

# Soccer vs Sunday Mass: How youth sports are undermining religion—and hurting our kids



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“Man, that sounds nice,” he said. I was talking about nothing, how my kids did nothing. Talking to another dad around a campfire in Oklahoma as a pack of third-grade girls loudly roamed through the woods scaring bears as far away as Arkansas, it was an instance of honesty, staring at the fire. A moment of truth, it was a confession of exhaustion, each admitting to the other how he really felt.

Talking about what our kids did—the sports they were in, the teams they were on, all the games they played, I told him about our family’s annual off-season, how during the winter our kids get bored, fight over the remote and spend sometimes entire Saturdays doing nothing at all. You’d think my kid had been accepted to Notre Dame or Harvard the way I bragged about it. That’s what sounded nice, this fellow dad admitted with a laugh, and a little resignation too—doing nothing.

Not that there is any virtue in what our family is doing, or rather, not doing. For us, family off-season is accidental. Our oldest kid tried basketball but didn't like it. No one in our family is destined for the N.B.A., much less a middle school roster. Also, dragging a Catholic-sized family (with the added anomaly of me being a formerly Episcopal and now Roman Catholic priest) through one crowded gym and then another quickly became an exhausting chore for my wife (who most weekends had to lead these expeditions alone). Better to declare an off-season and cut our losses, maybe take a karate lesson or two, go on a playdate or visit grandparents. That became our "doing nothing"—doing something other than going from one game to another and then two more games after that. That's what I was bragging about, what sounded nice.

We parents are exhausted. Quietly, to one another, we may admit that we're tired and worried about the rush of it all, but the social pressure to appear on top of our parenting game, doing what's best for our kids, silences most of us. Yet families are exhausted; one sees it on the faces of parents and children hurrying from one game and practice to the next. Standing on the sidelines one morning at a soccer game for my then-kindergartener, the contest barely half over, I saw the dad next to me suddenly pull his daughter out of the game. "Get your things, darling. We've got to run," he said sweetly.

He had told the coach before the game they had to leave early. "She's got another game in 30 minutes," he said to me as he began to jog off the field. His daughter was on two other soccer teams and had two other games that day—a kindergartener. I saw that same devoted father later that day. He was tired; they were all very tired, he told me. He couldn't say if it was right or wrong, good or bad. That's just what their Saturdays and Sundays looked like.

Youth sports have changed in recent decades and not for the better. David King, former athletic director at Eastern Mennonite University, describes the change he has witnessed over his 35-year career. In *Overplayed*, a book he co-authored with Margot Starbuck, he writes:

I've become increasingly concerned about the toll that current youth sports culture is taking on children, young people, and families. Families' dollars and time are stretched and stressed. Children are suffering overuse injuries and burning out at younger and younger ages. They're being asked to perform beyond appropriate developmental stages. They're failing to develop some of the intrinsic values that adults assume sports will teach them. Parents are damaging their relationships with their kids and with each other. And far too often, as we struggle to navigate this new terrain, we're driven not by love but by fear.

Fewer kids are playing sports today, and those who do play are often not served well. The negative outcomes are several, including “elite” pay-to-play exclusion and the normalizing of single sport specialization, leading to an increased number of injuries due to year-round play. But aside from social consequences and bodily harm, and issues of inequality and injury—which are all part of the brave new world of youth sports—there are also damaging spiritual effects.

Worrying about the possible spiritual dangers of youth sports goes back a long way. Some of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council raised such concerns. They feared sports could tempt too many people away from the practice of religion.

It was not an unfounded fear. As the authors of *On the Eighth Day: A Catholic Theology of Sport* write, one could argue that “sport has gradually displaced traditional religion on a functional level.” They continue, “Today, many spend their Sundays with sport rather than in church. Sport gives people the type of social connections, traditions, identity, and even meaning that is usually found in religion. To put it simply, the pews are empty, but the bleachers are full.”

In their likeness to religion, however, sports often seem to offer falsely what only authentic religion truly offers, and that is the genuine experience of transcendence. In that sense, sports today, and youth sports especially, are functionally another religion proclaiming, as St. Paul would put it, “a different gospel” (Gal 1:6). As a longtime sports chaplain, Bernhard Maier, put it, sports, although meaningful in significant ways, also “can distract us from more elevated things.”

