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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S VIEW ON SPORT

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Abstract

The Catholic Church recognizes the significant role of sport in the holistic development of individuals, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. This perspective is rooted in the historical importance of sport, which dates back to ancient civilizations where athletic activities were often linked to religious rituals and served as a means of physical conditioning. The Church promotes sport as a vital avenue for instilling core values such as perseverance, courage, teamwork, and discipline, which are essential for personal growth and character development.

In its teachings, the Church emphasizes the importance of sport in fostering social cohesion and community engagement. It encourages the participation of young people in sport, viewing these activities as opportunities for them to learn about honesty, respect, and ethical standards. The document *Giving of Ourselves* highlights that sport contributes not only to personal development but also to spiritual enrichment, allowing athletes to deepen their faith and strengthen their relationship with God through their efforts.

Pope Francis has articulated the Church's interest in sports, noting its impact on the formation of the human person and the development of interpersonal relationships. This view aligns with the belief that sport is not merely a physical activity but a space for personal growth and spiritual fulfillment, reinforcing its significance in contemporary society.

Furthermore, the Church sees sport as a powerful tool for evangelization, where the message of the Gospel can be spread, promoting moral values and personal growth. It encourages athletes to express their human characteristics during sport, cultivating a deeper understanding of themselves and enriching their body, mind, and spirit.

In conclusion, the Catholic Church's view on sport is multifaceted, recognizing it as a means of personal development, social cohesion, and spiritual enrichment. By pro-

meeting official standards and encouraging participation, the Church aims to harness the transformative power of sport for individuals and communities alike.

Keywords: holistic development, sport, spirituality, intercommunion, moral values

Introduction

The Catholic Church recognizes the importance of sport for holistic individual development, integrating physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Historically, sport has served both physical fitness and religious purposes, reflecting its deep-rooted connection to spirituality. The Church promotes values such as perseverance, teamwork, and discipline through sport, viewing them as essential for moral growth. Additionally, sport fosters social cohesion and community, providing a platform for evangelization and the promotion of Christian values, particularly among the youth.

1. General overview of the history of sport and the Catholic view of sport

1.1. General overview of the history of sport

The multifaceted history of sport that has fascinated many individuals over the generations can be traced back thousands of years to ancient civilizations, including the glorious Greeks, the mighty Romans, and the legendary Egyptians, each of whom in their own way contributed to the development of competitive physical activities. Among the many contributions of the ancient Greeks, one of the most important was the creation of the Olympic Games. It was a monumental event that not only demonstrated exceptional sporting ability but also had spiritual dimensions. In addition to physical exertion and competition, all these activities involved devotion. In this way, they combined areas of physical excellence with spiritual tradition and communal celebration (Fogel and Anderson 2022, 86-87). In contrast, the Romans, who were known for their insatiable appetite for entertainment, introduced a diverse range of sporting and competitive events, which included the famous gladiatorial battles. This delighted spectators and offered an interesting form of entertainment. Games were also sometimes 'used' to solve social problems. In the Middle Ages, sport lost its ancient meaning, but a new discipline emerged, and that was jousting. These tournaments served as a platform to showcase the military skills of the knights, but they also included other physical competitions that encouraged competition and, at the same time, friendship between

the competitions. Knightly tournaments developed between the 11th and 13th centuries in France, initially as military exercises but later becoming complex competitive events (De 2024, 99–103).

