

Sports ethics and Christian life:
A pedagogical alliance to be revalued for the education of the new generations

Etica sportiva e vita cristiana:
un'alleanza pedagogica da ri-valorizzare per l'educazione delle nuove generazioni

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ABSTRACT

This essay intends to resume and deepen the ancient reciprocity of values between sports ethics and Christian life. Sport and Christianity are two phenomena which have remote origins. Both of them have influenced each other reciprocally in many occasions through the contact between the original cultures and they are today globalized all over the world. Among the many arguments the question arises whether Catholicism can contribute today to restore the original epistemological statute of sports sciences for a rediscovery of the most authentic sport (without doping, corruption, betting, lack of fair play, excess of technicality and economic investments, etc.) in order to become a fundamental resource for the education of the new generations, on the base of the evangelical and at the same time rational principle: "not man for sport, but sport for man". Sport, as an educational vehicle with widespread diffusion, is on the same wavelength of the Christian message for the same reason that the essence of real sport shares the majority of Christian values and its practical dimension allows to stage, in real terms, the 'game field' in which those values can be reached.

Questo saggio intende riprendere e approfondire l'antica reciprocità di valori tra etica sportiva e vita cristiana. Lo sport e il cristianesimo sono due fenomeni che hanno origini remote. Entrambi si sono influenzati reciprocamente in molte occasioni attraverso il contatto tra le culture di origine e oggi sono globalizzati a livello planetario. Tra le tante argomentazioni presentate si pone la domanda se il cattolicesimo possa contribuire oggi a ripristinare lo statuto epistemologico originario delle scienze dello sport per una riscoperta dello sport più autentico (senza doping, corruzione, scommesse, mancanza di fair play, eccesso di tecnicismo e di investimenti economici, ecc.) per diventare una risorsa fondamentale per l'educazione delle nuove generazioni, sulla base del principio evangelico e al tempo stesso razionale: "non l'uomo per lo sport, ma lo sport per l'uomo". Lo sport, come veicolo educativo a diffusione capillare e mondiale, è sulla stessa lunghezza d'onda del messaggio cristiano per la stessa ragione che l'essenza del vero sport condivide la maggior parte dei valori cristiani e la sua dimensione pratica permette di mettere in scena, in termini reali, il 'campo da gioco' in cui tali valori possono essere raggiunti.

Keywords: Sports, Body, Christianity, Ethical values, Pedagogy

Parole chiave: Sport, Corpo, Cristianesimo, Valori etici, Pedagogia

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Introduction

Nowadays, the argument that Christianity has played a crucial role in the devaluation of the body and physical education enjoys a broad consensus. This paper aims to refute this point of view. We are unconvinced by the ‘logical thesis’ according to which the scarce recognition our culture gives to physical education and, more generally, to sports sciences, should be ascribed to Christian thought. According to this thesis, Christianity – which had a powerful influence and a primary role in the forming of Western culture – would be conveying in its message a strong tendency to devalue the body; as a consequence, the Western world would be sharing in a well-established and widespread view which is unable to acknowledge – and indeed denies – the cultural and human value of sports. This is due to the fact that the human body and sport are intrinsically connected: denying the body leads necessarily to devaluing sports.

We consider it important to analyse this thesis in detail, with reference to the main authors who in various degrees contribute to support it. This thesis cannot leave experts of sports science and others unaffected. On the contrary, it seems that there is an urgent need to discuss the subject within the framework of philosophy and sports ethics, since a clarification of this subject is closely connected with the ethical significance of the sports phenomenon and with the comprehension of the values it involves.

The first author to whom it seems necessary to make reference is Galimberti (1983). In his volume entitled *Il corpo* [The Body], after having ‘rebuked’ Plato for having separated the soul from the body in a dualistic concept of man – where the soul is regarded as a formal principle akin to ideas and which, like these, transcends the body and is separated from it, so as to conclude that the body is the tomb of the soul – Galimberti reproaches Christianity for making this view its own. In Christianity the body, connected with death and sin (*Rm* 7, 5-18), is excluded from symbolic circulation and becomes a body in need of redemption. Galimberti’s argument appears to become more sharply accusatory of Christianity when he states that it carries with it a burden of suffering, loneliness and mortification (*Mk* 14, 34), in view of the fact that, in the plan of salvation, sanctification would be obtained by sacrificing the body, which would then be valued only on the day of its death. Time out of mind, it is precisely the body which sets a limit to our potentials and our desires. Christian religion – according to him – places the principle of personal identity in the soul, regarding the body just as flesh to be redeemed (e.g., *Gv* 5, 28-29; *I Cor* 15, 43-50; *I Ts* 4, 15-17).

