



An Unlikely Mixture: Sacramental Character and Sports

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By Anthony Maranise

Photo above: Tristan Rios via <https://twitter.com/Cathlete4Christ>

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Anytime I watch or participate in sports, of course I watch for the love of the game and I play for the joy of competition, but as a theologian who examines how sports and spirituality intersect, I also search for more. That “something more” is the variety of ways that sports have the possibility to positively transform not only its spectators and participants, but also our very concepts of what is actually happening around us, of time and space, and even of what we might think to be “ordinary” on the surface. The more I watch, the more I participate, and the more I research, the more similarities I find between the actions of sports and their meanings and the actions of our Catholic sacraments (and use of sacramentals) as well as the deeper realities also found therein. In this piece, I will further examine what I call “the sacramental character” (or sacramentality) of sports in three parts, including: 1) ritual and liturgy, 2) time & space, and 3) the transformation of the profane into the sacred.

As a foray into this discussion, perhaps it would be prudent to solidify the understanding of “sacrament” off of which I will be operating throughout this piece. In the 5th century, St. Augustine defined “sacrament” as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” Essentially, what St. Augustine’s definition offers

us is that sacraments express spiritual realities in humanly perceptible ways (by signs), which because of the finiteness of our human nature, we would otherwise be unable to perceive, but which are, at the same time, no less real.

Let's take up a common example, merely for the point of illustration. In the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony (Marriage), two signs most commonly come to mind in our rich Catholic tradition: both a candle and rings. The "unity candle," as it's called, is lit from two other candles, one held by the bride and one by the groom. Together, they join the flames of their candles and light the one larger "unity candle." This ritualistic sign represents the reality of the coming together as "one in love" between the husband and wife which, by God's blessing, occurs in a way they cannot tangibly see.

Rings are also significant. Obviously, they are perfect circles which represent infinity or an unending and unbroken bond. This signifies the reality of the power of love, which, never ends even should there be strife, disagreement, or discord. Love endures and unites in the end, and rings symbolize this inner reality outwardly.

Having just spoken of ritualistic actions and their representative meaning, we also see a plethora of rituals present in the sports world. From pre-game meals shared by teams to post-game handshakes, ritual is everywhere in sports. The very games themselves are so steeped in repetitive action (consistent with something being "ritualistic") that in many ways, a sporting activity can be seen as a sort of liturgy. In a 2004 article published in *U.S. Catholic* by John Rosengren entitled, "**Let Us Play**," he writes: "Rituals can open one to the experience... So, too, chanted cheers can open one to sport's sacrament." Cheers can be likened to the hymns we offer in Mass – both of which are forms of praise; the hymns to God and the cheers to the players of the game.

Photo: [Source](#)



But wait... in some way, can even the ritual of the cheers that resound throughout the stadium or arena be a form of praise to God? St. Augustine, in his *Confessions* once prayed: "You, O God, are more interior to me even than I am to myself." If this is so, namely, that God is more interior to each of us, thus, more a part of us than even we are ourselves, then does it not also follow that God is more a part of the athlete than the athlete his or herself?

Further, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) emphasizes the fundamental importance of a human person's dignity by reminding us from where our worth originates. We have been created *imago Dei*, or "in the image and likeness of God." These two important theological and spiritual realities taken together, we might then assert that when the cheers echo throughout the places of sport, they are in praise not only of what is

happening on that specific field of play, or as an expression of marvel and wonder at the talent of the athlete alone, but rather as a means of glorifying God in whose image the athletes that animate sports itself are made. Further, the gracefulness of the athletes themselves and the mere fun of the contests themselves are reflective of God's own spirit such that, like any true sports fan or participant, it might be said that we "lose ourselves in the game."

It is precisely that "losing ourselves in the game," that is, getting so "into" the goings on of the sporting event itself – either as spectator or participant – that leads us into our next point for examination: the differences in time and space. There is a well-known phrase that goes: "Time flies when you're having fun." Indeed! Most human persons have experienced this perceived reality. I call it "perceived" because time actually does not speed up, but it certainly seems to, especially when we are so fully invested in ("lost in") the activity. Fr. James Schall, SJ, in his wonderful book, *Reasonable Pleasures: The Strange Coherences of Catholicism*, argues in his chapter on sports:

"The closest most people come to pure contemplation is in the beholding of a good game... We are enthralled by absoluteness of the game, by the time of the game, which is a time outside of the normal day-to-day time. The game we watch itself takes us outside of ourselves and concentrates our attention on something that, like ourselves, need not exist at all, yet in existing holds our complete focus and interest.

