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Catholics and Sport in a Global Context

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1. From Play to Virtue

The Social, Moral, and Religious Dimensions of Youth Sport

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Abstract

Drawing on Brown's exegetical exploration of Wisdom's paideia in the Book of Wisdom, we show how sports understood as play are an invaluable means of moral as well as spiritual education. Playing sports, we argue, fosters children's development of the theological and cardinal virtues by leading them to practice the golden rule and grasp what it means to be a member of a team. In adulthood, sports experienced as play free us from the burdens of the world of work. The joy they bring is rooted in a sense of freedom, self-transcendence, and new possibilities for the human community.

Keywords: child development, moral education, play, virtues, wisdom

Introduction

I was his delight day by day,
Playing before him every moment,
playing in his inhabited world,
delighting in Adam's offspring (Proverbs 8:30-32; Brown: 28-29).

Johan Huizinga concludes his classic study of play and culture, *Homo Ludens*, by citing the above passage from Proverbs (212). In the account of creation in this passage, Wisdom, a primal agent in God's creation, appears as a young girl playing at God's side and "delighting" in the children of Adam. Brown comments that God creates and educates humankind, not through a sage invested with divine authority nor through the labor of a master artisan, but through a child's play. As Brown puts it, "Playing in creating is an indispensable part of Wisdom's curriculum, her education, her *paideia*" (34).

Following Brown's exegesis and an experientially-based approach to theological reflection (e.g., Berger; Ogden; Tracy), we maintain that play discloses God's loving presence and our call to become a "beloved community" (King). Moreover, drawing on cognitive developmental psychology from Baldwin and Piaget to the present, we argue that play is the primary activity through which we are educated as persons in and for community destined to play together in God's presence for all eternity. Proverbs captures this dual sense of play's intrinsic as well as educational value in its depiction of Wisdom as a playing child, who teaches as she interacts with God and with the human community. Wisdom's teaching, as outlined in the prologue to Proverbs, is focused on radical social transformation. Proverbs was written for a city in crisis. Wisdom offers a demoralized and directionless society a path to moral identity and community through the principles of righteousness, justice, and equity (Brown).

Wisdom's pedagogy is one of invitation, engagement, and play. Brown describes the method as beginning in and leading to "wonder," which is how he interprets the word "fear" in Proverbs 1:7 – "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." "Fear" in our everyday usage refers to our emotional response to a perceived threat, which in turn leads us to fight or flee. In contrast, the biblical expression "fear of the Lord" connotes a complex experience of God as one who attracts while evoking surprise, mystery, and disequilibrium. Brown calls this experience "wonder": "In wonder, fascination overcomes fear, desire overcomes dread" (21).

Our goal in this paper is to present a theological as well as social-psychological view of youth sports as educational play that fosters moral development and community-building. As Kelly argues, play is much more than a break from the tedium and stress of work for the purpose of returning to work refreshed and reinvigorated. Nor is play simply a way of letting off steam or releasing energy for the sake of focusing on serious matters. Play, as we present it, is fundamentally involved in the construction of our ways of knowing and interpreting our social world. Play from both a theological and social-psychological perspective is an activity of continuous "creation and re-creation" leading to both personal and social flourishing.

We define sports as play, an autotelic activity engaged in for its own sake (*ludere causi ludendendi*). As physically competitive games, sports are a subspecies of play. Yet, once we move from sports as an abstract ideal to the real world, we find that sports serve multiple social functions (Coakley). For example, at the professional and collegiate level (football and

basketball) sports are an industry and a part of the entertainment business. Most children play organized youth sport for the sheer fun of playing and leave youth sports when it ceases to be fun (Visek et al.). Their parents and coaches typically value organized sport as providing other benefits for their children, such as a safe supervised after-school activity, a regular way to get physical exercise, and a means of character development. For many parents with economic resources, youth sports represents an investment in their children's future either as a means of acquiring the social skills and work ethic requisite for success in any occupation or as a way of gaining access to college scholarships and professional sports careers (Hyman). Finally, Coakley notes that their children's achievements in youth sport have become a means for parents to demonstrate their "moral worth" as parents. Parents, seeking to provide their children with every opportunity they can, compete with other parents to provide their children the very best training resources that money can buy.

Play and Work

The most obvious way of understanding the nature of play is to contrast it with work, which we understand to be an activity which is engaged in for some instrumental purpose. By contrast, Huizinga points out that play is done for its own sake. We sometimes think of play as spontaneous activity, not directed toward any goal or regulated by any rules. But "playing around" is not the same as playing a game. Playing a game is a purposeful organized activity with carefully designed rules and strategies. Playing a game entails stepping into a complex social structure or world with shared norms, values, and traditions.

In his magisterial treatise on sports, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*, Giamatti describes sports as a "transformative" experience, which changes the nature of one's relationships and one's self: "Sport is an autotelic activity, if you will, transformative of *negotium* to *otium*, tedium to freedom (in Aristotle's terms war to peace) because it is a medium for self-transformation" (38). Giamatti does not rigidly separate work from play: "The issue is not a dualistic opposition between work and play. It is a progression from one to the other, from what is necessary to what is desirable, from the utilitarian to the liberal or free; from what . . . dignifies (work) to that which perfects (leisure)" (28). Work need not be reduced to "servile labor." It can, depending on the nature of tasks to be performed and the freedom to direct one's activities, exhibit features of play. Similarly, the *agon* or competitive struggle involved in sport can and usually does demand features of what we call work. As anyone who has played a sport knows, sports requires the acquisition of the stamina and skills through practice and discipline. Sport is physically and mentally demanding, and the mastery demanded of true sports participants can only be acquired through effort over time.