That is, if we judge “sports” to be a religion, then it’s a bad religion, shallow at best. For all that sports can offer is limited or counterfeit transcendence, something that either doesn’t last or is false. This is why, for instance, John Thompson, the legendary former Georgetown basketball coach, kept on display in his office a deflated basketball, to remind his players not to pin everything—their sense of personal value, their understanding of meaning—on a game they will one day stop playing.

For basketball, like any sport, is not equipped to provide truly enduring meaning and value. Those things are more reliably and lastingly found in family, relationships, community and religion. Which is why the religious rhetoric of sports is ultimately problematic, because at a certain point some may think that it’s more than a metaphor. An ESPN ad for college football, for

instance, calling it the “Greatest Story Ever Played,” is clearly just clever or silly advertising, undoubtedly harmless. But what about when Tom Brady and Michael Strahan helped found a media company selling the idea that “to feel the power of sport—and to truly believe—is to experience religion”?

What happens when we earnestly pretend that sports is a religion, or earnestly treat it like a religion, putting sports in people’s lives in place of faith? The answer is that the religion of sports eventually falls flat. The promised transcendence perceived and desired in superstars like Tom Brady turns out to be merely advertising, a peddled idolatry meant only to form consumers instead of believers and saints. Eventually the emptiness of the religion of sports is revealed, that all of it is destined to fade along with all the other fleeting glories of the world rather than endure as a world without end. One is eventually left with nothing.

This Christians should find troubling. It’s reminiscent of Screwtape’s words to Wormwood: “To get the man’s soul and give him nothing in return—that is what really gladdens our Father’s heart.” It’s a demonic goal to leave a person with nothing, entirely and eternally empty. But trading religion for sports is always a subtle exchange, barely noticeable. At first, it looks like time management and team commitment. But soon what is sacrificed are the habits and virtues necessary to the practice of genuine religion. For that’s a significant part of what religion is; from the Latin word *religare*, meaning “bind together,” religion is composed of those habits and practices that bind us to God.

The discipline of religion, manifest in routines and rhythms like regular Sunday worship, is replaced by practices, games and tournaments. Instead of going to Mass on Sunday, a family goes to the game, more than likely several games. And thus, in short order and as simple as that, sports functionally becomes a religion rivaling genuine religion, eventually replacing it, no matter how much one plies one’s spirituality and random religious observance with sentimentality—or “lip service,” as Jesus called it (Mt 15:8).

It’s a harsh assessment. At first blush, it seems overblown to suggest that when sports functionally replace religion, religion dies. But that’s exactly what the high school coach Albert Zander sees. “Nothing is sacred anymore, and Sunday has become a tournament day,” he told the authors of *Overplayed*. “I have observed long enough to see that the kid grows up and has no faith of their own because the message was communicated to them through the family’s actions that sports are more important than their church, faith, or God.”

It's not just about church attendance, missing Sunday Mass. As David King writes, it's about "the cumulative effect and decisions about sports and church involvements that communicate to children what we value and what we hope they will value." That matters because what we value is our relationship with Jesus Christ and the rest he gives to those who believe and live in him (Mt 11:28). Here we come to the heart of the matter: the fundamental spiritual danger posed by today's culture of youth sports. Here we touch the spiritual wound of youth sports. Those moments in which we're meant to encounter Christ are replaced by moments only at best fleetingly transcendent.

But what should Christian parents do? What should the church do? Youth sports is as prominent in the Catholic Church, in its schools and parochial leagues, as anywhere else. Yet too many bishops, too many pastors, too many school administrators and too many Catholic parents simply have not thought about it, have not been critical enough of the assumptions we make about the goodness of youth sports.

How should Catholics and Catholic institutions think about youth sports today?

### **Pure Play**

The Romans went about it all wrong. If they wanted to wipe Christians off the face of the earth, they didn't need to arrest them or try them, persecute or kill them. Better something else. Better to have made a spectacle for them than of them. Perhaps if the ancients weren't so bloodthirsty, they would have understood better the power of distraction over destruction. Would early Christianity have survived the cultural allure and power of today's youth sports? I'm not sure.

My assessment of the world of youth sports and other similar competitive activities, as they are widely experienced today, is harsh. Given especially that so many see nothing wrong, that I would warn of the spiritual dangers of these activities, speak of spiritual disaster, compare it to ancient Rome's persecution of Christians—I understand well that I may be easily dismissed or strongly opposed.

