



**ENHANCING PRIESTLY FORMATION THROUGH SPORT**  
‘Spirit, Soul, and Body’ (1 Th. 5:23)

by  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines sport as an intentional means of priestly formation and pastoral ministry in the Roman Catholic tradition. It argues that, when thoughtfully integrated, sport can foster holistic growth in seminarians and priests through physical health, emotional maturity, fraternity, leadership, discipline, and evangelization. Using Richard R. Osmer's practical theology framework and qualitative interviews with seven Catholic priests, the study engages Scripture, Church teaching, patristic sources, and contemporary scholarship. Findings highlight both benefits and risks, including exclusion and competitiveness. The dissertation concludes that sport, guided by theological discernment, can enrich priestly formation and pastoral outreach in the Church.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I.1. Genesis

Participating in sports has been a defining element of my personal and vocational formation, cultivating resilience, discipline, and leadership from an early age. I began playing soccer at the age of five, initially struggling but gradually developing skill through sustained dedication. By adolescence, I had achieved competitive recognition, and during high school and college where I served as team captain I experienced both victory and defeat. These experiences were equally formative, teaching teamwork, perseverance, humility, and leadership while fostering healthy relationships, cultural exchange, and positive life choices.

Throughout my time at the seminary, I discovered sport's significant role in my overall experience. As someone who has always been passionate about athletics, engaging in sports was essential to my seminary journey. For example, as a Franciscan novice, I enjoyed learning and playing volleyball, which provided enjoyment and helped me form strong bonds with my fellow Franciscan brothers. Sports and games were also instrumental in connecting with the youth in my pastoral youth ministry. As a youth leader, I worked with seven different groups, five in my home country Ecuador, and two in the Archdiocese of Chicago. In these groups, sport served as a vital tool for attracting and engaging the youth. I remember organizing a soccer game with my parish youth group in Chicago Heights in 2014. To this day, I still hear about the memorable and enjoyable experience it

was for everyone involved. As a result, I firmly believe that youths in pastoral ministry can effectively utilize sports and games.

While at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, I served as a seminarian and deacon at the neighboring parish, Santa Maria del Popolo. This experience allowed me to engage with the youth once again. The parish's proximity to the seminary enabled me to organize games and activities, preparing our seminary soccer team for two tournaments held at Conception Seminary in Kansas and Saint John Vianney Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. Additionally, I organized two 5K Walk and Run events on the seminary grounds, which contributed to constructing a new soccer field for Santa Maria parish. My time at the seminary also introduced me to various sports, such as ultimate frisbee, bowling, running, kayaking, hiking, and squash. I had the opportunity to train with fellow seminarians for the Chicago Marathon. The seminary's annual basketball tournament was particularly enjoyable, as it provided a high level of competition and entertainment, with many teams from other Catholic seminaries in the U.S. participating and showcasing their excitement and passion for the games. Engaging in sports at the seminary helped me maintain physical fitness and contributed to my overall well-being, providing relaxation, self-discipline, emotional mastery, and spiritual growth.

Reflecting on my journey to the priesthood, I realize the significant presence of sports in my life, particularly during my time at Saint Vincent De Paul Regional Seminary in Florida and Mundelein Seminary in Illinois. In Florida, I had the opportunity to train with other seminarians and a faculty priest for the "Tough Mudder," a physical fitness challenge often divided into two groups. During this event, a classmate who excelled in sports asked me to lead a group of seminarians who were less experienced in physical

fitness. It proved to be a rewarding and enjoyable experience. When I think of sports, I remember the Latin phrase “Mens sana in corpore sano,” which translates to “a healthy mind in a healthy body.” This phrase emphasizes the importance of physical exercise for mental and psychological well-being.

These experiences have led me to affirm the importance of sports and games in the human, spiritual, and pastoral development of priests. This project seeks to explore the lived experiences of priests engaged in athletics, the theological foundations for sport within Catholic tradition, and relevant insights from contemporary scientific research. Ultimately, this thesis aims to lay the groundwork for a future book examining the role of sport as a formative and pastoral resource in priestly life.

## **I.2. Academic Research in Priestly Formation, Sports Psychology, the Spirituality and Theology of Sport and Play.**

The primary sources for this research consist of scholarly literature on pastoral ministry and related interdisciplinary fields, particularly those engaging the relationship between sports, faith, and athletic formation. These sources provide critical insight into best practices, pastoral frameworks, and formation-oriented programs that align with the objectives of this thesis. Peer-reviewed articles and academic studies offer contemporary perspectives on the integration of athletics and moral formation and reflect a diverse range of theological, pastoral, and educational approaches. One such example is the *Run the Race Well* (RRW) program, a formation initiative designed for high-achieving athletes that

intentionally integrates moral and spiritual principles into athletic participation.<sup>1</sup> Although RRW is not specifically oriented toward priestly formation, its emphasis on character development, virtue formation, and the holistic integration of faith and sport closely parallels the aims of this thesis. In a similar manner, this dissertation proposes the intentional use of sports as a formative tool within priestly formation, fostering human, spiritual, and pastoral growth in future priests through structured athletic engagement.