Going on, continuing down that road, we now turn to the link, posited by some authors, between denial of the body and devaluation of sports. According to Piéron (1989), in today’s Western societies, except perhaps in Great Britain, physical education is still a victim of the effects of a poorly interpreted Greek philosophy and of a Christian doctrine hostile to the body. The relationship between body and soul conditioned the role assigned to physical education. This is the starting point for the argument that says that a concept of man which denies the value of the body leads inevitably to the demeaning of physical activity and sports. The alleged ‘denial’ of the body in Christian thought logically leads some critics to deem that Christianity historically played a role in devaluing sporting activities.

We think that not only can the above mentioned thesis be easily refuted, but that there are also valid reasons to maintain that it must be completely overturned if we remain strictly adherent to biblical data. In addition, we must state beforehand that ‘Christian doctrine’ has been and still is a victim of wrong interpretations. We are indeed convinced that Christianity (and on this particular issue the authors refer to ‘Christianity’ mainly as Roman Catholicism) has a concept of man able to ‘give back’ to the human body his full value, and that sports and Christian life are a binomial able to share many values (see Spencer, 2000). We find ourselves unable to justify the acrimony of some authors, even very expert ones, in bringing accusations against Christianity as a whole, often with obvious and exceeding generalizations.

Without a doubt Christian thought, at certain moments of its history (see Melchiorre, 1988), let itself be ‘contaminated’ by Plato’s dualism, but we must recognize that its message is very far from holding to that position, if we consider an anthropology adhering to biblical data. Moreover, Plato’s dualism was assimilated and shared only by some Christian thinkers during specific historical periods. We cannot thus support an absolute correlation between Christian thought and the devaluation of the body. We are strongly convinced of the contrary. Therefore it is appropriate, perhaps essential, to analyse this matter in more depth.

We must underline the fact that, when such a devaluating concept of the human body is attributed in-

distinctly to all Christian thought, we are already very distant from the actual historical reality. A negative concept of the body characterised only a fraction of Christianity (and this was just one of the many interpretations that have been given historically); moreover, the fact that his idea was supported in certain Christian circles does not make this concept less erroneous and less foreign to the essence of the Christian message.

In order to arrange the framework for an objective discussion on the topic, we deem that, first of all, we must consider the basis of Christian religion, since the message that Christianity wants to confer must be taken from the Word of God, the Sacred Scriptures, and in particular, from the Gospel, which puts the foundation of Christianity in Christ, who, by becoming incarnate, brought the corporeal dimension into the Trinity, that is, into God himself (see Leon-Dufour, 1984).

1. Body and sports: a predictable connection?

The thesis we are discussing puts forward an argument we can agree with: namely that Christianity played an essential role in the consolidation of Western culture (Ratzinger, Pera, 2006). We cannot agree, however, the assertion that Christianity has historically spread, and keeps on spreading, a negative view of corporeality (see Mellor, Shilling, 1997). Indeed, we believe that the value of body is fully expressed in Christian anthropology. We will address this theory later with more specific and detailed arguments, as this seems to be a strong point in the argument we are discussing.

Now we intend to focus our attention on the assumption that a concept of man which belittles corporeality must necessarily result in a belittlement of sports as well. I dare to say that it is a typical tendency of these days to identify the body as the peculiar and exclusive field of investigation for sports science, as though there were a sort of preset and unassailable correspondence between body and sports (Cfr. Parry, Robinson, Watson, Nesti, 2007). Yet, at other times we witnessed very different positions, which seem to disprove what is currently paraded around with certainty (Scarpa, 2007). Let us consider, for instance, how Jewish culture from the very beginning strongly valued the body in a unitary perspective of the human person, while at the same time rejecting the practice of sports, which was regarded as an 'import' from Greek culture (*2 Mac* 4, 13-15). Another typical example is precisely ancient Greece, which gave rise to the Olympic Games, and at the same time maintained positions which deeply devalued the human body. First of all, Plato, who identifies the body with a tomb and a prison for the soul. The same Plato who, in the Republic, considers gymnastic education crucial, not as a mean of improving the body but as a discipline contributing to the 'training' of the soul. Only a good soul, in fact, by its own virtue, can perfect the body to an extraordinary degree.