What makes sport ultimately play and not work is that sport's work is freely chosen for the sake of mastery or playing better. In examining peak experiences in sports, which they describe as "flow," Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi found that athletes' most joyful sports experiences are in a psychological state of "flow" or of "being in the zone." Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as a "state in which people are so involved in activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at a great cost for the sheer joy of doing it" (4). Athletes in the zone are performing at their very best, yet they often describe their experience as "effortless." Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi point out that the flow state requires the prior acquisition of refined skills and full concentration.

Paradoxically, the discipline and hard work that is a part of the conditioning and skill acquisition is a necessary pre-condition for flow, which itself feels free, effortless, and automatic.

In describing the demands of training and athletic performance, Giamatti does not use the word “work” but describes the athlete as engaged in “making the self over . . . and over again” (38). Sports demand full attention and a quest for mastery in order to perform at our very best. When Giamatti refers to work, he is referring to that part of our lives that we experience as a chore and necessity: “Work is the burden we assume, not the one we choose” (19). Work, in his view, is other-regulated and obligatory activity.

In a culture thoroughly devoted to the “work ethic” (Weber), human worth and dignity is to be earned and measured by one’s productivity. To be idle is to be regarded as useless and without value. Within this culture, leisure appears to be wasting time – and time is money. Work, which is necessary to “earn a living,” can become living itself. As Weber pointed out, the “work ethic” inverted the relationship between work and leisure. Instead of working in order to “live,” one lives in order to work. Within this system, one’s “life” ends when one stops working.

In contrast, a proper perspective on play affirms that one’s life far transcends what one produces and that one’s worth is inherent in one’s personhood and cannot be earned. While we are at play, we experience time in a different way. Huizinga describes play as taking place in a “magic circle,” a “self-enclosed, spatio-temporal world” (10). This is most evident in sports like basketball, which are bounded by a “game clock” that is utterly removed from ordinary time. Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi report that play in a flow state can also alter the perception of time, so that it feels as though it is “slowing down” or “speeding up” (29).

There is another sense in which play appears to transcend ordinary time altogether. Novak writes that sports take place in a “realm” in which time is “transmuted into eternity” (225). Berger makes a similar point by associating play with childhood. In Berger’s view, play not only defies death but “brings about a beatific reiteration of childhood. When adults play with genuine joy, they momentarily regain the deathlessness of childhood” (70). Berger is careful to say only that play evokes an experience of the deathlessness of childhood.

Karl Rahner, however, goes much further in developing his notion of original childhood, which is an enduring dimension of the person in relationship to the mystery of God: “We do not move away from childhood in any definitive sense, but rather move towards the eternity of this childhood, to its definitive and enduring validity in God’s sight” (27). Rahner’s notion of the original child does not contradict the trajectory of human development from infancy into adulthood. Rather, it calls attention to children’s primordial sense of God’s presence and grace from the very beginning their lives (Hinsdale). Rahner argues that trust, openness, and courage constitute the essence of original childhood. Paradoxically, an awareness of the abiding state of original childhood becomes possible only in mature adulthood when we can become aware of the full meaning of childhood in relationship to God. Rahner notes that original childhood is an enduring “state in which we are open to expect the unexpected, . . . a state which endows us with the power still to be able to play, to recognize that the powers presiding over existence are greater than our own designs, and to submit to their control as our deepest good” (42).

To be clear, play only points to a realm beyond time, suffering, and death. Its transcendence over finitude and death is incomplete and temporary. The game is over when the buzzer sounds, the runner crosses the finish line, the last batter strikes out. Play is only a small portion of human life, most of which is consumed by weal and woe. Yet, from the standpoint of Christian faith, play discloses what work cannot, that human nature and destiny is bound up in, but not limited to, the finite. Novak states that “participation in sports is a foretaste of the eschaton” (224). Like Giamatti, he regards play as superior to work. But he goes further than Giamatti by suggesting that play points not to a “paradise lost” but to a “paradise regained,” the eschatological promise of God’s kingdom.

Leisure, Education, and Sport

Both Novak and Giamatti see sport as not only an expression of religious awareness but also as a way of cultivating human excellence at the communal as well as the individual level. Giamatti links education to sport, noting that the English word “school” is derived from the Greek word *scholē* meaning leisure. Play areas and school have the common characteristic of being places reserved for the free activity, physical as well as mental, of human beings. Huizinga describes play as a “stepping out of ‘real life’ into a temporary sphere of activity” (8). This stepping out can occur in a purely mental space as we see in the musings of the scholar or fanciful flights of the poet or, as Huizinga illustrates, the pretend games of children. Yet this stepping out typically takes place in designated physical spaces, like ball fields, playgrounds, and classrooms.

Both the Greeks and the Romans thought of formal education as a leisure activity involving the practice of communicative and quantitative arts undertaken by a love of wisdom (philosophy) and later the love of God (theology). The arts, which we call the liberal arts, were and still are understood as ways of making a mind, analogous to the ways in which one might produce a statue or any work of art (Ballard). The arts of mind-making are called liberal arts because they have always been seen as essential to being a free person. In this context, the purpose of the school has been to reserve a space for the development of autonomy, truth, and beauty for their own sake.

In his eloquent and revolutionary treatise, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois makes a powerful case that education must detach itself from the prevailing social structures of servility that demean and enslave. He argued for a revival of the liberal arts that prepared people, regardless of race and class, for a life of freedom and the “Quest of goodness, Beauty, and Truth” (73). Criticizing the American obsession with wealth and its consequent educational emphasis on “breadwinning and the consequent Deification of Bread,” Du Bois proposed a revival of liberal arts education: “not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of life which meat nourishes” (74).