I will also utilize sources that discuss sports, and physical and outdoor activities, as well as the theology of sports and the theology of the body. For instance, the book *Brief Theology of Sport* references theologian Jurgen Moltmann's descriptions: "The play as a gift of an eschatological reality in which the player joyfully moves in step with God as his kingdom-life bursts onto the present, momentarily shattering the yokes of slavery and liberating the person to experience transformed life."<sup>2</sup>

The book *Theology of the Body* teaches us that God created man in His image and likeness. The likeness is a potentiality that is realized through our choices, the inclinations of our will, our way of life, our inner states, and our actions. "For the Fathers, it is by means of the virtues that we can become like God, and it is in this likeness to God, acquired by collaboration between free will and grace given us that we can ultimately become a partaker of divine life, a participation to which we are both destined by our nature and called by personal vocation. For young people who choose to live virtuously, it involves both soul and body."<sup>3</sup> Finding this balance will help them fulfill their calling.

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<sup>1</sup> Brett Bruner and Chad Bruner, "Run the Race Well: A Faith-Based Model for Character Development in Competitive Athletics," *Journal of Sport and Christianity* 4, no. 1 (2021): 23–41.

<sup>2</sup> Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 90.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Donley (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 27.

### **I.3. Thesis Statement**

The four essential dimensions of priestly formation, academic, pastoral, spiritual, and human, are foundational within seminaries and houses of formation. This thesis project emphasizes the importance of integrating games and sports into the human, spiritual, and pastoral formation of priests. Drawing on qualitative research with a select group of priests in the Archdiocese of Chicago, as well as magisterial teaching and other literature on the theology of sports and other forms of “play,” this project argues that formation praxes that intentionally engage sport and play offer a distinctly impactful medium for integrating key dimensions of priestly life such as physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. The project also argues that an additional benefit of sport-centered priestly formation praxes is their potential to cultivate an awareness in priests of the potential of sport and play as a medium for pastoral engagement, especially with youth and young adults for whom this medium may be one of the most effective for evangelization, for the cultivation of a sense of ecclesial belonging, and for lifelong spiritual growth.

### **I.4. Methodology**

#### **I.4.1. Method in the Field of Practical Theology**

This thesis project is framed by an appropriately adapted version of Richard Osmer’s fourfold method of practical theological interpretation, which attends systematically to lived ministerial experience and pastoral praxis.<sup>4</sup> Osmer’s methodology

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<sup>4</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 4–11.

provides a coherent structure for analyzing the role of sport and play within priestly formation.

Osmer describes the first stage by reference to the *empirical task* that is posing and formulating a sufficiently intricate and nuanced response to, the question: “What is happening?” In the context of this thesis-project this question looks something like: *What are some of the salient (and not so salient) features of the landscape of both individual and programmatic approaches to the role of sport and other forms of play in priestly human spiritual formation?*

In Osmer’s schema, the second stage involves the *interpretative* or *explanatory task*. Now that we have some picture of what is going on, we proceed to ask the question: “Why is this going on?” In other words: *What factors have engendered and continue to sustain things as they are taking into consideration both the positive and negative aspects of the current status quo?*

The third stage of analysis centers around the *normative task* namely, asking the theologically normed question: “What ought to be going on?” *What role should sport and other forms of play take in the human and spiritual formation of diocesan Roman Catholic priests in the U.S.?*

The fourth and final stage of this Osmerian process of practical theological analysis is the *pragmatic task* asking the question: What are some practical achievable steps that can be taken to help realize the normative vision generated by the third task? In terms of this thesis-project the question animating this fourth stage of analysis is basically: *What*

*are some pragmatic recommendations for ensuring that sport plays the role in priestly formation that the data seems to indicate strongly that it should play?*

Osmer's methodology resonates with the pastoral method I encountered during my early formation as a Franciscan friar, particularly the liberation-theological approach of *see, judge, act, celebrate, and evaluate*.<sup>5</sup> This methodological convergence strengthens my conviction that Osmer's framework is well suited to guide this thesis project. By carefully analyzing current formation practices and placing them in dialogue with magisterial teaching and interdisciplinary scholarship, this method provides a solid foundation for articulating a coherent and pastorally effective response.

