

**THEOLOGY OF
SPORT**
*Object, Sources and
Method*

Tomás Emilio Bolaño Mercado

THEOLOGY OF SPORT:

Object, Sources and Method

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To Saint John Paul II
Athlete of God

Gratitude

I Thank my wife Rosamaría Robledo who has endured my long silences when I write these books. I Also thank Alessio Albertini (Italy), Alexandre Borges (Brasil), Greg Smith (USA), Stuart Weir (UK), Javier Zárata (Paraguay), Jim Penrice (USA), Jonathan Rúa (Colombia), Santiago Valencia (Colombia), Sergio Adarme (Colombia), and Susan Saint Sing (USA) who cooperated by answering the interview, and Alejandro Cifuentes who translated this book from Spanish.

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Prologue

“As a boy I played ball games, and that play slowed down the speed at which I learnt letters.... I was disobedient not because I had chosen higher things, but from love of sport.”

--St. Augustine

It doesn't seem to have slowed him down that much. Yet while he was one of the greatest philosophers and Christian theologians in history, St. Augustine may have missed the significance of athletics in the life of God's people, and the rich possibilities of finding God in our games as in any of our activities. In his *Confessions* he laments his childhood *abuse* of sports: “In competitive games I loved the pride of winning. I liked to tickle my ears with false stories which further titillated my desires.... Look with mercy on these follies, Lord, and deliver us who now call upon you.”

Any gift from God can be abused, as sports have been from time to time. But sometimes we mistakenly view the abuse as the norm, and lose sight of the beauty of the gift itself. Such can be the case with sports. They are sometimes considered an inconsequential element of our society; athletes who bring their faith to their games have been accused of trivializing religion by doing so.

But when we truly understand how limitless God's love for us is, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as an activity too "trivial" for God not to be interested and involved. God cares deeply about every aspect of our lives, and he wants to be included in our every activity. God can be found on an athletic field just as he can anywhere else--there is no place God can't be found. Why then can he be difficult to recognize in our "insignificant" moments?

Perhaps it is because we tend to downplay sports and recreation as merely a break from the more "important" business of life--the inconsequential opposite of our essential work. Yet Bart Giamatti, a former commissioner of Major League Baseball in the United States, once observed that leisure is, "in Christian terms, a moment of contemplation.... Contemplation is the result not of work but of an activity freely assumed whose goal is to so perfect the self that for a moment we see what lies beyond the self..." Recreation indeed means "re-creation," when God uses seemingly trivial activities to build us back into the body he created us to be. Sports provide us with a ripe opportunity to do so, and thus are an important arena for theology.

For centuries sports have been universally recognized as a means of religious expression. The Greeks celebrated the Olympics as a festival to honor their god Zeus. Ancient Egyptians employed ball and

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stick games in their religious ceremonies; the ball represented fertility, and ritual hitting, catching and throwing were believed to encourage spring rains. In fifteenth century England and France ball games were often played to celebrate religious holidays, especially Easter.

In the United States, the YMCA was formed using sports to lure youth to their Christian ministry, giving them a wholesome alternative to other pursuits. In 1901 a writer describing the YMCA's physical education programs proclaimed: "We are soldiers of Christ, strengthening our muscles, not against a foreign foe but against sin, within and without us."

Sports can and should play a central -not peripheral-role in Christian theology. Foundational to Christianity is that God took on a human body to redeem ours. His resurrection and ascension in a physical-spiritual union foreshadows our own. The health of both body and spirit affects the other. How we live in our earthly bodies will affect how we live in our heavenly bodies; sports, and the sacrifice and physical discipline they entail, can play a major role in this scheme.

This volume is an important contribution to this effort to bring the theology of sport to its rightful place—on the same stage as other theological disciplines. It is my hope, and the hope of all who love

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Jesus Christ and athletics, that this book will be a catalyst that will help advance this effort.

