



AUSTRALIAN
CATHOLIC BISHOPS
CONFERENCE

Open the Way to Christ

FOSTERING A PASTORAL
MINISTRY OF SPORT



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Australians have always been passionate about sport, with evidence of Aboriginal people being involved in traditional games well before European settlement.¹ According to recent government data, about 16 million adults and children participate in sport each year, and more than 90 percent of adults have an interest in sport.²

A global phenomenon, sport is embraced by the Catholic Church as a good and worthwhile human activity that reflects Jesus' words in John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." While the early Christians drew upon sport as a metaphor for the spiritual life,³ recent Popes have written extensively on sport.⁴ Pope Francis has highlighted the unique opportunity sport presents for an encounter with Jesus, stating: "Sports can open the way to Christ in those places or environments where, for different reasons, it is not possible to announce Him directly."⁵ This powerful opportunity of encounter is the focus of this statement.

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POPE FRANCIS

Throughout history there has been a connection between sport and religion. Many of the ancient Greek games were based upon religious beliefs and mythology, while ceremonies of the modern-day Olympics can be likened to liturgical events (for example, the opening and closing ceremonies). The connection between sport and faith in Australia has been more visible in recent times, with elite athletes seen praying on the field⁶ and others speaking openly about their faith.⁷ At the local level, many parents and guardians are generously giving their time and talents to volunteer at sporting clubs, and in doing so, are actively living out their faith and witnessing to the Gospel. Further, those who play sport can bear witness to their faith by exemplifying values such as fair play, teamwork, respect for others and sacrifice.

While sport has been celebrated by the Church as "a powerful instrument for the integral growth of the human person",⁸ it is important to note the reality of various challenges that can undermine the merits of sport. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's 2014-15 Social Justice Statement, *A Crown for Australia: Striving for the best in our sporting nation*, outlines some of these challenges, such as the 'win at all costs' mentality, the commodification of sport, and the exclusion of vulnerable groups.⁹ The document, which also explores the majesty and transformative power of sport, serves as an ideal foundation for this statement.

THE CHURCH AND SPORTS

The Church in Australia has had a long association with sport. For decades, church facilities have been used for sport,¹⁰ faith-based teams have taken part in local competitions and sporting associations have been run by churches.¹¹ Today, the Church maintains many connections with sport, particularly through education. However, sport and faith are often put at odds as the demands of sports scheduling makes young people and families choose between the practise of their faith or participation in sport.

The Church's perspective on sport has been presented in various papal documents. One of the earliest of these documents was a letter from Pope Pius XII to athletes competing in the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, in which he encouraged athletes to witness to the spiritual ideal of sport, "and thus, while ardently defending the colours of your homeland, be keen to serve the cause of God among your brothers".¹² As recent popes have met regularly with professional athletes from various teams and organisations, there are now many readily accessible Vatican letters, speeches, writings and teachings addressing the many parallels that exist between the Church and sport.¹³

For many Australians, sport will always be a secular endeavour. However, for many others sport can be seen through a theological or religious lens as a profound opportunity for its participants to express their full humanity by articulating and strengthening some fundamental aspects of human identity. Sport and religion each provide people with a strong sense of identity, providing a place of community, a sense of belonging and hope for the future. Like faith, sport can be transformational for the participant, spectator, volunteer and administrator, instilling and developing character and moral virtues. These can include humility (always accepting officials' decisions, winning without boasting and acknowledging defeat graciously), justice (playing fairly and in an ethical spirit) and fortitude (persevering even when victory seems unlikely).

SPORT FOR ALL

The Church and sport strive to invite all people to participation, valuing everyone's contribution regardless of age, gender, social status or ability.¹⁴ Indeed, there are several ways in which the Church and sport can learn from each other. Often, sport has been at the forefront of championing social issues¹⁵ and recognising the giftedness of all people, seen, for example, in the development of the Paralympics and the Special Olympics, and in the growing inclusion of women in sport. With an estimated 8,000 different sports now played globally,¹⁶ there are ample opportunities for individuals to find a sporting endeavour that uses their unique gifts and talents. Regardless of whether someone plays football, netball or lawn bowls, they will have similar opportunities for growth, virtue development and a connection with God through their sporting activities.

However, sport can fall short in respecting dignity, religious beliefs and practice, and inclusivity.¹⁷ Often, a 'win at all costs' mentality prevails, where athletes and coaches are seen as commodities whose value is measured only by performance. This is in stark contrast to the Church's constant assertion of the God-given dignity of every person in all circumstances.¹⁸ People of faith, whether they be athletes, coaches or spectators, can positively challenge the commodification of sports people by showing respect for the dignity of all and gratitude for their contributions, recognising and applauding their efforts no matter how successful they have been.