We can still see vestiges of the liberal arts model in elementary schools, which were once called “grammar schools,” and in high school and college liberal arts programs, which value learning for its own sake and not as a means of vocational preparation. The liberal arts are in the final analysis leisure arts, in which the free play of the intellect is given the opportunity to focus and expand, to differentiate and integrate, and to conserve and revise. Ideally, the schools and sports belong to leisure. At their best, they create “magic circles” of physical and

mental play in which children are given the freedom without everyday external constraints that inhibit and constrict their imagination and creative drive.

Sports as Moral Education

Having established that play, understood broadly as leisure, is fundamental to education, we now turn to Piaget's seminal developmental research on how play influences children's social and moral development. In order to appreciate the fundamental role that Piaget gives to play in the development of children's socio-moral cognition, it is important to understand what he calls his "genetic epistemology." Piaget (1970) describes knowing as an adaptation to the environment, which consists of the interrelated processes of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the process in children (and adults as well) in which information from the external world is "modified in such a way that it can become incorporated into the cognitive structures of the subject." Accommodation is the process in which those structures of the child are modified to "fit" the external world. The processes of assimilation and accommodation represent two poles of knowing, which function together in all cognitive activity. In describing the development of children's play from infancy into the school years, Piaget categorizes play as primarily involving the pole of assimilation and imitation as primarily involving the pole of accommodation.

Piaget and Inhelder divide the development of children's play into a sequence of three categories: 1) "Exercise play" which appears in infancy when the child will repeat an acquired skill (for example causing a ball to roll) for the sheer pleasure of the experience; 2) "Symbolic play," which appears in toddlerhood when a child will pretend an object, like a box, is something else, for example a house or a boat; and 3) "Games with rules," which appears about the time a child goes to elementary school. Play becomes social at the stage of symbolic play when children use their imaginations to transform not only physical objects, like boxes, into houses, but social objects, like themselves and their playmates, into superheroes, doctors, and police officers. By taking on different roles, such as mommy, daddy, and teacher, children take into account that social objects, unlike physical ones, are persons with subjective experiences like their own. Cognitive developmentalists, such as Piaget, Kohlberg, and Selman describe social development as a process of moving beyond egocentric ways of thinking to take into account the perspectives of others. Taking the role of others helps children develop a sense of themselves and others. They also develop the competence to become effective social agents building relationships with others and eventually become committed and loyal members of teams, churches, and their civic society.

Role-taking is essential for children to participate in structured competitive games, like tag and chutes and ladders, which require the observance of rules and turn-taking. Games demand a new level of coordinated role-taking and fairness. They are fun only if everyone understands the rules and commits to playing by them. Playing games encourages children to take the perspective of their playmates and to balance their self-interest with that of others. Children learn how to compete by being able to balance their own desire to win with realization that others want to win as well. Games are especially conducive to children's development because they bring cooperation to children's relationships and because they are under children's control. Although they learn to regulate their play by following rules, they

eventually come to understand that the rules of their games are social constructions, which they can change through negotiation with their peers.

Influenced by Kant's moral philosophy, Piaget (1965) believed that children's understanding of and respect for rules was at the center of their moral development. He observed that children originally experience rules as imposed on them from on high by adult authorities. Yet when children play games among their peers, they slowly develop a "consciousness of rules" and a corresponding competence to apply and change the rules according to overarching principles of fair play and mutual enjoyment. Piaget, therefore, conducted his classic study of children's moral judgment by focusing on children's games, specifically marbles and hopscotch, which he described as "the most admirable social institutions" and as constituting a "jurisprudence of [their] own" (1965: 13). Piaget asked how toddlers without any understanding of the rules of any formal game could by the beginning of adolescence not only master very complicated sets of rules taught to them by older siblings and friends but could also alter those rules and pass them on to the next generation of players. Taking on the role of a participant observer, Piaget investigated children's game-playing by acting not as an adult authority but as a peer or "elder collaborator." His inquiry led him to distinguish a sequence of four stages of rule-governed play: 1) ritualized idiosyncratic "motor" play; 2) egocentric collective play; 3) "incipient" cooperative play; 4) and democratically directed play (1965: 27).

Piaget also found that these stages express differences in the way children conceive of rules and experience their duty to respect the rules. At the first stage, toddlers simply try to replicate features of games that fascinate them. For example, my (Power's) two year-old granddaughter asked me to go out and play soccer with her. She insisted that we bring a whistle as well an inflated ball (the size did not matter) with us, and proceeded to play by running around in circles kicking the ball while asking me to blow the whistle every few minutes. At the second stage, children begin to grasp that games have shared goals (for example, kicking the ball into the net) and shared obligatory rules (everyone uses their feet to advance the ball but not their hands). Yet children play egocentrically, that is, they "parallel play" with each child playing with her or his own world. Children at this stage see no reason why everyone cannot win at the same time nor do they see any reason why they should cooperate with each other. This explains why children just beginning to play soccer with other children all swarm around the ball oblivious to their coaches shouting at them to spread out.

At the third stage, children try to obey the rules of the game and strategies dictated by their coaches, but do so blindly or heteronomously. They feel obliged to follow rules that they do not understand. Piaget found that children at this stage regard the rules as sacred and absolute, but nonetheless they routinely violate the rules because they are still playing egocentrically. For example, determined to score a goal, a child may grab the ball with her hands and proceed to kick it into the goal. It is only at the final stage that children understand the game as a genuinely cooperative activity based upon mutually agreed upon rules that all should uphold.