As Pope Benedict XVI has noted, “Sport is one of the human activities which is also waiting to be enlightened by God through Christ, so that the values it expresses may be purified and elevated at both the individual and the collective levels.” The Vatican Office of Church and Sport adds: “The world of sport is an important areopagus of modern times, awaiting apostles who are ready to boldly announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Let the games begin!

Jim Penrice

Director of Faith Formation a St. Mary's Catholic Church
in Spring Lake, Michigan, Unitates States

Abstract.

In the present book, the results obtained from an investigation of the theological concept of sport are reported; its sources, topics, methods and effects, as expressed by authors who have been interviewed, such as Alessio Albertini (Italy), Alexandre Borges (Brasil), Greg Smith (USA), Stuart Weir (UK), Javier Zárate (Paraguay), Jim Penrice (USA), Jonathan Rúa (Colombia), Santiago Valencia (Colombia), Sergio Adarme (Colombia), and Susan Saint Sing (USA), and those found in textbooks of authors who were not interviewed; such as Carlos Mazza (Italy), Dietmar Mieth (Germany), Eber Rojas (Spain), George Soëll⁺ (Germany), Gino Borgogno⁺ (Italy), Jose Moreno (Spain), Michel Kerrigan (USA), Nick Watson (UK), Patrick Kelly (USA), Roger Ward (USA), Rino Fisichella (Italy), Stanislaw Kowalczyk (Poland), and Taylor Smith(USA)

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Introduction

In 1974, the magazine *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, sponsored by the Spanish Olympic Committee, published an article of the German George Soëll (1972) entitled: *A Theology of sport?* (1974) There, the author demonstrated how the salvific-liberating actions of God are related to the set of physical and sporting activities, and additionally expressed that, until then, theology had not entertained or articulated systematically the act of sport as a sign of times. Since then, certain advances¹ in study have been raised by

¹ Among these developments, it is worth mentioning the publications by ADAME RODRIGUEZ, SERGIO, "Significado cultural y teológico del deporte". Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2004. BRAVO, NAVARRO. M. Teología moral del deporte, en GER VII, Rialp, Madrid 1984. COLEMAN, J.A. El deporte y las contradicciones en la sociedad, en "Concilium" 225, Cristiandad, Madrid 1989. CHRISTIAN. M., *L'esprit Chrétien dans le sport*. Paris: DDB. 1933. DUQUE, L. El valor humano y cristiano del deporte según el Magisterio Pontificio de Pío XII a Juan Pablo II. Roma 1997. HEINEMANN, K. Ética del deporte, en "Concilium" 225, Cristiandad, Madrid 1989. KUCHLER, W. Deporte, en Enciclopedia Teológica Sacramento Mundi II, Herder, Barcelona 1972. MOLTSMANN J. Sobre la libertad, la alegría y el juego. Salamanca: Sígueme, Salamanca 1972. PERICO G, Deporte, en Diccionario enciclopédico de teología moral, Paulinas 1986, 196-205. PIEPER J., El ocio y la vida intelectual, Rialp S.A., Madrid 1983. RAHNER K., Advertencias teológicas en torno al problema del tiempo libre, en Escritos de teología IV. Madrid: Taurus. 1961, 467-94. "Servitium" 40/ 1985, número monográfico sobre el Tiempo libre

theologians and pastoral ministers, which, although we have succeeded in promoting the concept of *Theology of Sport* in some sectors of academia and society, have not been able to build a consistent body of theory that serves as a reference for pastoral and educational practice.

Today, at least in this part which corresponds to the Latin American and Caribbean Church, we make use of Söell, formulating his question in the following terms: A theology of sport? With what is this new preoccupation concerned? Is it a branch of theology, or is it a practical application of theology?

The Interview

In early 2012, in a effort to build a definition of this new object of study, we began a study of the texts of some authors who have written about sports and Christian life, which could provide some clues to help decipher the concept of the *Theology of Sport*. The terms of definition found in the analysis of some of the texts of these authors were confronted with a written interview. The interviewees were: Alessio Albertini²

RYAN, T. Hacia una espiritualidad del deporte, "Concilium" 225, Cristiandad, Madrid, 1989.