From these considerations it is clear that it is not possible to establish a necessary correspondence between the depreciation of the body and a depreciation of gymnastics and sports. With regard to our discussion, it should also be said that both sports and Christianity presuppose the practice of a type of ascetic behaviour, based fundamentally on psychophysical control practices. Ordinarily, Christian ascetics are often thought to be hostile to corporeality and their goal is seen almost as opposite to that of sports practice. We think instead that asceticism cannot be identified as a mere practice of mortification of the body: the ascetic exercise too must be considered from the point of view of the promotion of humanity, including its bodily dimension.

Not only do we not find that necessary link between 'denial' of the body and belittlement of sports; we do believe, instead, that Christianity is founded on a positive outlook on corporeality, and beyond that, that it is possible to establish a relationship between values connected with sports practice and Christian ethics. As will be illustrated, in support of this assumption, we will be analyzing in two separate sections the concept of corporeality emerging from Christian biblical exegesis and the reciprocity of values existing between sports and evangelic message.

2. The body in Christian biblical exegesis

When analysing the Christian concept of man, multiple aspects stand out which contribute towards the full realisation of corporeality. We will now attempt to summarize them (see Scarpa, 2008):

- A. From the study of the text of the *Bible*, we notice how *the term 'body' is used with a specific meaning by Paul*, who asserts that no existence of any sort is possible, not even of a spiritual kind, unless it is 'grounded' in a body. This somatic grounding cannot be erased without erasing the very possibility of living. Among the various passages, there is one in particular where Paul clearly explains the importance of the body, of its role and destiny: "The *body is [...] for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body*" (1 Cor 6, 13). From this relationship between God and the body, a reciprocity stands out which elevates the body, temple of the Holy Spirit, from its role of instrument to that of essential element of the person, destined for eternal life.
- B. *Man was created in God's own image and likeness*. By reading the book of Genesis, we can appreciate the full value of human body. The text does not say that man was created with a spirit similar to God's, but that man, in the essential unity of his various components, was created in God's likeness. Even the body is part of this likeness to God, in spite of any concept of man that attempts to deny the intrinsic value of the body in constituting the human person (*Gen 1, 27 and 2, 7*).
- C. A fundamental aspect of Christian thought, which makes it possible to attribute a full value to the body, is *Christ's incarnation*. The fact that God 'became' man, took a body (*Verbum caro factum est, Jn 1, 14*) and shared in the same life as those He had created, constitutes the principle and foundation of the Christian revelation. The mere fact that God's son lived in a body, leading a 'human' existence, induces us to maintain that Christianity assigns a fundamental value to the body. From Jesus' life, it is possible to understand how the flesh cannot be considered something dead. The fact that he took flesh means that, in becoming man, he acquired all human characteristics: rationality, feelings, emotions; all aspects that were combined with his divinity in what taken together, Christianity has called, the Person of Christ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1992).
- D. The theme of the incarnation and the corporal life of *Christ* is deeply linked to his *resurrection*, since it consists in the continuation of his life after death. Jesus rose again in his body. The fact that the tomb where Jesus was buried was found empty three days after the burial, that his body was no longer there, that it had not been abandoned to corruption, means that He who rose again is not only 'soul'. Christ rose again in his body. The same body which He assumed when becoming man, became incorruptible at the resurrection: it is the same body, but it has been 'transformed', it is a 'heavenly' body. Despite there being a shadow of mystery in trying to imagine a transfigured and incorruptible body which is the result of resurrection, the materiality of the event expressed by the words «*noli me tangere*» [don't touch me], which Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, clearly stands out (*Jn 20, 17*).
- E. One fact is fundamental: the resurrection of Christ is not destined to be an isolated case. It prefigures *the resurrection that every man will experience*. It does not only concern Christ but it involves every believer. In article 11 of the Apostles' Creed, the following is professed: "*I believe in the resurrection of the body*". Or, more precisely, "*I believe in the real resurrection of our body*". This article, which is fairly simple, is often misinterpreted by the history of Christianity and of Western culture in general. The resurrection of the body is one of the topics that encountered the highest number of misunderstandings and confrontations within Christian thought (see Berti, 2007). At its core there is a fundamental problem: death, and the indivisibility of man. Views were often developed, even within Christianity, according to which after death the soul detaches from the body. The biblical message instead does not promise the immortality of the soul as detached from the body (as was believed instead in Greek thought), but of man in his entirety. It is essential to understand how the meeting of the Jewish and Greek cultures has modified both concepts: immortality of the soul on the one hand and resurrection of the body on the other. In the Christian creed, no separation and return of the entities can be conceived. The person is an immortal being. And its immortality is a dialogic immortality. Man cannot perish because he is known and loved by God. It is God's love which determines eternity. Therefore, with death, no separation takes place. Man does truly and totally perish. But, in view of the fact that

