

CULTIVATING ATHLETIC SPIRITUALITY (Part 1)

By Art Canales

There are three passions in my life: (1) love for God, (2) love for my family, and (3) love for athletics and/or physical activity. The latter category is the focus of this essay. Ever since I can remember, I have always loved playing sports, being involved in physical activity, and working out at the gym. Being physically active or playing sports are part of our human disposition and our human physiology; however, there is also a connection between sports and spirituality. Albeit sports and spirituality does seem to be an oxymoron, in reality there is a strong connection between athletics and spirituality.

Christian spirituality at its very best is balanced and holistic and has characteristics of both secular and sacred. Becoming more spiritually attuned and developing a more meaningful spirituality is an arduous task, but certainly attainable for those who desire to become more spiritually attuned. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to *encourage* those who work directly with adolescents in athletic roles, particularly young adolescents (ages 11-14) and middle adolescents (ages 15-18), to develop and foster a sense of the sacred in their own lives in order to either share or model Christian spirituality to the young people they serve.

Back to the Basics

What is Christian spirituality? Christian spirituality is formed by the interpersonal relationships that a Christian forms within the community of faith and the daily routine of a lived expression that centers around Jesus the Christ, the fountain of all Christian spirituality, and the self-communication and self-transcending compassion and mercy of God. In simpler words, Christian spirituality is the practice of the Christian faith or living the actions that compose the Christian faith. When the great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1900-1980) was asked to respond to the question: "Why are you a Christian?" "Saint" Karl's (1992) reply was simple: "I would like to be a Christian. . . In the Christian view, one must in the end leave it to God to decide whether one really *is* – in theory and, above all, in practice – what one claims to be" (3). Rahner is simply suggesting that Christian spirituality is a process of becoming a Christian, a journey that will last a life time.

People are stimulated by the sacred in various ways and Christian spirituality ideally opens a person's mind and heart to experience God. The church has a responsibility to help foster a keener sense of spirituality and self-awareness of God through Jesus the Christ, but the ultimate burden of becoming more spiritually aware rests with each individual Christian, and in this case, Catholic coaches.

Okay – What about Coaching?

What does all this spiritual talk have to do with coaching? Everything. A coach is a mentor, a guide, counselor, and a servant leader. A Catholic coach is a catechist on the court or the ball field. When I was coaching wrestling at a Catholic high school in Miami, Florida, it was easy to adapt prayer into daily practices and wrestling matches and to provide young athletes with faith experiences. Sure Catholic schools provide an ambiance for cultivating athletic spirituality in adolescents, but I would strongly suggest that spirituality, like sportsmanship and leadership, flows from the coach to the athletes. If spirituality is a priority for a Catholic coach beyond attending Sunday Mass or praying before meals, then spirituality can become a team reality. A coach has a unique and privileged place in American society, and therefore, is influential (for good or for ill) in a young person's life.

Where to Start

If a person is trying to become holier then the best place to begin is with prayer. Prayer is *language of the heart*, and in its simplest form, prayer is human beings communicating with God, talking and listening, as well as discussing and discerning, and God communicating with human beings. Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) said it best: "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee O God." In other words, human beings cannot find true inner peace or settle down until the person finds God in one's own life. Human beings have a certain longing to be with their creator – God. Frankly, Christians pray because Jesus was a person of prayer and thus modeled prayer for the Christian community.

There is an ancient Christian injunction to "pray without ceasing" (First Thessalonians 5:16), although impossible to accomplish, it is meant to guide the Christian life in order that every action we do becomes a form of prayer. Therefore, my two cent advice to Catholic coaches is simple: pray always and in all ways! The quest for cultivating athletic spirituality in adolescent Catholics begins with influential adults. If we want spiritual youth then adults must model Christian spirituality.

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