² Father Alessio Albertini is Secretary of the Sports Committee of the Diocese of Milan (Italy). He has written several articles and books on sports and Christian life. Also Alessio is brother of Demetrio Albertini an soccer player in Milan Team and Italian National Football team.

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(Italy), Alexandre Borges³; (Brasil), Greg Smith⁴, (USA), Javier Zarate⁵, (Paraguay), Stuart Weir⁶ (UK), Jim. Penrice⁷, (USA), Jonathan Rua⁸, (Colombia), Santiago Valencia⁹, (Colombia), Sergio Adarme¹⁰, (Colombia), and Susan Saint Sing¹¹ (USA).

³ Frater Alexandre Borges is a brasilian theologian was also one of our guests who agreed to answer our interview. His answers were collated with his article "Sport and the Christian life"(Spanish) published in 2008 by VE Magazine of reflection and Christian witness. He is member of Sodalitium Christianae Vitae.

⁴ Gregory Stephen Smith has a Master's degree in Theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Alabama, USA and is Licensed Christian therapist. He is a minister of the Baptist Church. His response to our interview was also confronted in his book "Sports Theology (Playing Inside Out)."

⁵ Javier Zárate has a degree in Didactic from Asuncion Paraguay University and is a graduate in Theology at Evangelic University of Paraguay. Zarate work with MIDPY (Ministry Sport in Paraguay).

⁶ J. Stuart Weir, Executive Director of Verité Sport. He has more than 25 years dedicated to the evangelical mission in the sports field. His answers to our interview were contrasted with his book "What the Book Says About Sport". 2000. The Bible Reading Fellowship Peter's Way, Sandy Lane West Oxford OX4 6HG. ISBN 1 84101 148

⁷ Jim Penrice, our prologist and interviewee is a Catholic layman, author of ten books on Catholic faith, cooperates with Catholic online, and is a member of Catholic Athletes for Christ. He has published four short articles on his blog "Getting God in The Game: Living Faith Through Sports". Also, He is Director of faith Formation at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Spring Lake, Michigan, Unitates States.

⁸ Jonathan Rúa is an Colombian lay theologian who defined himself as "Human being".professor at the Fray Luís Amigó in Medellin city. His article "Budget for a theology of sport" (Spanish) has been contrasted with his answer of our interview

⁹ Santiago Valencia is a catholic lay professional water polo athlete, Bachelor of Education in religious studies, and a candidate for a Masters in Theology from the *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana*. His response

These were the questions:

Q1. How do you define the Theology of Sport?

Q2. According to you, in which branch of theology does a Theology of Sport belong? Dogmatic, spirituality, ministry, systematic, biblical, practice, etc.?

Q3. According to you, what are the sources (authority) for the study of a Theology of Sport? Scripture, patristic, church teachings, human experiences, etc.?

Q4. What would be the theological method of the Theology of Sport? Rational, inspirational, experimental, etc

to the interview is supported in his commentary "About the Theology of the Body," published in the journal *Cuestiones Teológicas* 39 (91). ISSN 0120-131X, in 2012.

¹⁰ Sergio Adarme is a Colombian catholic lay theologian, professor at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá City. His book "Theological and cultural significance of sport" (2004) pioneered this subject in South América.

¹¹ Susan Saint Sing (2004) is part of the U.S. World Cup boating team. She holds a Doctorate in History and Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. She is Catholic and practices Franciscan spirituality. She has published several books about her spiritual theology where she relates the sport through her own athletic and spiritual experience. Her book "Spirituality of Sport: Balancing Body + Soul. St Anthony Messenger Press. Cincinnati, 2004, and her response to the interview has been consulted for this project

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Q5. What are the topics and subtopics that the Theology of Sport would deal with? Body, spirituality, competence, etc.?

Q6. What practical effects is the Theology of Sport expected to produce? Performance, ethics, spirituality, ministry, glorification of God, etc.?