Piaget observed that children's understanding of and commitment to following agreed upon rules made their enjoyment of games possible. He noted that "mere competition is not what constitutes the affective motive-power of the game" nor is demonstrating superior force

or skill (1965: 42). Rather, the enjoyment of the game depends upon playing within a framework of “common rules.” Winning takes on its meaning within the context of participating in a cooperatively constructed activity with socially established rules of fair play and standards of excellence. Winning a game is very different from conquering enemies and seizing their possessions. Winning is the momentary achievement of a socially defined and evaluated excellence. In games played for their own sake, the winners win nothing more than the esteem of their competitors, which is traditionally demonstrated in expressions of congratulation at the end of a game or a season.

Cognitive developmental psychologists following Piaget, such as Kohlberg and Selman, have elaborated in considerable detail the stages in which children develop from egocentrism to taking the perspectives of others and coordinating those perspectives with one’s own. Role-taking is at the heart of moral development within the cognitive developmental framework. Playing sports, which are competitive games, requires that children develop the cognitive competence to take the perspective of others in order to outwit their opponents and, in the case of team sports, to coordinate their role with those of their teammates in order to play effectively as a unit.

Although he was far less interested in how children play than in how they develop morally, Piaget saw play as an ideal setting to develop the competencies necessary for just social interaction. Piaget rejected the relativistic view that morality reflects the cultural norms and values of different societies. He argued that morality is rooted in universal principles of equality and mutuality and emerges out of a rational pursuit of truth in the social world. In his view, morality’s prescriptive force is anchored in its logic: “Logic is the morality of thought, just as morality is the logic of action” (1965: 398). In calling attention to the logic of moral norms, Piaget recognizes that morality involves “sympathetic tendencies” and “affective reactions,” which he calls the “raw material” of moral action. The role of moral intelligence and what we call “wisdom” is to direct those “tendencies” and “reactions” from egocentric to cooperative patterns of action reflecting reciprocity and mutuality.

Piaget studied children’s games because he wanted to observe children’s natural capacity to govern their relationships on their own. He found that when left to play on their own, children developed not only an appreciation for the function of rules but also became “a sovereign and a legislator in the democracy [of children playing the game]” (1965: 71). He recognized that his research had radical implications for moral education. He concluded from his studies of children’s games and from other inquiries into children’s moral reasoning that “adult authority . . . is not in itself sufficient to create a sense of justice” (1965: 319).

Rather, he argued that children could develop socially and morally only under the condition of cooperation: “The sense of justice . . . requires nothing more for its development than the mutual respect and solidarity of the children themselves” (1965: 198). Noting that adult-directed activities require nothing more of children than to conform to the dictates of authority, Piaget turned to children’s play as the ideal context for the development of moral autonomy. Dismissing the idea that the morality required in play is different from the morality required in real life, Piaget affirmed the seriousness of play, which demands commitment and sacrifice. Play, not submission to external authority, is necessary for the development of moral autonomy.

The Place of the Virtues in Moral Education

From the perspective of virtue theory, Piaget's description of the children's socio-moral development focuses primarily on the development of two of the cardinal virtues: prudence and justice. In the tradition, the cardinal virtues are the four "pivotal" virtues for leading a moral life. As is clear from Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas' analyses, these virtues are interdependent and essential for living a virtuous life. Prudence and justice have a primacy in the scheme by accentuating the necessary but not sufficient role that reason (prudence) and right relationships (justice) have in directing the moral life. Prudence is a translation of the Greek word *phronesis*. We generally think of prudence as being cautious, using commonsense, and acting in one's enlightened self-interest. According to Aristotle, however, *phronesis* is best understood as the intellectual virtue that judges what is good for the self, for others, and for society (the common good). For our purposes, *phronesis* is best translated as practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is the intellectual virtue that directs and sets the standard for the practice of all of the other virtues. Because of this, *The Catholic Catechism* refers to practical wisdom as the "charioteer" of the other virtues (1806). The second cardinal virtue, justice, concerns the relationships of individuals to each other and to society as a whole. As we have seen, taking the perspective of others is essential for playing competitive games, which demand a sense of justice and willingness to abide by socially constructed rules.

Piaget's analysis of games as a window into children's socio-moral development was limited to the games of marbles and hopscotch, which involved competition among individuals. He did not study team sports, which involve a level of cognitive complexity beyond individual competition. In their study of the influence of group memberships in adolescent development, Power, Seroczynski, Morrissey, and Roney found that the experience of being on a team fostered a sense of moral responsibility for others on the team and the team as a whole. Drawing on Durkheim and previous research on the just community approach to moral education (Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg), they argued that sports teams provide many young adolescents with their first experience of a group as a social whole, irreducible to the sum of its individual parts. Such experience has considerable import for children's moral and civic development. Valuing one's team as a team is an essential step in cultivating a sense of duty to the group and a willingness to make personal sacrifices for benefit of the team as a whole. The familiar refrain "there is no I in team" is a moral appeal to subordinate one's personal good to the common good. It need not and should not be understood as an absolute command to put the welfare of the group before the self. Athletes have a right to their physical and psychological integrity. There are moral limits to what can be asked of them. On the other hand, sports teams provide young people with highly formative experiences of working with others toward a common goal and accepting roles within a team that enable the team as a whole to be successful. Participating in a group in which one cares for others and feels cared for develops loyalty (Royce), which is a virtue only insofar as it is rooted in justice.