As the Church is made up of many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), sport is made possible by the efforts of many individuals, not just the athletes who compete. At the elite level, there are a myriad of roles within sport, from coaches and officials to administrators, medical staff and facility managers. In local sports, there are parents, supporters, and various volunteers, without whom many school teams or local clubs would cease to exist.

Given the enormous number and diversity of people involved in sport, its convergence with many social issues and its prominence in Australia, the Church has an ideal opportunity to renew its engagement in sport. Through the presence and service of local Catholics, the Church can enhance the sporting experience; and through relationship and enquiry it can open the way to Christ in a way that may not be possible otherwise.

GRACE ON THE SPORTING FIELD

Sport often arouses a range of strong feelings and emotions within those who are involved. Sometimes, for players, officials, parents or spectators, these emotions can spur on performance or evoke a sense of awe and wonder; at other times they can be expressed in aggressive or abusive behaviour. For people of faith there exists a great responsibility to act with grace and respect, both on and off the field. This means going beyond simply abiding by the laws of the game, which often make no comment about poor sportsmanship. Instead, we are called to demonstrate an ethical and charitable attitude towards all involved, always playing within the true 'spirit of the game'.

Before developing character, sport first reveals it. Competitors are called to rejoice in their gifts, to acknowledge their limitations and to recognise and applaud the skills of their opponents, rather than viewing them as an 'enemy'. Although there is joy in victory, defeat should also be accepted graciously; and there should be a spirit of camaraderie between opponents after the final whistle. For spectators, there is a need to gracefully accept all decisions made by coaches and officials. Sport teaches us that life is not always fair, but we are encouraged to pick ourselves up in a spirit of perseverance, to learn and to commit wholeheartedly to the next contest.



The sporting field is an opportunity to put Catholic Social Teachings¹⁹ into practice; that is, to consider how we can serve others and work towards building a level playing field for all. How might we offer a voice, a caring enquiry or a discreet action to assist those overlooked or excluded due to socio-economic circumstance, race, religion, or sexual orientation? What changes might we seek to initiate when the dignity of another is undermined? How might we foster efforts to enhance our club's or competition's contribution to the good of the wider community?

The potential for individual growth in virtue present in sport is especially important when considering junior sports and school competitions. Such settings provide an ideal platform to build lifelong virtues in children and young people, and to demonstrate that the goal of all human activity is to bring people closer to God. Pope Benedict XVI wrote that, for young people, sport can become a "school of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society".²⁰

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Sport also reflects the synodal model of the Church encouraged by Pope Francis. Through sharing our gifts in a way that glorifies God, while observing and listening to others, mutual enrichment is realised. By working, listening and growing together, and by recognising that each person has something to contribute, division can be overcome, wounds can be healed and a shared goal can be achieved. In fact, the importance of working together was recognised by the International Olympic Committee in 2021, when it adjusted its 140-year-old motto of ‘Faster, Higher Stronger’ to include the word ‘Together’.²¹

The sporting field is not a church, but both are places of encounter. As a fellow parishioner might become a genuine friend, so too a love of sport can offer opportunities for deeper relationships characterised by learning, prayer, and support in joy and sorrow.²²

A MISSION FIELD

In today’s Australian context, the sporting field is a place of mission, where the Church meets people on their home turf. Evangelisation in sport, as in all spheres of life, is invitational, where, through service and an action-based witness, Jesus can be revealed. Modelled on the example of Jesus, evangelisation “never proselytises or forces people to believe,”²³ but rather invites by witness.

There are numerous ways that people of faith can contribute their gifts and talents to sport in a way that witnesses to Gospel values. Each person should prayerfully discern the best way they can contribute, based on their own gifts. For many, particularly parents of children involved in sport, voluntary roles within their local clubs will be an opportunity to serve others, through coaching, keeping score, managing facilities, umpiring, or even contributing to ensuring the integrity of the sporting environment.²⁴ While volunteering in a sporting club may not provide any financial reward, those who witness to their faith through engaging in sport acquire great fulfilment and a sense of purpose.



Another significant opportunity exists within schools, where teachers, coaches and parents can combine their faith with sport in the various roles they fulfil. Such settings are powerful occasions to teach and accompany (walk with) young people in their relationship with Jesus, inspiring them to actively practise Christian virtues on and off the field, and helping them to develop an ongoing association of sport with faith. A simple means of integrating faith and sport within schools can be to pray at trainings and competitions.