#### **I.4.2. Qualitative Research Method**

James Creswell and Cheryl Poth Creswell, in their well-known handbook for qualitative researchers, describe five fundamental approaches to qualitative research that involve living human participants, often called "human subjects" in the social sciences. Of these five approaches, narrative research is the method that most closely aligns with the goals of this thesis project.<sup>6</sup>

In their definition of this approach, Creswell and Poth point out that "As a method, it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals."<sup>7</sup> They then proceed to cite the work of D.J. Clandinin<sup>8</sup> who explains that "the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals' experience but is also an exploration of the

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<sup>5</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 8–12.

<sup>6</sup> James W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> D. J. Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013).

social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted.”<sup>9</sup>

In applying this method, this study engages a limited sample of participants through in-depth, open-ended interviews designed to invite participants to narrate their experiences of priestly formation and engagement with sport and play. While participants are encouraged to tell their stories as freely as possible and in their own terms, interviews will also be guided by the core research questions of the project. This approach enables the collection of rich and varied narratives from both ordained priests who have completed seminary formation and seminarians currently undergoing formation.

In addition to participant narratives, this study incorporates the researcher’s own formative experiences of sport as a seminarian and as a priest. When employed reflexively and transparently, such autobiographical narrative serves not as a replacement for empirical data but as a complementary lens that deepens interpretive insight and situates the research within lived pastoral practice.

## **I.5. Sources**

### **I.5.1. Personal Narratives**

This thesis project examines the integration of personal experiences in games and sports into the human, spiritual, and pastoral formation of priests. A primary source of data will consist of personal narratives gathered through in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of seven priests serving in dioceses within the United States.

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<sup>9</sup> Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 18, quoted in Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 67.

Narrative research offers a particularly effective means of engaging these sources, as it allows for a close examination of how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences. By eliciting detailed and reflective narratives, this study seeks to attend to the complexity, context, and formative significance of sport and play within priestly life. Such narratives provide insight not only into individual experiences but also into the broader pastoral and formation contexts in which those experiences are situated.

### **I.5.2 Documents of the Catholic Church**

Numerous Magisterial and pastoral documents of the Catholic Church constitute a central source for this thesis project. These texts consistently encourage the faithful to discern their vocation through an encounter with God’s love and to live their discipleship through the responsible use of their gifts and talents. In Catholic teaching, sport is not viewed simply as physical activity or competition, but as a human practice that fosters the integral development of the person. The Church highlights that sport engages multiple dimensions of the human person physical, psychological, social, and spiritual and thus can serve as a meaningful context for education, character formation, and the building of community. From this standpoint, sport becomes a formative activity that promotes holistic human growth and cultivates virtues such as discipline, solidarity, and perseverance.<sup>10</sup>

Catholic teaching emphasizes a holistic anthropology that understands the human person as a unified whole rather than a collection of isolated parts. “This vision resists reductionist views that privilege either the spiritual or the physical at the expense of the

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<sup>10</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City, 2018), nos. 4–7, 18–20, 43.

other, insisting instead on the dynamic interrelation of body, mind, and spirit.”<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, sport is recognized as a legitimate and valuable context for human development and spiritual growth.

Various ecclesial documents explicitly highlight the role of sport and play in the cultivation of moral and spiritual virtues. The Church presents sport as a privileged context in which virtues such as temperance, humility, perseverance, courage, and patience can be developed, while also promoting solidarity, friendship, and mutual respect among people of different cultures and nations.<sup>12</sup> Because of its universal appeal and formative potential, the Church views sport as an important arena for evangelization and human flourishing in contemporary society.

In addition, documents addressing priestly life and ministry underscore the importance of ongoing formation, particularly during midlife, as a period marked by both challenges and opportunities for renewed growth. The *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests* “highlights the need for practices that support priests’ physical health, emotional balance, and spiritual vitality dimensions to which sport and play can meaningfully contribute.”<sup>13</sup>

From a Christian perspective, sport is understood not simply in terms of competition or performance, but as an expression of joy, freedom, and human relationality. When properly ordered, it becomes a celebration of life that deepens friendships,

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<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 155–57.

<sup>12</sup> Pontifical Council for Culture and Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nos. 18–24.

<sup>13</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, rev. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), nos. 87–92.

encourages dialogue, and affirms the primacy of being over having, thereby resisting purely utilitarian or consumerist views of human activity.<sup>14</sup> These ecclesial insights provide an essential theological foundation for evaluating the role of sport and play within priestly formation and pastoral ministry.