There are, however, plenty of parents alert to these dangers, many as concerned as I am. To speak personally from my oddly intertwined vocation as both father and priest, what worries me most is the spiritual damage I see done to our overscheduled children as they are scheduled away from both the dinner table and the altar, from meaningful relationships with family members

and friends and, most of all, from a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. What worries me are the wounds I see on the souls of so many children and parents, wounds of an overachieving unhappiness, a spiritually dead but material flourishing.

Does that mean Christians shouldn't have anything to do with youth sports, or that Christian parents should keep their kids from activities like dance and piano? Should we revive old Puritan hatreds, declaring all of it immoral and irreligious? Not at all. On the contrary, Christians should continue to embrace these activities. In fact, more children should participate in sports. Part of the problem today, as we've seen, is that too few children play any sport at all. Christians should want to reverse that trend. The problem is not that Christians participate in youth sports and other activities, the problem is *how*.

Christians have long been involved in sports. One could argue that many of the sports we play and watch today wouldn't exist without Christianity, or at least not without the Christians who invented them. Basketball, for example, was a Christian sport, at least as the Presbyterian minister, James Naismith, first imagined it. However one interprets Paul's use of athletic imagery in the New Testament (it does not imply, for instance, that Paul was familiar with sports or approved of them), Christians have nonetheless positively engaged in sports for a very long time. In the Middle Ages, when the churchyard was the only common land available, villagers often played their games there. Worship, rest and play were the natural elements of an ordinary Sunday. Games, athletics, even dancing have been part of Jesuit curricula since the 17th century.

The founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, himself a product of Jesuit education, got the Olympics' motto—*citius, altius, fortius*—from his Dominican friend, a priest, Henri Didon. Belgian missionaries carried their love of soccer to Africa. In Italy, in the first decades of the 20th century, the church encouraged Catholic youth sports as a way to fight secularism and fascism. Pope Pius XII considered youth sports vitally important to the church's mission. The church's care for the whole person, soul and body, as well as its concern for the perfection of virtue, meant that the church was bound to care about the world of sports. Examples of Christian engagement with sports abound.

How then should Christians think about youth sports? St. John Paul II said we should think about sports with an "attitude of redemption." "Giving the Best of Yourself," the 2018 document summarizing the church's understanding of sports as it relates to its mission, published by the Vatican's Dicastery for the

Laity, Family and Life, leads with just such an attitude of redemption. The church must raise its voice “in the service of sport,” because sport cannot interpret itself. What the church offers is a “vision of sport that is grounded in a Christian understanding of the human person and just society.” That is, the church serves to remind Christians how sports fit within the larger game of life. When rooted in respect for human dignity and committed to justice and open to human destiny, sports serve what the church has always prized, the “integral development” of each person.

Sports matter to the church because sports matter to the whole person, the soul as well as the body. In the church’s mind, at least, Christian parents, Catholic educators and clergy should be agents of redemption in the world of sports. But today that means, as Clark Power, the founder of Play Like a Champion, which promotes equity in youth sports, puts it, we Christians should “reclaim our prophetic tradition” in the world of sports. Again, because sport cannot interpret itself; because sports, in fact, often fall victim to other interpretations, “ideological or even amoral and inhuman.” Which is precisely the crisis. The fight is for the humanity and soul of sports for the sake of the souls and humanity of our children. That may sound dramatic; after all, we’re talking about youth sports. But it does in fact matter as much as that. What’s at stake isn’t just a game.

We must realize that the redemption of sports begins with the redemption of play. Again, as the sociologist Hilary Levey Friedman said, pointing to the rigid hierarchies of youth sports, full-time paid coaches and year-round seasons, too many young athletes today are “young professionals.” According to the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, for generations “casual play” was the “foundational experience” of America’s children. “But the era of the sandlot or unstructured play, of making up games and playing with friends for hours on end, is largely gone.” And so, says the Aspen Institute, we need to “reintroduce free play where possible.” For them, this is a moral ought “given the science.”

It’s science that also resonates with Christian thought, for when we begin to think about play theologically, we soon find ourselves thinking about the more primeval realities of our faith—things like contemplation, creation and God. Play is woven into just these sacred things. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, famously likened play to contemplation: 1) because, as the contemplation of wisdom is enjoyable, so is play; and 2) because play “has no purpose beyond itself.” This latter feature of pure play—its purposelessness—is what brings it so near the sacred, St. Thomas thought, for it replicates the play of divine wisdom.