The Renaissance was marked by a significant revival of interest in physical activity and sport. This was felt in both the cultural and intellectual spheres, a period when the foundations were being laid for later sporting disciplines. On the one hand, humanism and the appreciation of physical fitness, and on the other, the awakening of the sporting spirit. As we move into modern times, the importance of sport has continued to grow. In this period, organisations emerged, rules were drawn up, and standardisation of the various sporting disciplines began. All this had the effect of making sport even more popular among the people. In addition, spectators and those who passively watched sporting events were also affected. All this led to a renewal of the Olympic spirit. At the end of the 19th century, Pierre de Coubertin brought together and integrated the idea of Olympism. It was essentially a global educational programme for young people around the world, with peace, democracy, international understanding, and the pursuit of human perfection as its primary goals. Thus, the first Olympic Games of the modern era were held in Athens in 1896 (Chikman) or later, Dresden in July/Aug 2005 (De 2024, 19–20). This event not only reawakened enthusiasm for athletic competition, but also symbolised the motivation for unity and cooperation among nations. The Olympic Games became a platform for showcasing athletic excellence and promoting international cohesion. The revival of sport during this period led to the development and recognition of many sporting disciplines. The Olympic Games have played a key role in promoting these sports at a global level. As a result, these sports have become increasingly popular among the people and enjoy outstanding recognition worldwide (Chikman, 2023). The resurgence of sport and the creation of the Olympic Games reflect broader societal changes, including the increasing value of physical fitness, competition, and international cooperation. Sports have become an essential part of cultural identity and social interaction, transcending geographical and political boundaries.

1.2. The Catholic view of sport

The Catholic Church has a nuanced view of sport. It recognises that sport is something that can significantly enhance the holistic development of individuals, while at the same time having a positive impact on their physical and spiritual well-being, thus harmoniously motivating body and mind. In this

light, sport goes beyond the mere act of physical exertion; it is also seen as an invaluable way of nurturing the spirit and cultivating the fundamental virtues, including perseverance, courage, teamwork, and discipline, which play a key role in shaping and strengthening the overall character development of individuals as they grow stronger throughout their lives. In an address to the Italian Tennis Federation on 4 May 2017, Pope Francis said that the Church is interested in sport because at its core is the human person, the human person as a whole, and recognizes that sporting participation has an impact on the formation, interpersonal relationships, and spiritual side of the human person (*Discourses for the Laity, Family and Life* 2017, 48).

In addition, the Church takes an active stance in promoting sport as an effective means of promoting and maintaining physical health. Through its visible representatives, the Church emphasizes the importance of sport and is aware of its significance in the life of the human person. John Paul II was himself a keen sportsman and saw sport as an instrument for education, for cooperation, and for building greater harmony. Pope Francis also speaks about sport. He underlined the fact that sport helps young people to develop healthy values and virtues, which are reflected not only in sport but in life in general (*Regula* 2021).

The Church recognizes that sport is more than physical activity; it is a means of building strong character and strengthening social bonds. At the parish level, many parishes organize sports activities that are not only physical exercise but also an opportunity for young people to learn important life lessons in line with Christian values. Through sport, young people learn about teamwork, honesty, discipline, and respect for others, all of which are key virtues that the Church wishes to promote.

The role of sport in the pastoral care of parishes is thus multifaceted. Sporting activities are not only a way of maintaining physical health, but also a means of building strong and cohesive communities. Through sporting activities, young people experience successes and failures, and learn to cooperate and compete, which helps them to develop a strong moral and ethical foundation. Pope Francis stresses that sport can serve as a bridge between faith and everyday life, encouraging young people to reflect on the connection between their sporting experiences and spiritual values (*Claritas* 2022, 260-264).

The Church also promotes ethical standards in sport and advocates for the inclusion of all, regardless of their abilities or social status (*Discourses for the Laity, Family and Life* 2017, 70). In this way, sport becomes a tool for social

justice and inclusion, which is particularly important in today's world. Sports activities in parishes often include spiritual content, such as prayers before matches and reflections on sporting experiences, which helps young people to relate their sporting experiences to their faith.

In conclusion, the Catholic Church recognizes and emphasizes the key role of sport in the holistic development of the individual, which includes physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Sport is not just a physical activity, but an important tool for building values such as perseverance, courage, and teamwork, and for promoting spirituality and social cohesion. The *Giving of Christ* document clearly points out that sport contributes to personal development and spiritual enrichment, reflecting the belief that through their endeavors, athletes can deepen their faith and strengthen their relationship with God. The Church is committed to ethical standards in sport and encourages the involvement of young people in sporting activities, which not only enriches their lives but also contributes to greater social cohesion (Charynchar 2022, 114). In this way, sport becomes a space for personal growth, spiritual fulfillment, and the dissemination of moral values, which confirms its importance in contemporary society.