The experience of play has wider implications for moral and character development informed by practical wisdom. As John Paul II noted, sports develop all of the cardinal virtues: "While playing sports, Christians also find help in developing the cardinal virtues – fortitude, temperance, prudence and justice." It is easiest to see how competitive sports, which involve

struggle (*agon*) and endurance, develop fortitude and temperance. Fortitude or courage literally means strength and is the virtue related to doing what is right and good in spite of the obstacles in the way. Fortitude encompasses a range of virtues related to effort, grit, confidence (with humility), and perseverance. It is exemplified by the courage of the soldier or martyr willing to face death in defense of a higher good. As the theologian Paul Tillich argued in his classic *The Courage to Be*, living a full and flourishing human life demands overcoming the anxieties that arise when presented with risk and the possibility of loss. Sports provide a safe but demanding environment for acquiring habits of making sacrifices, taking risks for a greater good, and persevering in the face of disappointment and failure.

Temperance is the virtue of maintaining inward balance and harmony. Temperance involves self-discipline (*ascesis*) and sacrifice. As we noted earlier, athletes must train to acquire the skills and stamina needed to compete. Temperance also involves keeping one's thirst for victory in the proper perspective. Yes, one must play to win, but for winning to be meaningful, it must be achieved while playing fairly and respectfully.

In addition to fostering the cardinal virtues, our earlier discussion of the religious dimension of play indicates that participation in sports engages the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Traditionally, the theological virtues are distinguished from cardinal or "human" virtues in two ways. First, according to Aquinas, the theological virtues are thought of as "infused" directly by God rather than acquired through education. Second, the theological virtues have God as opposed to the finite social world as their object. O'Meara argues that rather than drawing a sharp distinction between the infused theological virtues and the acquired cardinal virtues, we should focus on the transformation of human nature through God's grace, which is the source of all virtue. The theological virtues describe the transcendent outlook and dispositions that are the conditions for the possibility of practicing the cardinal virtues. For example, through faith, hope, and love, we experience God's transforming power in our present relationships with others and trust in the final coming of the kingdom of God.

Although the theological virtues are known explicitly through revelation, they can be experienced tacitly within human play, which provides a "foretaste of the eschaton" (Novak). Sports, in our view, provide an education in the theological virtues, insofar as they communicate the goodness of God, who made us and all creation to play with and for each other and God. Play teaches us to have faith in unseen, providential powers that shape our lives, to maintain hope against all that discourages us, and to love one another unconditionally. From a theological perspective, sports disclose new possibilities for human cooperation and flourishing. Sports also affirm that happiness is not to be earned through work but is a gift of God to be enjoyed through the full exercise of our humanity.

The role that sports can play in children's social and moral education depends on the extent to which the experience of playing is genuinely under children's control. If Piaget were to study children's sports today, he would have trouble finding children playing sports on their own, like pickup basketball or backyard wiffleball. Today most children play sports under adult supervision. For sports or any game to qualify as play, the participants have to be in control of their actions and the rules. Yet, Coakley remarks that "the culture of childhood play," understood as involving "creativity, expressiveness, joy, and 'ownership'" has "nearly disappeared" (85). Youth sports today are increasingly driven by controlling coaches who take

the fun out of sports by emphasizing only winning and conformity to their demands. Conditions of constraint take away not only from the enjoyment of sports, which involve strategic social cooperation in combination with physical skills, but also from their educational value, which requires cognitive engagement and agency.

The Play Like a Champion Today Approach: Coaching as a Ministry

The first author, Power, founded the Play Like a Champion Today sports education program in response to the loss of a play culture in organized youth sports, which has led to high numbers of children dropping out or declining to participate at all (Project Play). Instead of encouraging children to have fun playing and to develop themselves as athletes and people, sports organizations have all too often focused on winning and advancing athletes perceived to be elite to the next level. Limiting children's playing time in order to keep the best athletes in the game has become commonplace. The Play Like a Champion program is built on two basic premises: that all children have a right to play and that upholding that right by creating a welcoming and inclusive sports culture is a generational responsibility. Play Like a Champion works in partnership with youth sports organizations across the country to provide clinics for coaches and parents. These clinics develop the three-fold message of the Play Like a Champion Today mantra. First, that sports are play and should be organized as such; second, that sports should help all young athletes to become champions by developing themselves morally and spiritually as well as athletically; and third, that sports are rooted in a *Kairos* mentality that frees us from binds us to the past or concerns about the future to be fully open to and engaged in the present (Power).

In order to establish an alternative youth sports culture, Play Like a Champion teaches youth sport administrators and coaches to see themselves as ministers to children. We chose the role of minister for several reasons. First, the word ministry comes from the Latin *ministerium*, meaning service. The primary role of the coach on any level from t-ball to the major leagues is not to win but to serve their players. When children are just beginning a sport, coaches have a responsibility along with other adults and older children for initiating them into rules, rituals, and lore of the game as well as helping them to master basic skills and strategies needed to play the game. Yet, as we have emphasized in our discussion of play and moral development, coaches must encourage and respect the fact that for sports to be play, children must be in control. Coaches can only minister to children by making sure that children experience a sense of ownership of their experience. The second reason for choosing to call coaches ministers is to point to the religious dimension to the coach's role. As we have emphasized throughout our description of play, coaches serve children by helping them to enter into Wisdom's "playground" where they can experience and respond to God's love and grace in a special way. Gaillardetz describes this dimension of coaches' role as that of "mystagogue" helping children "to see that they are already living lives imbued by the Holy Mystery of God" (176-77). They can do this directly in times of prayer or reflection or indirectly by encouraging children to play joyfully and gratefully as champions. Finally, the role of ministry also includes a strong moral component. Coaches should readily embrace their roles as character educators and life mentors. They should be committed to helping children to grow in the moral and theological virtues.