A practical way of bringing faith to the sporting field is through sports chaplaincy. There is a rich history of individuals being involved in sport as chaplains in Australia, even prior to the role being titled as such.²⁵ Prior to chaplaincy becoming common in some contexts, team managers, coaches, trainers and members of religious congregations often filled a similar role by providing athletes with emotional and personal support, particularly those with whom they had built strong relationships.

Chaplains are characterised by a love of sport, a love of people, and a love of God. Their role in the sporting environment is pastoral, and often takes the form of being present and accompanying others. Many people of faith who have a passion for sport could be called to consider chaplaincy as a way to share those passions.²⁶

At the parish and diocesan level, it would be worthwhile considering the most suitable ways for communities to pray and support those involved in sports. One way could be to highlight significant sporting events and relevant feast days each year as occasions to pray for athletes and sporting officials. Further, parishes and communities can consider hosting sporting initiatives to engage with and connect young people with the Church. The National Centre for Evangelisation is developing a range of resources to assist parishes in this mission.

For those who are already serving in various sporting roles, this statement is an invitation to consider how your contribution to local sport is a witness to your Catholic faith. Indeed, the often-unpaid efforts of many to enable sport to occur are essential, in the words of St Pope John Paul II, to the “formation of a personality which considers sports not an end in itself but as a means to total and harmonious physical, moral, and social development”.²⁷

“[the] formation of a personality which considers sports not an end in itself but as a means to total and harmonious physical, moral, and social development.”

ST POPE JOHN PAUL II

A RICH HARVEST

St Irenaeus famously wrote: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”²⁸ Sport is a human activity that reflects the beauty, splendour and wonder of God’s creation. It will continue to attract people around the world because there is undoubtedly something inherently good about it. Crowds of people will continue to flock to major sporting events in Australia, from football Grand Finals to the 2032 Olympics in Brisbane, where athletes from around the world compete for the highest sporting prize – an Olympic gold medal. But while athletes and sports enthusiasts look forward to such momentous competitions, people of faith will remain committed to lifelong training in the “spiritual gymnasium”,²⁹ eagerly striving for the “imperishable crown” of eternal life (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Throughout its long association with sport, the Church has always maintained hope in a renewed focus on sport’s true dignity, value and purpose. With so many involved in sport around the country, there is a wonderful opportunity for people of faith to contribute to this renewal by exemplifying the virtues sport can foster, and in doing so, witnessing to the Gospel and opening the way to Christ. We encourage individuals, families, parishes, and dioceses to prayerfully consider how they can best engage in this vibrant mission field.

Further information can be found at: nce.catholic.org.au/sport



Together we pray.

Loving God,

You have given us the gift of sport as a means to draw closer to you.

May we use our gifts and talents in ways that bring you glory,

By demonstrating humility, charity, and gratitude.

May we strive to bring Jesus into the rich harvest of sport,

And in doing so, gently allow all people to encounter your love and mercy.

Amen.

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NOTES

¹ Edwards, Ken. 2009. "Traditional Games of a Timeless Land: Play Cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities." *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2: 32–43.

² Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. 2024. "About sport in Australia." <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/sport/about-sport-in-australia>

³ See the letters of St Paul, particularly 1 Corinthians 9:24–27.

⁴ Msgr Carlo Mazza, former head of the office for the ministry of Leisure, Tourism, and Sport of the Italian Bishops Conference, states that the Pontiffs of the 20th century gave over 200 discourses on sport, more than half of which were given by St Pope John Paul II. See Muller, N. and C. Schäfer. 2020. *The Pastoral Messages (Homilies, Angelus Messages, Speeches, Letters) of Pope John Paul II That Refer To Sport (1978–2005)*: 2.

https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Documenti/sport/eng/magisterium/John%20Paul%20II/John%20Paul%20II_Pastoral%20Messages%20on%20sport.pdf

⁵ Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. 2018. "Giving the best of yourself: A document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person."

<https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Documenti/sport/dare-il-meglio-di-se/060118%20ING%20-%20Dare%20il%20meglio%20di%20s%20C%20A9%20-%20web.pdf>

⁶ Masters, Roy. 2018. "In rugby league, the team that prays together stays together." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 31, 2018.