### **I.5.3 Sacred Scripture and Tradition**

In Catholic theology, divine revelation is communicated through both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, which together constitute a single deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church. Consequently, Scripture is interpreted within the context of the Church's living Tradition and under the guidance of the Magisterium, ensuring the faithful transmission of the Gospel throughout generations.<sup>15</sup> The Church thus bears the responsibility of faithfully safeguarding and proclaiming the Father's definitive Word, which remains universal and enduring for all humanity.

Sacred Scripture holds a central role within the Church's living Tradition. Although the Scriptures, as divinely inspired texts, authentically communicate the Word of God, they are not interpreted in isolation. Instead, they are understood within the context of the Church's Tradition and under the guidance of the Fathers, theologians, and the Magisterium.<sup>16</sup> This interpretive framework ensures continuity, fidelity, and theological coherence in transmitting the Gospel to each new generation.

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<sup>14</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City: Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, 2018), nos. 9–12, 25–28.

<sup>15</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), nos. 9–10.

<sup>16</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), nos. 10–12.

Within Scripture itself, athletic imagery serves as a powerful metaphor for Christian discipleship. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul draws explicitly on the discipline and perseverance of athletes to illuminate the Christian life: “Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus, I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:24–27).<sup>17</sup>

The early Church Fathers received and developed Paul’s athletic metaphors as central images for the ascetical and moral life. In his homilies on First Corinthians, Saint John Chrysostom underscores the seriousness of the Christian life by comparing it to athletic training. He observes that athletes willingly embrace rigorous discipline, self-control, and sustained effort for a temporary reward, thereby illustrating how much more Christians should persevere in striving for an eternal crown.<sup>18</sup> For Chrysostom, this image does not suggest competition among believers, but rather emphasizes the importance of intentional effort, self-mastery, and perseverance in the life of discipleship.

In a similar manner, Saint Augustine frequently draws on athletic imagery to describe the Christian journey toward God. In his sermons, he encourages believers to persevere in their pursuit of Christ, emphasizing that the race of faith requires continual

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 9:24–27 (*New American Bible*, Revised Edition).

<sup>18</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Homily 23, on 1 Cor. 9:24–27.

conversion, humility, and dependence on grace.<sup>19</sup> For Augustine, the athletic struggle is not a solitary endeavor but one sustained by divine assistance and ordered toward communion with God. Victory, therefore, is not self-achieved but received through faithful perseverance in love.

Together, these patristic interpretations reinforce a theological understanding of sport as a formative analogy deeply embedded in Christian tradition. When read within the Church's living Tradition, athletic metaphors support an integrated vision of bodily discipline, moral formation, and spiritual perseverance. Such insights provide a robust scriptural and theological foundation for considering sport and play as meaningful contexts for human and spiritual formation particularly within priestly life and ministry.

## **I.6. Chapters**

### **I.6.1. Chapter I: Sports in the History of the Catholic Church**

This chapter will be a general historical overview of some of the more salient attitudes toward sport (and other forms of recreational play) in the Roman Catholic tradition. It will pay particular attention to the tradition's understanding of the role of sport and play in three major contexts: (a) praxes of priestly formation; and (b) praxes of evangelization and the promotion of Catholic beliefs and values in general; and (c) praxes of Catholic identity formation and maintenance among the laity. A meticulous analysis of church literature and documents will be conducted to gain a thorough understanding of the Church's perspective on sports in the ministry field. Additionally, the chapter will delve

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 169*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part III, vol. 5, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992), sec. 15.

into the evolution of sports in church schools and religious programs, providing valuable insights into its role in expanding pastoral groups in parishes. The exploration will further delve into the history of sports in Catholic education and explore how it has been used to foster leadership, teamwork, and character development among young people.

### **I.6.2. Chapter Two: The Role of Sport in Priestly Formation**

Building on the foundation of the previous chapter's *historical* overview of the role of sport in praxes of priestly formation, this chapter will further engage Osmer's "empirical task" by focusing on the role of sport in current praxes of priestly formation in select contexts in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. Among other things, it will explore the impact of sport and other related forms of recreational play on the personal and professional growth of those striving to become priests. It will explore the validity of widely held assumptions regarding the ways in which sport is a medium for cultivating important character traits such as self-discipline, attitudes regarding the value of teamwork, and capacity for leadership qualities that prove invaluable for success in any profession, including the Roman Catholic priesthood.