Sports, Solidarity, and Service

Civic and educational leaders have long believed that engagement in sports and in other outside of school activities played a vital role in children's social and civic education (Pruter; Gems, Borish, and Pfister). In fact, *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* published in 1918, which framed the core structures of today's comprehensive high school, assigned "athletic activities" and the extracurriculum more generally the responsibility of "unifying" students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds: "The school is the one agency that can be controlled definitely and consciously by our democracy for the purpose of unifying people" (Commission: 22-23). *The Cardinal Principles* go much further than comparable educational policy-setting documents today in acknowledging the importance of preparing students for leisure and democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society. Moreover, *The Cardinal Principles* give the extracurriculum a significant role in fostering social solidarity and developing students as whole persons. In fact, *The Cardinal Principles* treat the individual self and democratic society as developing in harmony: "Consequently, education in a democracy, both within and without the school, should develop within the individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he will find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends" (Commission: 11).

Sadly, although the shell of the comprehensive high school still exists, the *Cardinal Principles'* explicit concern for building social solidarity and fostering democratic education through the extra curriculum has largely been lost. Nevertheless, the extracurriculum continues to play a significant but underappreciated role in students' socio-moral education at all grade levels. A growing body of research shows that consistent participation in sports and other extracurricular activities leads to higher grades and lower truancy and dropout rates, less delinquency, greater resiliency, and more civic participation. (e.g., Barber, Eccles, and Stone; Power and Sheehan; Putnam). In his extensive review of the literature and his own research on factors that influence attainment in school and social mobility, Putnam argues that extracurricular activities, such as sports, succeed in developing students' character more so than the formal curriculum.

In spite of the demonstrated potential of youth sports to promote children's welfare and development, cuts in public spending and the fragmentation of social networks have shifted the burden of financing youth sport participation from the general public to individual families (Coakley). This new "pay to play" model for financing youth sports coupled with rising income inequality has led to a steep decline in sports participation among the poor and the loss of sports programs in low income urban communities (Coakley; Cohen et al.; Derose; National Women's Law Center; Project Play; Putnam).

What does this growing inequality of sports participation mean for children in low income communities, who already lack the advantages of their better off peers? Should we be concerned about providing youth sports to children in need of better health care, food security, and schools? Several years ago the first author and a colleague were asked to travel to a remote village in Uganda to support a fledging community sponsored youth sports program as part of the Play Like a Champion Today youth sports education program. Given the cost of the flight and the time involved, we wondered whether the children would be served if we stayed home and donated the money we would have spent on our travel to refurbish the village

school, which had a leaky roof and no books or blackboards, and to provide food and medical assistance for the HIV infected children in the community. After some deliberation, the phrase “People do not live by bread alone” (Matthew 4:4) came to mind. In that context, it appeared to us that the nourishment that children receive by playing a sport like soccer is a form of spiritual nourishment and is as important for their welfare and development as their material nourishment. We resolved our dilemma by doing both and by affirming that care for children should not be limited to meeting their material needs.

An informed understanding of the multiple beneficial effects of sports participation on children’s physical, moral, and spiritual development should lead our civic as well as religious leaders to address the harm inflicted upon our most vulnerable children by depriving them, although unwittingly, of even access to youth sports. Over the past decade breakthroughs in neuroscience have led to a better understanding of the effects of poverty on children and how sports participation may be particularly effective in helping children develop the resources to flourish under adversity. Accumulating evidence suggests that children growing up in poverty are far more likely than their economically advantaged peers to experience multiple stressors, which assault their “biological response systems” and damage their self-regulatory capacities (Evans and Kim). Over time, continuous exposure to chronic stressors can lead to an array of psychological as well as physical health issues into adulthood. Of direct concern to those of us involved in youth sports is the research showing that chronic stress can lead to maladaptive coping patterns, such as social withdrawal, disinterest in school, and hopelessness (Wolff, Wadsworth, and Santiago).

Jack Shonkoff, Professor of Child Health and Development at the Harvard School of Public Health and Chair of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, emphasizes the need to provide “protective interventions” that “buffer” the effects of trauma exposure and give children the relational support that they need to thrive in adverse environments (92). Radner and Shonkoff propose community-based efforts to address intergenerational poverty. They note that a key factor in breaking the generational cycle of poverty is involving adults as well as children in collaborative programming that develops their sense of agency and efficacy.

Well-run youth sports programs provide a multitude of benefits for all children, particularly the most vulnerable. Yet, as Putnam notes, “Perversely, as the opportunity gap has widened, we have increasingly excluded poor students . . . by instituting pay-to-play” (258). The fact is that many families can no longer afford the costs of today’s youth sports. Coakley points out that the culture of youth sports is organized for advantaged parents, who can pick and choose among a wide array of sports and sport programs to find those best suited for their children. In affluent communities, facilities for every kind of sport abound as families have both the time and the resources to pay the fees, buy the equipment, and transport their children back and forth from after school and weekend practices and games. They also have means to travel to tournaments and championship games around the country, and even to hire individual trainers to develop their children’s skills. Low income families simply cannot keep up.

In his study of how inequality is affecting America’s children and threatening to destroy the American dream, Putnam proposes an array of strategies for bridging the class gap and

creating a better future for all. His favored and most cost-effective proposal is that we as a country to re-invest in extracurricular programs in poor communities. His research suggests that extracurricular programs hold the key to closing the gap. He elaborates that “extracurricular activities, particularly youth sports, may be as close to a ‘magic bullet’ as we have in our arsenal of policies for addressing neighborhood-based intergenerational poverty” (258). Yet, the funding and organizational structures that once brought youth sports to children from all social classes have collapsed.