St. Thomas in this brief text points to the Book of Proverbs: “Then I was beside him as his craftsman, and I was his delight day by day, playing before him all the while” (Pr 8:30). The analogy St. Thomas makes, using this text, is that as divine wisdom seeks nothing else but to play eternally before God, contemplation seeks nothing else in just the same way, yearning as well only for wisdom-like pleasure.

Beyond this spiritual theology of contemplation, this passage also says something about the theology of creation. That playful wisdom is also a “craftsman” suggests that creation (the universe, the world, you, me) is also in some sense play, that we are the created objects of God’s play. To put it philosophically, creation is not necessary; it needn’t have happened at all. Like a game, there is no purpose for which the world was made, no purpose beyond creation itself. God could just as well have not created anything, but instead he created the heavens and the earth and called it good, much like a child at play rejoices in his or her own unnecessary little world. But although unnecessary in this philosophical and playful sense, creation is still meaningful, again, as a game is meaningful with its world of rules and goals and ways to win and lose.

### **The Loss of Spiritual Rest**

At the end of *Homo Ludens*, his classic study of play and culture, Johan Huizinga observed that as Western civilization grew more complex, pure play began to disappear. “All Europe donned the boiler-suit” at the start of the Industrial Revolution, he wrote, and hasn’t changed clothes since. Play, slowly dislocated from its primeval place within culture, was eventually divorced from things like ritual and festival, war and law—all features of human culture long formed by play—as scientific and technological advances began to reshape worldviews and cultural imagination. Play no longer seemed to have any role in the serious running of the world.

Utility now governed play, no longer the primeval, mystical pleasures of contemplation. Hence the rise of modern sports, with their organization and regimentation, where for a time the “play element” found refuge but which ultimately were transformed into something they weren’t previously—instrumentalized, segregated activities that one now had to make sense of as a means to an end. Play could no longer simply be fun or ritually serious, shaping culture inadvertently as it had in the past. Play now had to be for something, like training laborers or giving children a good shot at the best college. Play now served work, becoming itself a kind of work. Here began the



developmental myth of youth sports and eventually their professionalization. Huizinga called it instead the profanation of play, a cultural wound.

It's also a spiritual wound. We have allowed sports to become something they weren't meant to be, an instrument to achieve lesser ends. Youth sports no longer belong to leisure, no longer to contemplation, no longer to the freeing joy of play for play's sake. Rather, play belongs to work, to the rat race, to social reproduction. Which has made a thing like youth sports not only a contributor to our uniquely modern, hurried anxiety but also to the loss of the spiritual rest Christ offers (Mt 11:28).

If this then is the wound of youth sports, how is it healed? To redeem youth sports, we must recover play. Christians should grasp the deeper reasons for this, that this is a moral imperative not just "given the science" but also given the soul. Such redemption is twofold, involving first a challenge to the individual conscience and then a challenge to the "social structures" shaping youth sports today. Individually, it is a matter of vision and courage. Seeing what is at stake—the rest God gives in Christ, the good of our souls—the Christian should find the strength to stand up against a culture deceptively benign and profoundly at odds with happiness and holiness.

But what about challenging "social structures"? Here the church and organizations such as the Aspen Institute's Sports and Society Program agree. Both seek to increase participation and inclusion in youth sports. The Aspen Institute, for instance, urges coaches to avoid cutting kids from rosters, and to add teams instead. It also calls on communities to support afterschool programs for kids, for churches and other faith communities to help create opportunities and eliminate the barriers to play that many children face, poorer children especially. It insists that organizations and teams stop using words like "elite" to describe children's sports: "No child qualifies as elite before growing into their body." This is in line with church teaching since Pope Pius XII.

The church wants everybody to play. The dicastery document "Giving the Best of Yourself," calls for sports in seminaries, for example; it even calls for parishes to promote and organize sports not only for young parishioners but the elderly too. The Aspen Institute recommends that organizations and other institutions embrace a model of youth sports that doesn't just prioritize performance, or discovering the best athletes destined for college or professional sports, but a model that offers each child the opportunity to become "physically literate by age 12."