he was created and loved by God, that he was able to know and establish a dialogue with Him, the creator of life is able to keep alive this dialogic relation after death (Ratzinger, 1968).

- F. *The miracles performed by Jesus on the physical impairments* of the sick constitute an additional point in favour of the valuation of the human body. The miracles Christ performed, healing the bodies of the blind, deaf-mute, lame, paralytic, leprous, epileptic and even the dead, who were resurrected, were numerous. This confirms once again the importance that Christianity assigns to the body. A body that cannot be intended as a late addition to a person, destined to decay, but was created for life. There are those, such as the theologian Ravasi (2002, p. 25), who statistically quantified the episodes where Jesus heals the sick. This underscores the importance of the body by drawing attention to the number of times physical healing is mentioned. For example, the Gospel of Mark, is made up of 666 verses, 209 of which, 31% of the text, are dedicated to miracles, which are of the physical type. Moreover, if we exclude the story of the passion of Christ, we have 47%, therefore half of that same Gospel dedicated to Jesus' relation with the five senses.
- G. The body acquires an unmatched value and a central role in the *Christian concept of love and relationship with others*. It appears unnecessary to underscore the close relation between the body and sexuality, and more generally love, such as relations which must be lived inside and through one's body. A relationship is impossible without the body, as well as an act of love, even the most intimate and secret, is impossible without the body (Scola, 2003). It is obvious that a concept which denies the value of sexuality leads as a consequence to a devaluation of the body. Similarly, a low consideration of the body leads to depriving sexuality of its full value, as happened in the case of Manichaeism, a heretical movement that was born in the near East. This was outside the biblical sphere based on the dualism of Mazdeism, which identified matter as the source of evil, and therefore it condemned whatever was corporal in man (John Paul II, 1987). In order to understand the deep meaning that Christianity ascribes to sexuality, we must start from the topic of creation. Man is not made in God's likeness only in view of the fact that he is a single person, but it becomes so in force of the *comunio personarum* between man and woman. Man and woman, with different, or better yet, complementary bodies, carry inside them a reciprocal tension aimed at reconstituting the original unity. In *Genesis*, we read that the woman was moulded by God, 'using' a man's rib, in order for him to overcome the original loneliness (*Gn* 2, 23). Therefore, man's desire to reunite is inevitable. Nonetheless, sexuality is not craving to possess, but rather the desire to reunite, which is a very different concept. Indeed, possession refers only to objects, to which a person cannot be compared in any way, with loss of his intrinsic value. In the reunion instead, there is a reciprocal devotion, where possession is no longer present (see Benedict XVI, 2006). The person 'loses' himself to form a new unity. Therefore the body, the epiphany of love, takes up a central role, thus allowing man to open up to the other being, in order to relate to the other, in a significant manner. The body is the path through which an individual slowly learns to care for the other, which means, to fulfil itself in total freedom.
- H. Another aspect that marks *the central role of the body in Christian life* concerns the *sacraments*. Each Christian during his life is guided by a series of signs and rituals that lead him to God step by step, in order to acquire the divine nature day by day. These signs involve man's body in a significant way. Every sacrament speaks of and gives meaning to, objects and gestures that concern the human body and its path towards God. This always done with reference to Christ's Body and the Church's Body (Martini, 2001).
- I. *Prayer*, despite being a largely *spiritual act*, cannot be performed without the body, because of the unity of the human person. In fact, when praying, *the body has a fundamental role* to play in taking part in the soul's 'intentions'. In the *Bible*, we read of numerous situations that describe moments of prayer, to which a specific *posture* is often associated, or at least, a certain composure of body. Each of the fundamental postures of the human being, whether resting, sitting, kneeling or standing up, has always been present during ritual since the Old Testament (Gori, 1982). Even Jesus, when he was praying, used to assume significant postures. From the analysis of the passage of the Gospel concerning the agony in the garden, it is possible to see how all four Evangelists associate Jesus' 'Plea' to his Father with precise body postures which reflect the emotional state of Him who prayed and the intentions of the prayer itself. This once again underscores how man is not only a spiritual being, but a synergy (a combination) of body and soul (see Stein, 1932-33).