### **I.6.3. Chapter Three: The Influence of Sport on Priestly Physical, Spiritual, and Human Development**

This chapter will integrate elements of Osmer's empirical task and his "explanatory task" by giving voice to the stories of a select group of individual priests as they reflect on the impact of sport and other forms of related recreational play on their physical, spiritual, and human growth. By focusing on and analytically interpreting the personal narratives of Catholic priests for whom sports has been an important part of their lives and especially

their vocational journey, this chapter will test the hypothesis that sports can foster virtues such as discipline, temperance, perseverance, obedience, teamwork, charity, and patience, virtues that align with Catholic principles in general, and priestly formation, in particular. Furthermore, the chapter will investigate the potential mental health benefits of sports, particularly within the context of the Catholic environment. By examining the perspectives of these priests, our goal is to determine if there is enough documented lived experience to support the argument that sport can cultivate a strong connection between the mind, body, and spirit, leading to a more fulfilling and enriched life and priesthood.

#### **I.6.4. Chapter Four: The Role of Sport in Clerical Ministry Formation**

Engaging Osmer's third "normative task," this chapter will make the case for a more intentional focus on sport and other forms of play, not only as an important and effective medium for priestly formation, but also as a medium for effective and transformational Catholic pastoral ministry. Based on evidence from the personal narratives at the heart of the previous chapter, this chapter will make an argument for the indispensable role sport and related forms of play does and can play in priestly formation. It will also argue that sport and other related forms of play in the "new evangelization" as well as in Pope Francis's vision for an authentically "synodal" Church, especially among youth and young adults. It will suggest that there are few ministerial praxes with more potential to form the faithful for truly synodal missionary discipleship than sport and other forms of recreational play. To make these arguments, this chapter will, among other things, examine successful approaches and techniques employed by priests to incorporate sports into their pastoral work, such as sports camps, tournaments, and leagues.

## **I.6.5. Chapter Five: Enhancing Priestly Formation through Sport: Practical Steps**

### **Forward**

This chapter will engage Osmer's fourth and 'final' task: the pragmatic. Based on the research and analysis adduced in the previous chapters, this chapter will offer a series of concrete suggestions for integrating formational praxes of sport and play into broader programs in priestly formation in the US that may well have significant implications for priestly formation programs in other national and cultural contexts. This chapter will provide practical suggestions for incorporating sports into priestly formation programs, such as retreats, workshops, and community service projects. Furthermore, we will highlight the significance of physical fitness for seminarians, as it can enhance their ability to serve their communities and fulfill their pastoral duties. Ultimately, we will explore how sports can foster interfaith dialogue and promote greater understanding between religious groups. Drawing from real-life examples of interfaith sports initiatives worldwide, we aim to inspire individuals to leverage sports to build bridges across diverse communities.

### **I.7. Audience**

This thesis project is primarily directed toward individuals and institutions engaged in priestly formation, including diocesan and religious seminaries, houses of formation, and programs dedicated to the ongoing formation of clergy. It is intended as a resource for seminary rectors, formation directors, faculty members, and others committed to fostering holistic and dynamic formation for future priests. Seminarians themselves also constitute

a key audience, particularly those interested in integrating sport and play into seminary life as resources for human, spiritual, and pastoral development.

A secondary audience includes Catholic lay ecclesial ministers and formation leaders involved in analogous processes of ministerial formation. This group encompasses those responsible for the theological and pastoral formation of campus ministers at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels; chaplains serving in contexts such as sports, military, healthcare, physical rehabilitation, and correctional institutions; ministers working with youth and young adults; and those engaged in ministry with the retired and elderly. For these stakeholders, the project offers transferable insights into how sport and play can support formation, outreach, and pastoral engagement across diverse ministerial settings.

## **I.8. Anticipated Outcomes**

### **I.8.I. Achievable Goals**

This thesis project intends to:

- a) Research the perspectives of individual priests on the role of engaging in games and sports during their formation as priests through interviews.
- b) Discern commonalities and distinctions through the narratives of priests on the impact of sports and games in seminary education.

- c) Develop recommendations for the innovative incorporation of sports and games into programs for priestly formation and diocesan seminaries, drawing from the identified similarities and differences in perspectives.
- d) Formulate recommendations regarding the creative integration of sports and games into priestly formation programs and diocesan seminaries, based on the shared commonalities and differences in perspectives.

### **I.8.2. Recognized Limitations**

Like any research project, this thesis will be working within certain limitations. Although I fully anticipate having to identify others as my research and writing unfolds, there are at least three sets of limitations I can identify in anticipation of the work. They are:

1. There is a lack of literature on the relationship between the Roman Catholic priesthood and sports.
2. I intend to conduct interviews with a select group of priests from the Archdiocese of Chicago and various dioceses in Florida, leveraging personal connections for access. However, this approach is geographically limited and is likely to exclude many other priests who have also been involved in sports during their formation period.
3. My recommendations will be tailored to specific contexts and may not be universally applicable. For example, the suggestions I make for Mundelein

Seminary may not be relevant to other seminaries. It is important to note that some seminaries may need to consider developing sports facilities on their premises.