2. Sport in the eyes of the Church

2.1. The document *Giving of Yourself*

The document *Giving of Yourself* strongly emphasizes the profound notion that taking part in sport involves much more than just participating in physical activities; in fact, it serves as a pathway through which individuals can promote their holistic development and effectively address not only their physical needs, but also make an important contribution to their emotional and spiritual growth.

The Church feels its responsibility for sport and for protecting it from the deviations that threaten it day by day, in particular from corruption and dishonesty, manipulation, and commercial abuse. The document stresses that the Church wishes to serve all those who work in the world of sport as professionals and officials, and the vast majority of people who are involved in it as volunteers, competition staff, coaches, teachers, managers, parents, and the athletes themselves (Mikstori in *Iskustvo* 2019, 17).

The Church recognizes and affirms the important role of sport in the formation of human character. Sport instills fundamental values and fosters

virtuous habits. These habits foster personal integrity and a sense of social responsibility in each individual. In this way, sport contributes to the general well-being of the individual and the community. It also promotes cooperation and understanding between people of different backgrounds (Mistron and Fisher 2012, 20-21). Sporting activities enable individuals to develop perseverance, discipline, fairness, and teamwork – values that are essential for healthy and balanced development.

On the field, athletes gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. Through victories and defeats, team achievements, and challenges, they learn important life lessons. These help them grow as individuals. Sport becomes more than just a competition. It becomes a place for personal growth, self-discovery, and spiritual discovery. Through sport they develop perseverance, courage, and teamwork. Their self-discipline and respect for others is strengthened.

Sport also plays a key role in promoting emotional stability and mental health. Regular physical activity has been shown to reduce stress, improve mood, and increase general well-being. In the context of spiritual development, sport provides an opportunity for meditation, reflection, and the search for deeper meaning, which helps individuals to build strong and connected relationships with God.

Athletes are encouraged to find ways of expressing their human characteristics during sport. In this way, they cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves. This goes beyond competition and achievement. Sport becomes a way of life (Dierckxhele 2014). It enriches body, mind, and spirit. They develop perseverance, courage, and teamwork. Their self-discipline and respect for others is strengthened.

The practice of sport, integrated into the life of the faithful, also makes it possible to strengthen the sense of community and connectedness between individuals. Group sports activities, competitions, and training create opportunities for cooperation, friendships and support, all of which are key elements for building strong and cohesive communities.

In conclusion, the Church recognizes sport as an important tool for the integral development of the individual. Sport is not merely a physical activity, but a means of promoting personal, emotional, and spiritual development. Through sporting activities, individuals can strengthen their integrity, responsibility and connectedness with others, which contributes to a richer and more fulfilled life experience (Jolly 2015, 20-40).

2.2 Sport and spirituality

The Comprehensive Document accurately reveals the deep and important connection between the multifaceted fields of sport and spirituality. It clearly illustrates the various ways in which active participation in sport can greatly enhance and enrich one's spirituality and overall life experience in a comprehensive and meaningful way. Athletes are encouraged to connect their physical efforts and endeavours with their deeper spiritual ambitions and aspirations. In the context of sport, they discover a unique opportunity to deepen their faith. In this way, sport strengthens a personal relationship with the divine and the sacred in a harmonious way (Krychowiak, 2019).

In this context, the wide field of sport can develop into an exceptional means of glorifying God, as athletes joyfully and responsibly use their exceptional physical talents, which they see as a gift they have received from God. They express their commitment by striving to honour their Creator through unwavering dedication, competition, and excellence. In doing so, they not only strengthen their physical fitness and improve their skills, but also progress spiritually and deepen their relationship with God. In this way, they reflect the harmony between physical and spiritual endeavours.

Sport as a means of spiritual growth is particularly emphasised in the Catholic Church, since sporting activities are often used as an opportunity to promote spiritual discipline and perseverance. The document stresses that sport can become an outstanding tool for connecting the faithful with their spiritual goals, because it combines physical exertion with spiritual values. In this way, it creates a holistic experience that enriches and ennobles the lives of believers.