J. Another important aspect –which summarises and gives meaning to all those mentioned previously – is the fact that Christian doctrine considers flesh as the grounds for salvation (*caro cardo salutis*, Tertulian). *Christianity places salvation in the body*. The task of escaping from death is entrusted to ‘whom’ is about to become corrupted and appears to be inevitably destined to corruption. When Paul, on the Areopagus of Athens, tried to explain that man’s immortality is based on the resurrection of bodies, his listeners deserted and derided him. It is therefore easy to understand how the theme of the body started to be misinterpreted. After its meeting with Greek culture, Christianity had to face the hard task of re-viewing itself through dichotomous schemes based on Plato’s matrix (Henry, 2000). This point, more than any other, allows us to disprove the initial thesis. For Christianity the body is not simply flesh to be redeemed, it is a crucial element. Redemption begins from the body, which is the starting point and the guide for the development of the project that will lead to eternal redemption.

After having explained the main arguments in support of the valuation of the body in Christianity, we will now to briefly examine the thought of some of its adherents. John Paul II states that the Christian thinkers of the early centuries already strongly opposed certain ideas, in vogue then, which were characterised by their net devaluation of the body, in the name of a misinterpreted exaltation of the spirit. Based on biblical data, these thinkers strongly asserted a unitary vision of the human person.

Even pedagogist Giugni (1974), in defining the theoretical requirements of physical education, recognizes the value that Christianity has always ascribed to the body. Disdain of the body cannot fall in with essential and ‘genuine’ Christian thought. Disdain of the flesh is instead typical of the false ‘gnosis’, against which Christian apologists have fought energetically since the early centuries.

Militello argues that for many centuries, the majority of the religions followed in both Western and Eastern countries showed a certain hostility towards the body. Therefore, we can understand that it is a wrong interpretation of Christianity, and not Christianity itself that is hostile to the body. Still nowadays, in a way that has, as we have seen, little to no foundation, Christianity is rebuked for its aversion to the body. This opinion is justified only if referring to specific periods or thinkers, for whom the meaning of the body was devalued in relation to the soul. Fortunately today there is a strong belief that leads to a positive attitude towards the body, deemed the temple of divine love in the Christian faith (Militello La Rocca, 1999).

3. Sports and evangelical message

Is there a commonality of values between sports and evangelical message? The Christian message contained in the Gospels, and more in general in the *New Testament*, was certainly affected by the sports ‘cult’, rooted in Greek civilization. There are also those who assert that Christian asceticism itself might be a concept born within the sporting sphere, which was then reviewed later on by philosophy and by Christianity itself. By this we came to understand asceticism not only a form of ‘training’ aimed at attaining better performance, but mainly as the unfolding of attitudes which were identified as fitting to the human person: justice, strength, self-control, wisdom (Grün, 2005).

Sport and Christianity are two phenomena which have remote origins: the first was born in Ancient Greece (e.g., Angeli Bernardini, 1988; Di Donato, Teja, 1989), the second established itself within Jewish culture as a starting point and progressing from previous tradition. Both have influenced each other reciprocally in many ways through contact between the original cultures (see Freyne, 1989; Barbieri, 2003). Both of them have evolved in time until today when they reach the entire planet by characterizing themselves as two of the pillars of western culture. Today globalized extensively throughout the world.

Despite these preliminary remarks, we think that it is not possible to speak of sports ‘theology’. This is because the *New Testament* rarely mentions sports. And, when it does, it does not refer to this phenomenon according to the terms by which we view it nowadays. We will try to overcome this problem by considering the fundamental message transmitted by the *New Testament*, and, in view of this, we will try to analyse the role that sports may assume. We agree with Bonora (1987) in thinking that, in many cases, it is possible to infer from the Bible instruction for situations which are not specifically mentioned.