### **I.8.3. Potential Broader Ministerial Import**

Although the primary empirical data for this study is drawn from a single, relatively representative diocesan context in the United States, this thesis is intended to contribute to a broader ecclesial and pastoral conversation regarding the role of sport and other forms of play in priestly formation. It is hoped that the findings will engage scholars, formation leaders, and pastoral practitioners involved in the design and implementation of priestly formation programs in Roman Catholic contexts beyond the United States.

More broadly, this project seeks to situate the discussion of sport and play within the Church's ongoing reflection on the new evangelization and the renewal of missionary discipleship. By highlighting sport as a relational, participatory, and culturally accessible practice, the study proposes that athletic and recreational activities may serve as underutilized resources for pastoral outreach and formation in diverse cultural settings.

Finally, this research aspires to contribute to the synodal vision articulated by Pope Francis, which emphasizes listening, participation, and shared responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. In this context, sport and play are presented as concrete practices that can foster encounter, dialogue, and communal belonging, thereby supporting the vitality of missionary discipleship in the twenty-first century. Through these broader conversations, the project aims to encourage further research, experimentation, and discernment regarding sport as a meaningful dimension of formation and pastoral ministry across the global Church.

## **I.9. Definition of Some Terms**

Andes: A mountain range in western South America, extending about 4,500 miles.

Asceticism: Spiritual effort or exercise in the pursuit of virtue. The purpose is to grow in Christian perfection.

CTU: Catholic Theological Union is a Catholic graduate school of theology in Chicago.

Evangelium: Gospel, Good News.

Jubilee: A special year of reconciliation, pilgrimage, and coming home. (Pope Francis).

SVDP: Saint Vincent De Paul Regional Seminary.

Synod: An assembly of the clergy and sometimes also the laity in a diocese or other division of a particular Church.

(SPE): School of Parish Leadership.

## CHAPTER I

### PRIESTLY FORMATION AND SPORT IN THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

#### 1. Biblical Origin of Priesthood

Sacred Scripture presents priesthood as a mediating ministry ordered toward worship, sacrifice, and covenant fidelity. One of the earliest biblical references to priesthood appears in the figure of Melchizedek, who is described as both king and priest and who offers bread and wine in a gesture of thanksgiving and blessing (Gen 14:18). This passage establishes a foundational biblical image of priesthood associated with sacrifice and mediation between God and humanity.<sup>20</sup>

The Old Testament further develops priesthood in a more structured and institutional form within the Mosaic covenant. Priestly ministry becomes closely associated with Aaron and his descendants, who are set apart for liturgical service, sacrificial offerings, and the maintenance of Israel's worship life (Ex 28:1).<sup>21</sup> In this biblical context, priests function as representatives of the people before God and as ministers responsible for sacrificial worship and covenant fidelity.

Throughout the Old Testament, although sacrificial practices and liturgical structures develop over time, the theological purpose of priesthood remains consistent: priesthood is ordered toward communion with God and the sanctification of the people

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<sup>20</sup> Gen. 14:18 (*New American Bible*, Revised Edition).

<sup>21</sup> Exod. 28:1 (*New American Bible*, Revised Edition).

through rightly ordered worship. In this biblical horizon, priests are appointed to serve as representatives of the people before God and to offer sacrifice for sins. While the forms of worship and sacrificial practice develop across the Old Testament, the underlying theological logic remains consistent: priesthood is ordered to communion with God and the sanctification of the people through rightly ordered worship.

### **1.1. Jesus the High Priest**

In the New Testament, the priesthood of the Old Covenant finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ, who is presented as the definitive mediator between God and humanity. The Letter to the Hebrews describes Christ as the great high priest whose self-offering surpasses the repeated sacrifices of the Old Covenant by establishing a new and eternal covenant through a single and perfect sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the Levitical priesthood, Christ does not offer external sacrifices but offers himself, thus fulfilling and transforming the entire sacrificial system.

The Gospel of John expresses this theological reality through the image of Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). In this sense, Christ's priesthood unites sacrifice, mediation, and intercession, extending beyond the earthly sanctuary toward the heavenly reality to which the Old Covenant pointed.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the Gospels present Christ's ministry as deeply embodied. His ministry involved travel, physical endurance, and periods of solitude dedicated to prayer. The recurring pattern of withdrawal to mountains or solitary places for prayer reflects a

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<sup>22</sup> Heb. 4:14–16; 9:11–14; 10:10–14 (NABRE).