Fr. Schall, here, points out some very salient points of interest, especially for a consideration of the sacramentality of sports. He first mentions contemplation which is an essential form of prayer. Prayer, of any sort, also requires discipline in that it demands focus of attention. Sportspeople, too, exercise discipline and must focus their attention. Contemplation and/or prayer can draw us out of "ordinary time" just as a good sporting contest also might.

Personally, when heavily burdened by many worries, I know I have "lost myself" in prayer or a Mass such that when I finally emerged from my prayers or the Church, a significant amount of time had passed greater than what I could've imagined or known during my prayer time. Something similar happens in sports. When we enter a game, the game is usually bound by a time-keeping mechanism that operates entirely independent of "ordinary time." Take for example, basketball or American football. Both have "clocks" which keep time of the game, yet, unlike our "ordinary time," the time these "clocks" keep in regulating the pace of the game can be and often is stopped for penalties, time-outs, etc.

Moreover, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, time operates differently than "ordinary time." A wise priest once told me: "The world outside the Church, outside the Mass is the world of illusion. That is unreality. Reality occurs in the time of the Mass – a true foretaste of eternity." Given his statement, and what Catholic-Christian theology teaches us, in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood

of Christ, Jesus becomes truly present to us. This most certainly changes both time and space. In one instant, we are there in whatever locality the Church is located at whatever local time it may be, but in the next, once the Spirit descends upon the gifts of bread and wine “like the dewfall,” we are no longer bound in ordinary time. Eternity itself – very God of very God – has entered into our time and into our space. Ordinary time has become sacred time and ordinary space has become sacred space. In a way, this occurs within sports. As we “lose ourselves,” marveling at the events of the game, we forget for some time “ordinary time” and “ordinary space.”

Differences in time and space in both sports and worship are not so unusual on their own. It is instead what causes those differences in both time and space that is unusual. That is our third point for examination: the transformation of the profane (or ordinary) into the sacred (or holy, extraordinary). At the outset of this discussion, many may question, “What can be holy about sports?” Admittedly, sports in our world today are profane things – something that, if we are not careful, we could easily overlook as having much, if any, significance at all. Though, whether we can conceive of or perceive within sports any greater reality, the fact remains, such greater reality does exist and does so through the symbols we often take for granted. According to Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, “Symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world.”

In other words, the symbols of sports we know and love – the field, the buzzer or whistle, the official or referee, the jersey, the basket, the goal-post, the scoreboard – while seemingly ordinary are only so because we have begun to take them for granted. Take, for example, the whistle or buzzer. For most, it is merely a signal of either a penalty or a stoppage of time within the sport itself. However, in reality, it exists to call attention to a matter of all those engaged in either the activity of the sport or those looking-on. The whistle or buzzer, then, might be likened to our church bells or “bells of consecration.” When the bells ring as the priest elevates the bread and wine, which in those moments, are becoming the Body and Blood of Christ, we are called to attention for a significant reason just as in an athlete who hears a whistle or buzzer. So, then, in answer to our earlier question: “What can be holy about sports?” Might I suggest we turn to the wisdom of two great Catholic thinkers: Jean-Pierre de Caussade and Brother Lawrence.

In the early eighteenth century, a French Jesuit priest by the name of Jean-Pierre de Caussade worked as a spiritual director to the Nuns of the Visitation in Nancy, France. He wrote many letters to several of the nuns who sought his spiritual counsel. The collected letters of Caussade were eventually published into a Catholic spiritual classic known as *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* in which he offers two pieces of advice with relevance to our consideration of the sacramentality of sports. In the first instance, he writes: “There is not a single person who cannot easily reach the highest degree of perfection by performing every duty, no matter how commonplace, with eager love.”

Consider, now, sportspersons. According to the spiritual wisdom of Caussade, even the sportsperson who, with great love, performs their seemingly profane sporting tasks, in fact, can be propelled to “the highest degree of perfection,” and in so doing makes manifest the holiness of each moment. In the second instance, he offers: “To

achieve the height of holiness, people must realize that all they count as trivial and worthless is what can make them holy.” While many may dismiss the idea that sporting activities could ever be sacred or contain within them opportunities for spiritual growth, dare I say, even holiness, I would point them to this guidance of Caussade. While sports may seem “trivial and worthless” in the grand scheme of human existence and relationship to God, it is anything but when viewed as an activity wherein one may encounter God in the here and now.

Finally, there is the spiritual wisdom of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. We know little of this holy man except that he was a lay brother of the Carmelite Order who served in a monastery in Paris during the seventeenth century and left behind a single work titled, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In his brief spiritual work, he wrote, “He does not ask much of us, merely a thought of Him from time to time... the least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to Him. One need not cry out very loudly; He is nearer to us than we think.” If this is true, as I hold it to be, then I would argue that even amidst the competition, the sweat, and the excitement of sports, we can not only encounter and experience the Presence of God, but also please Him in the process.

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