Sporting events and training often include elements such as communal prayer, meditations, and reflections to help athletes understand and integrate spiritual teachings into their sporting activities. Pope Francis has repeatedly stressed that sport can act as a bridge between the physical and the spiritual world, where physical endeavours are intertwined with the search for deeper meaning and connection with the Divine (Cassini 2024).

The Church encourages athletes to recognise their physical talents as gifts to be nurtured and used in accordance with God's principles. Such an approach not only increases their awareness of their own worth and abilities, but also strengthens their commitment to spiritual values such as respect, compassion, and responsibility towards others (Pope Francis 2024).

In conclusion, sport plays a key role in linking physical activity with spiritual growth (Wharton) or faith, doctrine in *Dehony* 2019, 42–44). Athletes

are encouraged to see their physical endeavour as a pathway to spiritual fulfilment through which they can glorify God and deepen their faith by their achievements. In this way, sport becomes more than a physical activity; it becomes a rich, multifaceted experience that enriches the life of the individual at all levels.

2.3 Sport as a tool for social cohesion

Pope Francis stresses the key role that sport plays in promoting social cohesion and inclusion in the various communities of the modern world (Comité 2016). Sport has a unique capacity to bring together people from different social backgrounds, confirming it as a powerful positive force that fosters cooperation, inspires mutual respect, and promotes a spirit of solidarity among all participants. The Church sees sport not only as a means of competition and victory, but also as a valuable tool for personalizing. Sport bridges the differences that arise from social inequalities and contributes to a more harmonious, cohesive, and united society.

Pope Francis specifically points out that one of the most powerful characteristics of sport is its ability to bring people together (Bordoni 2016). Sport allows people from different social and cultural backgrounds to meet on common ground, where there are clear rules and common goals. This creates opportunities for dialogue, mutual understanding, and building bridges between people. Such experiences are key to building an inclusive community where respect and solidarity prevail.

The Church also recognizes sport as a tool for the formation of character and moral values. Competing in sport is not only about striving to win, but also about learning important life lessons. Values such as respect for rules, fair play, perseverance, and teamwork are reinforced through sport and remain important even outside the sporting arena. Pope Francis has repeatedly stressed that sport contributes to the promotion of peace by overcoming prejudices and encouraging living together in harmony (Luhar 2016).

Sporting activities within Church communities often include elements of spirituality, such as prayer and meditation. These activities help participants to connect with the divine and find a deeper meaning to their efforts. In this way, physical activity is linked to spiritual growth, creating a holistic experience that enriches the lives of individuals on different levels.

In this sense, sport becomes more than a physical activity; it becomes a way of life that promotes spiritual growth, social cohesion, and the strength-

oring of moral values. The Church recognizes sport as an important means of achieving peace and cohesion in a world that is often divided by differences (Elkannari) *in libro, directive in Dilectio 2019, 45*. Athletes are encouraged to use their talents not only for their personal success, but also for the well-being of the community, thus contributing to the creation of a more just and inclusive world.

3. Pastoral guidelines and incentives for the future

3.1. Promoting participation in sport

In its commitment to fostering a sense of community and well-being among its followers, the Church actively encourages people of all ages, especially young people, to take part in various sporting activities. In doing so, it recognizes and values the many benefits that such participation brings for the personal development of individuals and the enrichment of the wider community. This initiative involves not only supporting parishes and Catholic educational institutions in the creation and implementation of sports programmes, but also creating an environment where the competitive aspects are not the main focus. Instead, it emphasises educational values and inclusive participation that welcomes everyone, regardless of ability or social background.

Particular attention is paid to ensuring that individuals from all walks of life are involved in these initiatives, thus fostering a culture of acceptance, unity, and a sense of community. The document *Giving the Best of Yourself* highlights the key pastoral environments for promoting sport: parents as primary educators, parishes (youth centres), schools and universities, and amateur sports clubs, as well as professional sport (Elkannari) *in libro, directive in Dilectio 2019, 46-48*.