By analyzing these main points, and the values that characterise sport (Simon, 2000; Culbertson, 2008;

Hosta, 2008), we see that there may be what we could call a prolific reciprocity with Christian thought, and, more in general, with the spiritual dimension of man (see Parry *et al.*, 2007). Sport means the manifestation of values such as loyalty, solidarity, honesty, tenacity, altruism, peace, justice, strength, self-control, wisdom, generosity, equality, (see, in particular, Loland, 2002; McNamee, 2008; Isidori, 2009). Sport is a feast, an expression of the joy of living, a celebration of life as a gift (see Sandel, 2007), a privileged access route to attain a sense of one's limits, to become aware of human vulnerability and limitations (see McNamee, 2007). All these factors constitute the strong cultural, ethical and educational valence, which fosters true development and opportunities for the permanent growth of man. There is vital ethical point here that conscience does not let pass unnoticed: that of turning sports practice into a reality which services the whole person. It is the evangelic and at the same time rational principle: "*not man for sport, but sport for man*" (Tettamanzi, 2004).

It is also important to notice how St. Paul might consider sport in many occasions as a metaphor of Christian life (e.g., *1 Cor 9, 24-27*; *2 Tim 2,5*; *2 Tim 4,7-8*). Before him Philo of Alexandria, an author of great importance for the history of Christianity, said "*I and the athlete eat for different reasons: I eat only to live, the athlete eats also in order to rejuvenate and improve his performance*" (Leg. Alleg. I 98). This similarity between Christian values and sport ethics is studied later on by some Church Fathers. St. Clement considers life as a gymnasium: each event that comes in contact with the life of an individual, if lived according to Christ's principles, is able to inspire immense love in the heart of each person, a type of love that grows day by day, which is trained by the events, by concrete facts, by people that surround us, whom we meet and confront. Eusebius of Caesarea combines military and sporting metaphors to celebrate the struggle of the martyr (Hist. Eccl. V, Praef. 4). For Saint Basil the Great, the skills of the athlete, from a certain point of view, are the same skills that a Christian must have. For Theodoret of Cyrus, the body, thanks to which we obtained victory, will rise again as a very brave soldier, winning the battle of life. Lastly, John Chrysostom explains in a symbolic manner, the 'mysterious' meaning of the cross' victory. The training of the Christian takes shape in living each event of one's life according to Christ's principles, with the awareness that God 'leads' the life of each man through a project of love. The daily life of a Christian is made up of continuous 'fights'. The attitude of the Christian is characterised by an ongoing tension and willingness to love the other, even at risk of injuring himself, which will increase his faith more and more. It is a path that, similarly to training, step by step, consolidates a stronger basis, where victories will be ever more frequent. Finally, also the desert father John Cassian uses athletic metaphors when speaking about asceticism and Christian life (see *De Institutis Coenobiorum* and *Collationes*).

The above mentioned references show how Christian thought, as represented by the Church Fathers, has, since ancient times, understood the value of sport. All the similarities pointed out show the multiple affinities between sport and Christian life. We think that this is not only a simple 'acceptance' of sport, but a deeper understanding of its values. But even if this were not the case, it is sufficient to simply accept a phenomenon in order to exclude any sort of rejection or denial of it.

The similarity between Christian values and sports ethics – initiated by St. Paul and then reviewed by some Church Fathers – has also remained alive during the contemporary age in which sport, now a common practice, has, in view of the large number of athletes, enthusiasts and spectators, assumed enormous sections of the population. This is proven by the numerous arguments of recent Popes in this regard. Pius XII (1952 and 1955), in one of his speeches, talks about sports and Christian asceticism, considering it from a standpoint of reciprocity. Between sport and Christianity, there is more than a dry metaphorical similarity. The values of Christianity, if combined with the practice of sports, can actually increase awareness of what it is to be human.

Pope John XXIII picks up this thread (1959), which sees in sport the faculty of evoking and developing the deepest virtues in the person, and the thinking of Pope Paul VI continues (1975 and 1976), talking about cardinal virtues in a sporting context. But perhaps it is Pope John Paul II (1984 and 1991) – a true sports enthusiast and a genuine sportsman – who, more than anybody else, was able to give a systematic definition to sport, exalting its values under multiple aspects. Sport is the joy of living, play and celebration, and as such, must be evaluated and perhaps today redeemed from the technical and professional excesses by means of a recovery of its freedom, of its ability to establish friendships, to foster dialogue and open people up to one other. As an expression of the richness of being, it is much more valuable and precious than any possession, while the latter expresses what we own, the former expresses what we are, and there-

fore it is above the harsh laws of production and consumption, and of any other consideration of life which is purely of a utilitarian and hedonistic type.

