

## Youth Sport as “Gymnastics of Body and Spirit”

**Fr. Patrick Kelly, SJ, PhD** (author and presenter)

Key words: *youth sport, spirituality, coaches, play, community*

*Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly, SJ is the first book that draws on resources from Catholic cultural and intellectual traditions to address problems and opportunities in contemporary youth sport. After a chapter which provides an overview of the history of Catholic engagement with play and sport, the remaining chapters are about how experiences of participation in youth sport can foster the integral development of the young person, and his or her search for meaning in life from a Christian perspective.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section contains chapters written by scholars from academic disciplines such as moral development, philosophy, psychology and theology. The second section contains chapters written by coaches and other practitioners who work closely with young people in sport on a daily basis. The primary audience for this book is youth coaches, physical education teachers, and athletic directors who work in Catholic school and parish settings.

The authors of this book give expression to three common themes. First, several authors insist on *the human and spiritual significance of play*. Patrick Kelly writes about how Catholics played games and sports throughout the medieval period on feast days and Sundays. As he shows, Thomas Aquinas regarded play as important for a virtuous life. For Thomas, as for the ancients, virtue had to do with moderation. This meant that a person should not be studying or working all the time. He or she should also take time for play and recreation. Indeed, for Thomas, *there can be sin in a lack of play*. The humanists of the Renaissance and the early Jesuits drew on this heritage when articulating the reasons for including time for play and sport as a part of the school day. Several of the authors in this book lament the loss of the play element in youth sport in our time. While they

also touch on other aspects of play, they point out that when youth sport is enjoyable and done for intrinsic reasons (rather than for a college scholarship, money or fame) it is related to the growth of the young person and his or her openness to transcendent values.

The second common theme is really more of a presupposition, which is that “grace perfects nature.” This well-known phrase of Thomas Aquinas is one of the most basic presuppositions in Catholic theology. From this perspective, “Healthy, sane personality development is the most fertile soil in which grace can take root and grow.” (Leo Rock, SJ) For this reason, this book has chapters that focus on how participation in youth sport can help to foster the moral, psychological, and social development of the young person. Traditionally, “healthy personality development” has been understood as related to the development of the virtues. In his chapter, Michael McNamee provides a rich description of how participation in youth sport can foster the development of the virtues. We have to start with an understanding of what it means to grow as a young person in the context of youth sport in order to understand how this is related to growth in the Christian life.

A third theme in this book is *community*. Because the Catholic tradition emphasizes community, the experiences that young people have playing on a team and being formed in communal values is an obvious starting point for reflection on the meaning of youth sport from a Christian perspective. In this book, high school coaches write about the way their players begin to understand themselves as part of something larger than themselves and grow in their ability to cooperate and work with others. Sherri Retif writes insightfully about the spiritual significance of such an experience for the girls on her basketball teams. Jim Yerkovich and Jim Naggi show how informed and skillful coaches can help their players understand the relationship between the experience of playing on a team and the experience of being a member of the Christian community.