for eternal life. Evidently, sport is not the sum of our asceticism. But sport has an important part

in *Giving the Best of Yourself*, ‘...Encounters with sacrifice in sport can help athletes form their characters in a particular way’, n. 3.4.

in our asceticism. And sport in our regime of asceticism helps us to build the kind of person who can live a sexual life that is acted out in congruency with the state of life in which one is placed or has chosen. In building-up ourselves in God's grace, we grow into a confident masculinity or confident femininity that affirms us as persons. People notice and respect such graceful affirmations that others find helpful in their appropriating for themselves the Gospel message that our lives, our words, and our witness increasingly portray. This is the *encounter* and *witness* of which Pope Francis so often speaks.³⁶

As already acknowledged, some readers will be more attracted to sport than others—just as some people will be more attracted to books and study than others. Nevertheless, a robust physical life is what God intends where our circumstances permit. With prudent allowances for differences in physicality and across age groups, sports athleticism sustains vitality across the eras of human life. Jesus was a robust man, and the Glorified Christ is a robust man. He did not choose the physical nature of his Passion—that was chosen under God the Father and by wicked men—and before his Passion and with Resurrection and Ascension, the Glorified Christ was and is a robust man.

Sport is one of our pathways in uprightness of masculine or feminine *identity and performance* and of our being 'real men' or 'real women' for Christ and for the world that he came to and comes to save—and *through his People* that 'coming' of Christ also becomes a contemporary 'now': through the sanctified laity, through sanctified religious, and through sanctified clergy. And the message of *Giving the Best of Yourself* is that sport is 'transformative' and 'transcendental'—that is, properly understood and properly engaged, sport is *sanctifying*.

An Aside to Seminary Formators

The renewal of [seminary formation] comes about through the practice of discernment and through a dialogical way of proceeding capable of creating a corresponding environment of spiritual and intellectual practice.³⁷

³⁶ For example, in *Evangelii gaudium* there are 34 instances of *encounter*. For me it is important to be mindful that the emphasis on *encounter* and witness of Pope Francis is also pervasive in the teaching of his predecessor—an *encounter* perspective is remarkably explicated in *Deus caritas est*, the 2005 Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI. Although, like Bergoglio, Ratzinger was not an athlete, the footnotes of *Giving the Best of Yourself* cite three relevant addresses on sport by Benedict XVI (fn. 34, 48, 67).

³⁷ Adapted from a 2019 address of Pope Francis on *Veritatis gaudium*: <<https://zenit.org/articles/popes-full-remarks-at-theology-after-veritatis-gaudium-encounter-in-naples-italy/>> I would add, '...and physical practice'.

As an aside I would like to address the question of seminary formators: ‘Where can we fit this in an already crowded seminary program?’ As an ‘aside-within-an-aside’, I have been a tertiary educator of professorial rank in a high-rank civil university for most of my priestly life, and only in the latter part of my life prior to retirement as a parish priest (pastor). I thus speak as a seasoned tertiary educator and would emphasise a view that seminaries attempt to teach *too much*—where this over-teaching becomes detrimental to cultivating *self-learning* and habits of *life-long learning*. There is plenty of room for lightening-up the taught curriculum and for increasing self-directed learning among seminarians—learning culture and learning skills that need to be transferred to all areas and to all eras of ministerial life.

Moving from the ‘aside-within-an-aside’, it is important that seminarians have *structured* components of prayer that are mainly the ‘common prayer’ of the Divine Office and the Eucharist. It is also important that seminarians have *unstructured* components of prayer. And those observations also apply to recreation. Seminarians need spaces of time where they can regularly take a run long sufficient to build aerobic strength; spaces of time to train whether on the field or in the gym; spaces of time for competitive athleticism. Across a long and demanding life of ministry, scholarship, teaching, and athleticism, I have sustained this encompassing perspective of life-discipline and ministry. And I can demonstrate the fruits thereof—with a bio-age more than a decade younger than my chronological age; with mental alertness in research, scholarship, writing, and publication across the decades and continuing in advanced years; with seasoned approaches to pastoral ministry that are versatile and that involve dialogical encounter with varieties of people.³⁸

Closing Words

In moving to close this article on *Giving the Best of Yourself*, reference may again be made to the *Catechism*: ‘It is with and through their human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God’s children has access to the Father, in order to glorify him in the one Spirit’ (CCC, n. 1204). During an interval in writing this paper, those words *through their human culture* assumed particular force.

³⁸ There are 18 references to ‘dialogue’ involving sports in *Giving the Best of Yourself*. Not surprisingly, speaking in 2019 on the subject of the 2017 Apostolic Constitution governing universities, *Veritatis gaudium*, ‘dialogue’ suffuses the extensive remarks of the Pope on theological formation and practice. Pope Francis also makes the crucial point that ‘...the internal organisation, teaching methods and the organisation of [theological/ministerial] studies should reflect the appearance of an *outbound* Church.’ <<https://zenit.org/articles/popes-full-remarks-at-theology-after-veritatis-gaudium-encounter-in-naples-italy/>>

Pope Francis in his leading us to appreciate and practice ‘everyday holiness’ always speaks of the ‘concrete situations’ / ‘concrete circumstances’ / ‘concrete realities’ that situate our cultural lives.³⁹ Likewise, *Giving the Best of Yourself*—in recognising sport as a ‘multi-faceted reality’ (n. 4.2)—displays awareness of ‘particular situations’ (n. 4.2); is attune to the varieties of sports cultures (n. 2.1 and *passim*); shows an openness to new sports cultures (n. 3.6, 5.3); and sustains an appreciation of the potential of sports to exercise transformational influences across persons and cultures (n. 3.4).

Giving the Best of Yourself acknowledges the unfortunate fact that ‘the faithful are seldom aware that the Church accepts and perceives sport in a positive way’ and proposes sports to the faithful as a ‘beneficial lifelong activity’ (n.5.3).⁴⁰ I know the transformational influence of sport to be true in my own life: where younger and achieving athletes—both male and female—make remarks such as, ‘*You are an inspiration. I hope when I am your age I can be like you!*’. As earlier remarked, such responses arise not from direct proclamation of the Gospel, but place one *in* a ‘modern Courtyard of the Gentiles’ (n. 1.1). It is thereby that the incarnational manner of engagement in *sport* serves as ‘... an instrument of human elevation toward the supernatural goal to which we are called’ (n. 5.5).

P. A. McGavin

*Rev Dr Paul Anthony McGavin is a Retired List priest of the
Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese resident in Sydney*

drpamcgvain@bigpond.com

³⁹ *Evangelii gaudium* n. 283 and *passim*, *Gaudete et exsultate* n. 50 and *passim*.

⁴⁰ Vojtěch Svobada, ‘Theology of Sport in History’, *Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for Laity*, 2015, surveys past theological representations of sport. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316511726_THEOLOGY_OF_SPORT_IN_HISTORY That article is a discasterial predecessor to *Giving the Best of Yourself*.