<sup>23</sup> Heb. 9:24 (NABRE).

rhythm of physical exertion and spiritual communion that would later influence Christian understandings of discipline, formation, and spiritual growth.<sup>24</sup>

## **1.2. Formation for Discipleship in the Time of Jesus**

A foundational model of Christian formation is seen in how Jesus formed the Twelve Apostles. The Gospels depict this formation as relational, gradual, and mission-focused. Jesus first calls the disciples, then educates them through teaching and shared life, and ultimately sends them out to participate in his mission.

The selection of the Twelve is presented as a deliberate and prayerful act. The Gospel of Luke records that Jesus spent the night in prayer before choosing the apostles: “Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.”<sup>25</sup> This detail suggests that priestly and apostolic formation begins in prayer and discernment rather than merely institutional selection.

Second, Jesus forms the disciples through multiple pedagogical methods, including parables, sermons, personal instruction, and lived experience. The disciples learn not only through formal teaching but through observing Jesus’ actions, his relationships with others, and his prayer life. The authority of Jesus’ teaching is recognized by the crowds, who note that “he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”<sup>26</sup> At the center of this formation is the commandment to love God and neighbor, which becomes the

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<sup>24</sup> Matt. 4:1–2; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; Luke 6:12; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2602.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 6:12–13 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 7:28–29 (NRSV).

foundation of Christian life and ministry: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>27</sup>

Third, Jesus forms the disciples through accompaniment. He lives with them, travels with them, and models the life he teaches. This method of formation emphasizes imitation, relationship, and shared mission. The washing of the feet provides a powerful example of leadership through service, when Jesus tells the disciples, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”<sup>28</sup> This becomes a model for apostolic and priestly ministry.

Finally, formation culminates in mission. The disciples are sent to preach, teach, baptize, and build the Church, as Jesus commissions them: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”<sup>29</sup> This pattern call, formation, accompaniment, and mission provides a theological foundation for priestly formation in the life of the Church.

### **1.3. Priestly Formation During the Era of the Church Fathers**

From the second through the eighth centuries, the Church Fathers contributed to the consolidation of ministerial identity, ecclesial leadership, and the formation of clergy amid theological controversy, cultural diversity, and pastoral expansion. “Formation in this period typically combined biblical immersion, doctrinal instruction, liturgical

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 22:37–39 (NRSV).

<sup>28</sup> John 13:15 (NRSV).

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 28:18–20 (NRSV).

participation, and moral discipline often within communal patterns of life influenced by monastic and ascetical practice.”<sup>30</sup> Priestly formation was therefore not merely instructional but integrative: it aimed to shape spiritual maturity, moral credibility, and pastoral competence for the service of the Church.

#### **1.4. Preaching and Teaching and Athletic Metaphors**

Regarding evangelization in the early Church, priests were expected to possess a thorough understanding of the Scriptures. This biblical literacy was vital, and it empowered them to interpret and apply biblical teachings effectively for their congregations. Bishops and clergy were charged with the responsibility of leading their communities by exemplifying lives dedicated to Christ. Saint Ambrose of Milan voluntarily relinquished his position as governor and generously contributed his wealth to the Church and those in need. He became well-known not only for his eloquent speech but also for a lifestyle that exemplified his inherent virtue. One of the notable followers of the great thinker Ambrose was Saint Augustine of Hippo, a deeply influential figure in the early Christian Church. “What moved the heart of the African rhetorician, sceptic and downhearted, and what impelled him to definitive conversion was not above all, Ambrose’s splendid homilies (although he deeply appreciated them), it was rather the testimony of the Bishop and his Milanese Church that prayed and sang as one intact”<sup>31</sup> The model of servant leadership stressed the principle that actions bear greater significance than words; consequently, their

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<sup>30</sup> Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), 124.

behavior, teachings, and lifestyle choices were expected to inspire and motivate others to adhere to the tenets of Christianity.

As the Church endeavored to spread the Christian message among diverse populations, a crucial component of priestly formation emerged in the cultivation of strong preaching and teaching abilities. The capacity to deliver compelling and persuasive sermons was essential, not only for instructing the faithful but also for inspiring them to enact their beliefs in daily life. Here is where we find the use of sports to articulate the good news. In the fourth century, John Cassian, an influential figure in Western monasticism and the patron of teachers, used athletic imagery to explain monastic life. He argued that “understanding St. Paul’s teachings required insight into the games of the world, particularly the Olympic Games. St. John Cassian spoke of the “Olympic struggle against our vices,” saying that “our first trial in the Olympic games is to extinguish the desires of the palate and the belly by the longing for perfection.”<sup>32</sup> He captivated his fellow monks with a detailed account of the Olympic Games, exploring the rigorous training regimens of the athletes. His enthusiasm created a vivid picture of the dedication and perseverance that defined these remarkable competitors. Christian writers, influenced by St. Paul, often utilized athletic imagery as a metaphor to illustrate the Christian life, martyrdom, and monasticism. The early Church’s embrace of Greek customs established a precedent for integrating non-Christian cultures into the faith community. This approach shaped how Christians engaged with the customs and cultural traditions of other societies