In conclusion, it can be stated with certainty that the Catholic Church not only recognizes but also fully supports the crucial role of sport in the holistic development of the individual. Sport is not only a means for physical growth, but also for mental and spiritual enrichment, which are essential for a holistic life. Taking part in sport goes beyond physical activity; it becomes a tool to promote core values such as perseverance, courage, and teamwork, while dispensing a sense of spirituality and strengthening the social bonds between participants.

Giving the Best of Yourself emphasises that participation in sport makes an important contribution to personal development and spiritual growth. It an-

defines the belief that athletes have a unique opportunity to strengthen their faith and their relationship with God through their efforts and achievements in sport. The Church remains firm in its commitment to uphold ethical standards in the field of sport and encourages young people to participate actively in sporting activities. This not only improves their lives but also plays an important role in strengthening social bonds.

Sport is thus evolving into a dynamic space for personal growth, spiritual fulfillment, and the promotion of moral values, thus confirming its exceptional importance in the fabric of modern society.

3.2 Promoting ethical standards in sport

The Church makes clear its firm commitment to fostering a culture of integrity in the complex and ever-changing world of sport. In doing so, it stresses the importance of strict adherence to the ethical standards that govern this broad and dynamic field. It also encourages athletes, coaches, and event organisers to be aware of their important responsibility to uphold the moral principles that underpin their work in this field.

It is essential to cultivate a deep respect for the rules that govern the Games, while fostering a sincere respect for opponents. The Church also firmly rejects doping and other forms of dishonesty that undermine the essence and spirit of fair and healthy competition (Elkhartani *et al.*, *Strategies in Doping 2019* 47/5). The sporting community must act as an influential platform where moral values are clearly defined, consistently communicated, and increasingly reinforced over the years.

3.3 Sport as a tool for evangelisation

With a deep understanding of the great potential that sport offers, the Church recognises and emphasises its immense power as a means of evangelisation. Sporting events and activities create unique opportunities for spiritual growth and the building of authentic relationships, which allow the Gospel message to be spread in an attractive and widely accessible way.

One of the most important initiatives in this area is the work of the Salesian Salesians, who have been organising sports activities for young people for many years (SportKat 2019). The Salesians run football and volleyball leagues for primary and secondary school children, where they promote the values of team spirit, cooperation, and responsibility alongside physical activity. They also organise occasional tournaments where young people experi-

enrich the spiritual dimensions and experiences of community through sporting activities. The annual youth gathering in Šibenik also includes a sports workshop, which is very popular among the participants (Šibenik whole 2024). The workshop allows young people to spend time in a stimulating and positive environment through sport, which enhances their personal growth and deepens their faith.

The Catholic Church understands sport not only as a form of recreation, but also as a valuable tool that contributes to the holistic development of the individual, strengthens social bonds, and promotes ethical values. Sport is a place where virtues such as honesty, respect, perseverance, and resilience are developed. These values are not only important for sport, but also for spiritual life and for the relationship with others (Katolička Crkva u Sloveniji 2024). The Šibenik model of working with sport is an excellent example of the link between sport and evangelisation and shows that sport makes an important contribution to the spiritual growth of young people.

Sport is a universal tool that transcends cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. It offers young people a place where they can build genuine relationships and develop. In a world that often neglects spiritual values, the Church recognises sport as a bridge that leads young people to a better knowledge of themselves and a genuine encounter with God (Rogovik 2015, 80). In this way, sport becomes an opportunity to communicate the Gospel message and a place where the values of faith come alive in a way that young people understand and appreciate.

In the summer of 2024, the Chancery for Culture and Education in Rome organised a meeting of delegates of the Episcopal Conferences for the National Ministry of Sport. The meeting discussed the history, present, and future of sport as a field of pastoral ministry. They proposed deepening the specific characteristics of this pastoral ministry in order to develop it as an autonomous branch, since it involves unique methods, participants, and places of action. They highlighted the need to publish scientific articles on sport and testimonies of athletes on social networks. They also stressed the need to better inform athletes about the existence of the sports pastoral ministry and to offer them spiritual accompaniment. The desire was also expressed to prepare liturgical adaptations for sporting events, such as blessings of athletes, Masses for athletes, or pilgrimages (Katolička Crkva u Sloveniji 2024).