The problem of inequality is one of our own making; and it is one that we can resolve if we have the moral will to do so. Yet the geographical and cultural segregation that inequality has brought about makes it increasingly difficult for those with financial and organizational resources to connect with the communities most in need of well-run youth sports programs. Reich among others speaks of a “new tribalism” based in class and conflicting class-based interests and values. This new tribalism undermines social cohesion, which is the bedrock for achieving social justice in a pluralistic society.

Giamatti reminds us that cities are centers of economic and social commerce. They are profoundly public: instituted, governed, and maintained through public deliberation and varied social interactions on multiple levels of organization. Cities depend up the willingness of families, clans, tribes, religious congregations, businesses and cultural groups to live together as a united community. Giamatti points out that cities do not evolve on their own, naturally. Cities are artifacts, human creations: “Human beings made and make cities, and only human beings kill cities, or let them die” (49).

Giamatti notes that both cities and sports are “deeply conventional.” He explains that the “central convention” of the city as well as sport is that all members are guaranteed an equal opportunity to compete and that outcomes should be based on merit not privilege (64). Moreover, he points out that, like sports, cities are based upon an “agreed upon fiction” that we belong to each other as kin, a relationship based on “will and imagination” rather than on blood (50).

Sports, in Giamatti’s view, elevate the city by the way in which they attempt to raise our humanity to ever higher levels. Sports provide the city with opportunities for shared leisure. Sports “add Art to Nature” so that we can make ourselves the best we can possibly be (54). Sports in this analysis remind us of the possibilities of who we can be as an individuals and communities. Giamatti draws many of his examples of how sports function in contemporary American society from professional sports, particularly baseball. Sports bring urban communities together for the “happy comradery of competition” in a public place for “public pleasure” (78).

Youth sports serve a related function. They bring adults and children together from different parts of the city to share the games they love with the children they love. Youth sports provide adults, who coach and cheer from the sidelines, a joyful opportunity to mentor and guide everyone’s children. As we have seen through the lens of cognitive developmental psychology, sports teach children the value of leisure and agreed upon rules and conventions. Sports also teach children the value of hard work, of perseverance, courage, and intelligence. Perhaps most importantly, sports teach children the virtue of loyalty, of sacrificing self-interest for the common good. Children who participate in sports are far more likely than those who

do not to say that belonging to a team has made them better than they would be alone (Power, Seroczynsky, Morrissey, and Roney).

Sports teams also provide us with a model for civic life. At their best, they create a sense of family across differences of race, religion, and social position. Moreover, sports teach us about our own agency and social efficacy. Our games are our creations, our play. They are the products of human agency. To be enjoyed, they demand that we let go of our troubles and allow them to carry us to a happier and better plane of existence. They serve the city by gathering its citizens in all their diversity to celebrate as one and by reminding us of our creative potential to make and remake our cities as well as ourselves.

Albert Camus once remarked to a friend, “After many years during which I saw many things, what I know most surely about morality and the duty of man I owe to sport and learned in the RUA” (Albert Camus Society 2017).¹ The Albert Camus Society commented that Camus was referring to the “simple morality of the football field” rather than “to politicians and philosophers.” We believe that Camus’ “simple morality” has profound implications for the way we think about solidarity and collective responsibility today.

In *The Plague*, which remains one of the most profound ethical treatises of our time, the citizens of the city of Oran are forced to confront a pestilence, which brought about unimaginable suffering and death. The novel describes how the citizens of Oran chose or refused to choose to work together to do what they could to resist the plague and care for its victims. Rambert, a journalist from France who was on assignment in Oran when the plague struck, sought throughout the novel to leave the quarantined city to return to the woman he loved. By the time he had worked out a plan to escape, he discovered that he belonged to the struggling city of Oran. He explained that if he left, “he would feel ashamed of himself.” He explained that he saw “nothing shameful in being happy” but that it would be “shameful to be happy by oneself.” He elaborated, “Until now I always felt like a stranger . . . and that I’d no concern with you people. But now that I have seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody’s business” (Camus: 209-10).

Being a member of a sports team teaches the values of solidarity, sacrifice, and responsibility for common good. But sports can and often do become an escape from reality and our obligations to champion the cause of others, particularly the most vulnerable. Without the virtue of temperance to keep them in check, sports can also become a form of idolatry, a pseudo-religion with its own rite and rituals, claiming our undivided attention and allegiance. We need a theology of sport to check its demonic potential (Tillich) and integrate sport within a balanced and flourishing human life. As much as we may lose ourselves in our games, once the buzzer sounds, the whistle blows, or the horn blares, we must go back to work and to the challenge of making our ordinary life better for each other and our children.

Sports can stir within us a sense of connection and a desire to work together for the good of all. But sports alone lack the moral power and authority to exhort us to care for all children and not simply those in our own family and neighborhood. Here is where our religious leaders have a crucial prophetic and educational role to play. They must call attention to the injustice

¹ The RUA stands for “Racing Universitaire Algerios,” Camus’ junior soccer team.

of a social order that fails to provide for our most vulnerable children, and to our capacity to transform the status quo. They should seek not to induce guilt but to inspire action. The systemic neglect of our society's children numbs our souls and impoverishes our shared humanity. Wisdom invites us to accept the challenge of moral development and social transformation. Our religious leaders must invite us all to work together for the common good. They must also take care to avoid the hypocrisy of calling others to justice and solidarity while replicating the inequalities of our wider society in their own institutions.