This fits with the church's understanding of sports as something "aimed at the integral formation of the person," seeing sports truly in terms of education. Youth sports are not the minor leagues of anything. They are games children play because play belongs to what it means to be human, what it means to grow and flourish in body and soul. Here the church and the best of the world of sports agree, and it is what Christian leaders and organizations should be doing, working toward a more inclusive and more human vision of youth sports. And it's a vision that necessarily includes Sunday, that understands, cherishes and serves what Sunday is.

Here the church stands alone to offer wisdom as ancient and holy as the Sabbath itself. Speaking to athletes in the early 1950s, Pope Pius XII put it bluntly: "Do you wish to act rightly in gymnastics and sport? Then keep the Commandments." He insisted that athletes "keep the Lord's day holy, since sport does not excuse us from the discharge of our religious duties." Pope Benedict XVI later talked about protecting and developing a "culture of Sunday."

What he meant is that Christians should "preserve" Sunday as a day that frees us to remember that "our life is more a gift than an achievement." He saw Sunday as a day we needed so as to resist the dehumanizing tyranny of totalizing work, the degradation of the rat race. The way St. John Paul II put it is that the life of sports and the spiritual and religious life, each with its obligations and discipline, should not be opposed but rather "harmonized." One should not replace or eliminate the other; sports should not become a religion, nor should religion seek to do away with sports. Rather, what such harmonization looks like is a community of families sharing together a disciplined rhythm of worship and play, a rhythm ultimately tying the community closer together.

To be clear, this is not merely an appeal for Sunday attendance. Talking about this to a friend of mine, a monk and teacher, his response was simply, "Go to Mass!" Now practically, that is solid Catholic advice, but there is more to it than that, something deeper. What we've been talking about all along is the human and spiritual good of play and the human and spiritual tragedy that comes with ruined play. The reason Sunday matters in all this, the reason the church insists Mass be part of each Catholic family's Sunday, no matter how many teams you're on or games or tournaments you have scheduled, is that liturgy is itself a form of play. Like contemplation, liturgy is a kind of playing before God. As to any game belongs its own world—its rules and boundaries—so too for the liturgy. This was Romano Guardini's insight in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: The

genius of the liturgy is that “it simply creates an entire spiritual world in which the soul can live according to the requirements of its nature.” Liturgy is play. It constructs for the worshiper another world, a fleetingly sacramental other world.

Liturgy plays a sacramental world into brief existence, all for the sake of rest, so that God may grant his people the rest they need as they make their way to heaven. Here we see better the whole, the church’s deeper vision for things like youth sports, play and worship. The church believes that all of it approximates the rest God has always offered his people, but only when it is lived in harmony. Youth sports should serve the human person, helping each child to become someone who knows, loves and worships God because that’s what it means to be human, to flourish and to find holiness. Play and worship are those gifts of creation that not only offer the pleasantness of rest but also a foretaste of heavenly rest. Play and worship mystically mirror each other. That’s why the church doesn’t let families off the hook for Sunday Mass. The church does not forbid games on Sunday, but the church does insist upon Sunday Mass.

It should all fit together: youth sports, play and worship. Conflict is only a matter of illusion and sin. But what practically does this harmony look like? What should Christian parents and Christian organizations do or stop doing? Perhaps we should learn from our medieval ancestors who played lazily in the fields outside parish churches after Mass each Sunday or who gathered on the church porch to tell jokes and play games. Perhaps bishops and priests should play games together at Christmas and Easter as they used to do. Maybe the church should make more space for free play. Perhaps parishes could make room for casual gatherings on occasional Sunday afternoons for no other purpose than to play, talk, laugh; to offer a space for friends and families to do nothing other than while away the time. Maybe we should also change the way we think about organized sports. Maybe Catholic schools and Catholic sports leagues should lead the way. Maybe putting a young child on an “elite” competitive travel lacrosse team is not a good idea. Maybe a child playing three soccer games in one day is a bad idea. We need to talk about this candidly, charitably. Catholic schools and parishes, parents, coaches, and clergy should talk about it and then rethink their sports programs.

What the renewal of youth sports looks like is uncertain, but it will certainly lead to youth sports that look far different than they do today. Because as humans and children of God, we need that rest. That’s why the church insists Christian parents are still called to be Christians as they parent their children through the fun but sometimes dangerous world of youth sports. Because God

made them parents precisely so that they might share his divine rest with their children. Because that is a Christian parent's most important job.