<https://www.smh.com.au/sport/nrl/in-rugby-league-the-team-that-prays-together-stays-together-20180331-p4z774.html>

⁷ See the *Against the Grain* podcast: <https://linktr.ee/againstthegrainpod>

⁸ Pope Francis. 2013. *Address to members of the European Olympic Committee*.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/november/documents/papa-francesco_20131123_delegati-comitati-olimpici-europei.html

⁹ Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. 2014. *A Crown for Australia: Striving for the Best in Our Sporting Nation*. Canberra: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. <https://www.catholic.au/s/article/Social-Justice-Statement-2014-15>

¹⁰ Reid, Stephen. 2014. "Churches and sport: Churches connecting with local communities through sport." *Pointers* 24, no. 2 (June): 1–4.

¹¹ For example, the Church Cricket Competition in South Australia started in 1906. See Foote, M. 2006. "100 Up! Celebrating a century of church cricket in South Australia 1906–2006." Adelaide: Churches and Community Cricket Association.

¹² Pius XII. 1956. "Message from His Holiness Pius XII to the Catholic Athletes Participating in the Melbourne Olympic Games." https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/fr/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_p-xii_mes_19561024_atleti-olimpiadi.html

¹³ See <https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/sezione-laici/formazione/sport/i-papi-e-lo-sport.html> where Papal speeches and messages on sport since 1968 can be found.

¹⁴ The Church has noted this in *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, which states that: "Sports activity... helps to preserve equilibrium of spirit even in the community, and to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races," (n. 61).

¹⁵ See Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. 2014. *A Crown for Australia: Striving for the Best in Our Sporting Nation*. Canberra: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference: 4–8. <https://www.catholic.au/s/article/Social-Justice-Statement-2014-15>

¹⁶ Lipoński, Wojciech. 2003. *World Sports Encyclopedia*. MBI: St Paul, MN.

¹⁷ See Archbishop Anthony Fisher's comments in Wesselinoff, Adam. 2022. "Essendon affair is about all of us." *The Catholic Weekly*, October 14, 2022. <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/essendon-affair-is-about-all-of-us/>

¹⁸ Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith. 2024. *Declaration "Dignitas Infinita" on human dignity*, n. 1. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dff_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html

¹⁹ Catholic Social Services Australia. 2024. *Catholic Social Teaching*. <https://cssa.org.au/resources/catholic-social-teaching>

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI. 2009. Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the World Swimming Championships Held in Rome Organised by the International Swimming Federation (FINA). <https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Documenti/sport/eng/magisterium/BenedictXVI/TO%20PARTICIPANTS%20IN%20THE%20WORLD%20SWIMMING%20CHAMPIONSHIPS%202009.pdf>

²¹ The original Olympic motto was composed by a Catholic priest in 1881, Fr Henri Didon OP. See International Olympic Committee, 2024. *The Olympic symbol and other elements of the Olympic identity*. <https://olympics.com/ioc/faq/olympic-symbol-and-identity/what-is-the-olympic-motto>

²² See *Gaudium et Spes*. 1965: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ," n. 1.

²³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. 2023. *Evangelisation: Encounter, Discipleship, Mission*, n. 14. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b9wxmLRNqzJCyPiaqLxtb4cxKiYdZM8f/view>

²⁴ See Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. 2023. *Integrity in Our Common Mission: National Code of Conduct for those exercising pastoral ministry in the dioceses of the Catholic Church in Australia*. <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/acbcwebsite/Articles/Documents/ACBC/Integrity%20in%20our%20Common%20Mission%20FINAL%20print%20marks.pdf>

²⁵ Cahill, Desmond. 2017. "Chaplaincy and Specialist Spiritual Care in Multi-faith Victoria: A Preliminary Overview," Melbourne, Victoria: Religions for Peace Australia.

²⁶ For those interested in learning more about chaplaincy, *Sports Chaplaincy Australia* (www.sportschaplaincy.com.au) provides training and support for individuals with a passion for sports and faith to become chaplains.

²⁷ Muller, N. and C. Schäfer. 2020. *The Pastoral Messages (Homilies, Angelus Messages, Speeches, Letters) of Pope John Paul II That Refer To Sport (1978–2005)*, 23.

https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Documenti/sport/eng/magisterium/John%20Paul%20II/John%20Paul%20II_Pastoral%20Messages%20on%20sport.pdf

²⁸ Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Book 4, Chapter 20, s. 7.

²⁹ A term taken from Paul VI. 1964. Address to cyclists of Giro d'Italia, as noted in Muller, N. and C. Schäfer. 2020. *The Pastoral Messages (Homilies, Angelus Messages, Speeches, Letters) of Pope John Paul II That Refer To Sport (1978–2005)*, 3.

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