The task of social transformation may appear to be a daunting one, but the theological virtues, in particular, should assure us that we have the capacity to treat all children as our children, our kin. The theological virtue of faith enables us to see all children as God's children and therefore as our children. The theological virtue of hope guarantees that God's love working in and through us can and will conquer every obstacle. The theological virtue of charity disposes us to participate in God's love for all children. The theological virtues are more than mere competencies or divinely infused potentials. They direct, energize, and lead to concrete action.

The American Catholic Church has a rich tradition of serving children through sports. In 1930, Bishop Sheil founded the Catholic Youth Organization in Chicago to serve the children of Chicago by meeting their "physical, mental, and spiritual needs . . . without regard to race, creed, or color" (Treat: 55). In his groundbreaking study of race and Catholic parishes in Chicago from 1914 to 1954, Neary describes how Sheil's CYO crossed parish boundaries to foster children's moral as well as athletic development and overcome deeply entrenched racial discrimination and segregation for three decades. In the 1950s, however, the Catholic Church in America retreated from its commitment to serve the public good to focus on "the nuclear family, personal piety, and anticommunism" (Neary: 173). That retreat also marked the beginning of a retreat from the cities to the suburbs in a new era of racial and economic segregation.

Sheil's vision for the CYO remains relevant for today. It is, in fact a vision that all can embrace regardless of race, color, or creed. It is a vision of shared responsibility, which is the lifeblood of the city itself. Giamatti describes the human bond of kinship that creates sports as well as cities as a bold and "agreed upon fiction." Our religious faith affirms that fiction as a reality. All persons are God's children, and therefore, we all really are sisters and brothers. Greg Boyle, S.J., the founder of Homeboy Industries, which employs and provides therapeutic services to gang members in Los Angeles, reminds us of our common vocation to "practice kinship" by seeking the alienated, excluded, and left behind. Boyle's notion of kinship is rooted in the theological virtues. Practicing kinship from a theological perspective begins with seeing the other with God's eyes, which is to see the other as God does. From a developmental perspective, this seeing requires a special kind of role-taking, which is universal in scope and not bound by culture, class, race, nation or gender. The seeing that is part of the practice of kinship focuses not only on how we see the other but how we see ourselves in relationship with others. Our culture places a premium on independence and self-reliance. The practice of kinship reminds us that in Boyle's words, "we belong to each other" (9).

Boyle takes pains to point out that kinship should not be confused with service. Service, which is a first step toward kinship, takes us out of our comfort zone to meet others at the

margins of society. Yet service can be limited by a sense of hierarchy in which there are givers and receivers, “haves” and have nots. Practicing kinship requires solidarity by recognizing that we are all “wounded healers” (Nouwen). We are all given the grace or virtue to be a healing presence for others but only insofar as we are aware of our need for healing from them. Seeing oneself as broken and isolated is difficult for those of us who find ourselves among the “haves” and who tell ourselves (and others) that we earned our favorable position in society (and they should too).

Playing sports, which demands discipline and hard work, can sometimes encourage us to believe that we deserve our good fortune. Yet every athlete and sports fan has experienced the truth of Ecclesiastes 9:11 – “The race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant, nor a livelihood by the wise, nor riches by the shrewd, nor favor by the experts; for a time of misfortune comes to all alike.”² Practicing kinship demands a radical sense of equality and identification with others. Our struggles and triumphs may be different, but no one escapes the human condition.

Kinship leads us to discover that God loves us for who we are, not for who we pretend to be. We start life as helpless infants, and never outgrow our need for love and acceptance. We remain vulnerable in spite of our facades of self-importance. Practicing kinship takes us to the margins of society to accompany those who must live without such illusions. The poor teach us that we cannot be happy alone and invite us to participate in a far richer and more inclusive sense of community than we could have imagined without them.

Boyle’s notion of kinship offers a way of restoring a sense of social connection and co-responsibility for our children’s moral development. Proverbs 29:7 speaks directly to our social malaise: “The just care for the cause of the poor, the wicked do not understand such care.” This verse anticipates Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man passes by Lazarus but does not respond to him. Why? The verse in Proverbs treats the lack of concern for the poor as a problem of ignorance. The wicked person is a fool or one lacking in Wisdom. Wickedness consists in “vincible (or culpable) ignorance.” The wicked are guilty of neglect for not only failing to help the poor but failing to make the effort to get to know them. Their failure is a sin of omission. The wicked are not directly harming the poor; they simply do not “understand” why the poor should be their concern. Their lack of understanding implies not only that they lack knowledge of the plight of the poor, but that they believe that the struggles of the “have-nots” are not their “business.”

Boyle’s ethic of kinship, on the other hand, embodies Wisdom’s affirmative approach to moral education. Although the Book of Proverbs presents stern appeals to care for the poor with accompanying threats, Wisdom, personified as a young girl at play, takes a different approach. She summons us to play together and to experience through such play the mutuality at the heart of justice and true happiness. Her call is an invitation to participate in the Beloved Community to which we all belong.

² Here and below translation is from the New American Bible Revised Edition.

Conclusion

We have argued for the intrinsic value of sports qua play through the lenses of psychology and theology. Drawing on the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs, we have also claimed that sports qua play constitute an ideal paideia for social, moral, and spiritual development. That paideia, we claim, is rooted in the tradition of the moral and theological virtues. The paideia of play begins in a “magic circle” removed from the world of work, social segregation, and injustice. But informed with a theologically inspired moral vision, it should not end there. The Wisdom of play leads us to the practice of kinship and the transformation of society to the Beloved Community promised in the gospel.

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