The Church will continue to nurture and develop the link between sport and evangelisation, helping young people to form a solid foundation for spiritual growth and holistic development.

Conclusion

On these foundations, sport is not just a physical activity, but an opportunity for personal growth, connection, and the search for deeper meaning in everyday life. The Catholic Church is aware that sport can serve as a platform for the transmission of values such as respect, teamwork, and responsibility. This is particularly important in the modern world where we are often faced with challenges that require cooperation and understanding.

In conclusion, the Catholic Church recognizes the role of sport in the holistic development of the individual, which includes physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Sport is not just a physical activity, but a key tool for strengthening values such as perseverance, courage, and cooperation (Carrick 2008). It also fosters spirituality and social bonds. The *Goings of Christian* document clearly points out that sport contributes to personal growth and spiritual enrichment, reflecting the belief that athletes can deepen their faith and strengthen their relationship with God through their efforts.

Sport is also important in parish pastoral care. Many parishes organize sporting activities and events which are not just a form of recreation but a place to build relationships, community, and promote spirituality among young people. Through the experiences of success, failure, participation, and competition in sport, young people learn valuable life lessons consistent with Christian values.

The Church encourages young people to take part in sport because it strengthens their relationships with their peers, builds friendships, and teaches the importance of working together and respecting the rules. Such involvement not only affects physical fitness, but also moral and spiritual growth. Sport thus becomes a means through which the Church transmits to young people values that will help them to form a solid ethical foundation.

Sports activities in parishes often include spiritual elements, such as prayer before competitions and reflections on sporting experiences, which encourage young people to think about the link between sport and faith (Carrick 2008, 145-147). Pope Francis has repeatedly stressed that sport is a bridge that can connect young people to spirituality and lead them to search for a deeper meaning in life.

The Church is committed to ethical standards in sport and to the involvement of young people in sporting activities, which not only enriches their lives but also contributes to greater social cohesion. Sport becomes a place for personal growth, spiritual fulfillment, and the dissemination of moral values, thus

confirming its relevance in contemporary society. Pope John Paul II said that sport is not just a physical activity, but a road for spreading values and strengths, using the sport (John Paul II 2000). Pope Francis, for his part, stresses that sport can contribute to building a more just and inclusive society (Rome 2013).

Thus, we can conclude that through sports activities in parishes, the Catholic Church not only promotes physical fitness, but also educates young people about key values, connects them with their faith, and prepares them for the challenges of the modern world. Sport thus becomes more than a game; it becomes a tool for the holistic development of the individual and for building a more connected and compassionate world.

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Sadržaj

POKLAD KATOLIČKE CRKVE NA SPORT

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Katolička Crkva preporučuje važnost sporta za cjeloviti razvoj pojedinca, kondicionirajući fizičku, moralnu i duhovnu dimenziju. Sportske aktivnosti su pozitivna osnova, dajući joj u osnovu civilizaciju gdje je dostiže i na tjelesnu kondiciju i na vjerske vrijednosti. Crkva promiče sport kao važan putovanje vrijednosti poput: strastovitosti, hrabrosti, timskog duha i discipline. Duhovnost «čuvajući vjeru» naglašava da sport doprinosi našemu razvoju, duhovnosti i društvenoj harmoniji. Sportisti su pozvani kondicionirati svoju fizičku osobu u duhovnim nastojanjima, da im može pomoći postići vjere. Crkva potiče sudjelovanje u sportskim aktivnostima, pružajući podršku i potičući etičke standarde u sportu, kao što su poštenost i poštenje pobjede. Također, važni sporti kao što su evangelizacija, gdje se pruža izvanvremenski način života i promicati moralne vrijednosti. Na taj način sport postaje najprije za našu vjeru, društvenu harmoniju i duhovnu obogaćivanje.

Ključne riječi: cjeloviti razvoj, sport, duhovnost, moralne postavke, moralne vrijednosti.