Pope Benedict XVI in a speech of 2007 to the national Austrian ski team gave one of his few speeches in the field of sports. The main points of the speech highlight the value of sport in helping man perceive his abilities as talents and his life as gift of God. Sport may represent an opportunity to fully develop as an individual, provided that it does not lose its dignity, thus merely becoming a hankering after results. In order to talk about real sport, a series of values must be present: tenacity, a spirit of sacrifice, interior and exterior discipline, and again, a sense of justice, awareness of someone's limits and respect for others.

Pope Francis, on April 5, 2020, the day before International Sports Day (April 6 each year), in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, during the Palm Sunday Mass (exceptionally streamed on the Vatican website) and held in St. Peter's Basilica. The Pontiff, in his homily, also spoke about the world of sports in a very profound and incisive short address: *Tomorrow, April 6, 2021, marks the World Day of Sports for Peace and Development, called by the United Nations. At this time, so many events are suspended, but the best fruits of sports come out: resilience, team spirit, brotherhood, giving one's best. So, let's revive sports for peace and development.*

There is an element of continuity with previous ones in Francis' pontificate: the numerous speeches on the value of sport addressed to the Italian Sports Center (CSI). On such occasions, Pope Francis expresses utmost appreciation of sports considered as a instrument of promoting acceptance, health, employment, equal opportunities, environmental protection, the protection of childhood and adolescence, social cohesion and integration (Pope Francis, 2014).

There are also two extremely innovative elements in Francis' pontificate that demonstrate how the Catholic Church values sports as a "gymnasium of life": the birth of the Vatican sports federations and the drafting, publication and dissemination of the document *Giving the best of yourself*, a document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person, drafted by the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life—Vatican in June 1, 2018.

First, On January 10, 2019, the first sports association established and headquartered in Vatican City State was presented at the Holy See Press Office. The Secretariat of State has entrusted this new and special reality, affiliated with FIDAL and registered in the Registry of canonical juridical personalities of the Vatican City State, to the Pontifical Council for Culture, which has a Department dedicated precisely to "sport and culture". *Athletica Vaticana* officially participates in all athletics events, by virtue of the Bilateral Understanding signed between the Holy See and CONI: the signatures were affixed on September 11, 2018 by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, and Giovanni Malagò, President of CONI. *Athletica Vaticana* is affiliated with the Italian Athletics Federation precisely because of the Bilateral Agreement with CONI. The president of FIDAL Alfio Giomi said during that presentation: "We are particularly happy and proud that Italian Athletics is a participant and forerunner in this historic event for the sport. Which demonstrates, once again, the universality of Athletics. As Cardinal Ravasi said so well today, sport is the Esperanto of the world." The birth of Vatican Athletics constitutes the first federation that will be followed by the budding of many other Vatican sports entities.

Second, the document *Giving the best of yourself* attests to the bond between church and sports, which has been consolidated over time and attests to the relevance of sports for the church itself, being a practice that stimulates a healthy overcoming of oneself and one's selfishness fostering loyalty, respect and gratuitousness in interpersonal relationships. The document has good popularizing intentions but is objectionable with regard to the epistemological status of sports sciences (Scarpa, 2018). But these criticisms will be explored point by point elsewhere.

Among many others, the document takes up the initial example of the reciprocal influences between Hellenic culture and Jewish Christian culture in the *ascesis*, a practice shared but not invented by the Christians. *Ascesis* is a word coming from the world of Greek sport. The sportsman trains in order to achieve outstanding performances. The sportsman is the one who trains for exceptional performance, trying to always give his best, to "give the best of himself", in fact! From the sports world, the word moved to the sphere of philosophy. Philosophers trained in order to achieve inner freedom. Furthermore, in San Paulo, sport is considered as metaphor of Christian life. This parallelism between Christian values and sports ethics is afterwards spoken about again by some Fathers of the Church and it has remained alive

also during the Contemporary age, as it is possible to notice in the numerous *speeches* pronounced by Pope Francis and from the more recent Popes, quoted in *Giving the best of yourself*.

A line of circularity and fruitful reciprocity with Christian thinking appears by analyzing the foundations and the values which characterize sport. Values such as honesty, solidarity, loyalty, perseverance, altruism, peace, justice, fortitude, self-control, wisdom, etc, are expressed through sport. Sport is joy of life, play, fun. All the factors that constitute the strong cultural, ethical and educational valence, which materializes itself in creating development and permanent growth opportunities of man in the totality and truth of its values and its needs. Sport is expression of the richness of the human being, much more valid and appreciable than having, and therefore much above the severe production and consumption laws and every other life consideration that is purely utilitarian and hedonistic (Spencer, 2000).

There arises here among many arguments the question of whether Catholicism can contribute today to restoring the original epistemological status of sports sciences for a rediscovery of the most authentic sport (without doping, corruption, betting, lack of fair play, excess of technicality and economic investment, etc.) to become a fundamental resource for the education of new generations. We consider Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone's statement "*Believing in Sport*" (2020) unsupportable since, as Prof. Caffarra (1994) argues, sport does not constitute the ultimate goal of life but, sharing many ethical values with Catholicism, Christian thought itself can contribute to a continuous redefinition of the epistemological status of the sciences of sport so that it always remains authentic and genuine.

Some final pedagogical considerations

Today, we are increasingly witnessing phenomena where sports – especially high-level sports – seem to be losing touch with the values that should mark it out (Cfr. Walsh, Giulianotti, 2007). Reduced to a mere consumer product, to an advertising means capable of influencing the needs and wants of the masses and of the new generation, to a platform for extremes, turning it into a show where everything is permitted provided that it generates audience (e.g., doping, racism, corruption, economic scandal), sport has lost sight of its 'ontology' recognized in the phenomena which, on the contrary, are supposed to represent it (Carraro, 2004). The Christian perspective, that genuine sport share a multiplicity of values with, seems to offer a valid course for reaching the complete recognition as well as full assertion of sports essence. This is testified by the history of sports and of Christianity itself. A typical illustration is the revival of Italian sport – which occurred precisely thanks to Catholic movements – following the Fascist regime, which had emptied sport of its deepest values (Aledda, 1998).

With the unexpected Second Vatican Council as a result of which the Catholic sports body matures a progressive renewal in "purposes", "educational practices" in commitments to the point of later elaborating an educational sports itinerary. A new discourse between faith, sport and pastoral care is born - implicitly. Moreover, in the conciliar documents (*Lumen Gentium*) for the first time in the history of the Church, attention is paid to the figure of the laity, so the lay person finds notebooks of the Italian society of sports history its own role and dignity within the Church. We begin to talk about associations Christian-inspired sports, and of Christians engaged in sports animation. This set the stage for the transformation that led, in 1968, to the autonomy of the CSI from its mother organization, Catholic Action, and, a few years later (1971), favored the unification of this with its sister women's association, the *Fari*, with the consequent co-participation, of men and women, in the responsibilities of associational life. All signs, these, which can also be seen in the 1976 Bylaws (Cfr. Aledda, 1998).

The subsequent establishment of special offices dealing with sports within the Church and the School of Thought of the Italian Episcopal Conference sought to propose a new method of sports education that would "save sport", somehow one of the most genuine vital expressions of our society, a language known and appreciated by young people, an instrument of new apostolate and evangelization. However, there still remains, for the postwar and reconstruction period, room for further more extensive and systematic research.

To conclude, returning to the formative instances of this contribution, what appears certain is that it seems we can claim that Christianity values the human body (ATI, 2007) and it might be possible to identify a commonality and reciprocity of values between sports and Christian ethics (CEI, 1995). Genuine sport is on the same wavelength as the Christian message and by the same token, authentic sport shares

the majority of Christian values and its practical dimension allows it to clearly show the ‘playing field’ on which those values can be attained. Ultimately, sporting experience can be an avenue to religious insight (Hoffman, 1992). Sports can contribute to bring man to God. Sport represents one of the channels through which to enter into relationship with God. In sports, man can express all his beauty and carry out God’s creative work, bringing one’s own wonderful being into His image and likeness (Cfr. Spencer, 2000). One thing we can finally take for certain and established by the marriage of sports ethics and Christian life is that from this emerges and consolidates a pedagogical alliance that today needs to be placed at the center of anthropological reflection for the education of new generations.

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