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<sup>32</sup>Brantly Millegan, “How the Church Fathers Found God in the Olympics,” *Aleteia*, last modified April 2, 2014, <https://aleteia.org/2014/02/04/how-the-church-fathers-found-god-in-the-olympics>.

during the medieval era. Such imagery was frequently present in writings concerning martyrs and monastic life.

Throughout history, the practice of sports in various forms of entertainment has remained constant, consistently attracting people to participate. During the medieval period, hunting was called the “Sport of Kings,” enjoying popularity across Europe and Asia while also serving as a means of survival in some regions. This activity involved using dogs, pikes, bows and arrows, crossbows, and even swords. Saint Hubert is recognized as the patron saint of hunters, dogs, and archers. Initially indifferent to his faith, Hubert experienced a transformative turn in his life after the death of his wife. He withdrew from the royal court to dedicate himself to hunting. According to a legend, he had a profound encounter with a stag that bore a crucifix between its antlers, which inspired Hubert to turn his life toward God. “He noticed between the deer’s antlers was a crucifix, radiant with light. St. Hubert heard a voice telling him to turn his life over to God. He got down from his horse, knelt on the ground, and promised that he would follow the Lord’s command.”<sup>33</sup>

### **1.5. Middle Ages: Priestly Formation**

During this period, scholasticism flourished, giving rise to prominent theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus. By the end of this period, seminaries emerged as specialized institutions for the training of priests.

During the Middle Ages, priestly formation developed through a combination of apprenticeship under experienced clergy and formal education in cathedral schools and monastic settings. Candidates for the priesthood were instructed in basic literacy, Scripture, theology, and liturgical practice, often within communities shaped by monastic discipline and spiritual formation. Over time, concerns about the quality and consistency of clerical

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<sup>33</sup> “The Symbolism of the Saint Hubert Medal,” Catholic Saint Medals, accessed October 19, 2024, <https://catholicsaintmedals.com/saints/st-hubert/>.

education led to reforms that eventually culminated in the establishment of seminaries, especially after the Council of Trent.<sup>34</sup>

The movement toward reform in priestly education led to the establishment of dedicated seminaries. These institutions responded to the existing system's perceived shortcomings, designed to provide a more thorough and systematic approach to priestly training. They ensured that candidates for the clergy received the comprehensive education necessary for effective pastoral ministry and a deeper understanding of theological principles, marking a significant evolution in the preparation of priests.

## **1.6. Priestly Formation Council of Trent**

In 1536, Pope Paul III took a significant step toward addressing the clerical issues within the Catholic Church by appointing a dedicated commission tasked with the urgent matter of clerical reform. This commission diligently worked for a year and, in 1537, presented a comprehensive report to the Pope that meticulously examined the root causes of the principal abuses plaguing the clergy at that time. "The Council of Trent decreed that every cathedral and metropolitan church was required to establish a diocesan seminary, while smaller dioceses were permitted to collaborate in the creation of regional seminaries."<sup>35</sup> The Council further mandated that all candidates for the priesthood be formed within a seminary setting, emphasizing a balanced program of intellectual formation particularly "in Sacred Scripture, theology, and ecclesiastical discipline together with sustained spiritual formation marked by clerical discipline, regular participation in the

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<sup>34</sup> John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 132–140; R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 171–190.

<sup>35</sup> Council of Trent, Session XXIII (July 15, 1563), "Decree on Reform, Chapter XVIII," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, SJ, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 739–742.

sacramental life of the Church, and proven moral character. Preference was to be given, whenever possible, to candidates of good reputation, including the sons of the poor.”<sup>36</sup> Finally, the Council stipulated that those appointed as professors in seminaries must be suitably qualified and possess advanced academic preparation in their respective fields, thereby ensuring a high standard of priestly education.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.7. Priestly Formation: Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council brought significant renewal to the Catholic Church’s understanding of priesthood and priestly formation, emphasizing the relationship between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of all the baptized, and highlighting the need for integrated human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation for future priests.<sup>38</sup> A central element of this renewal was a more precise articulation of the relationship between the common priesthood shared by all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood received through the sacrament of Holy Orders, highlighting their distinct roles while affirming their complementary participation in the one priesthood of Christ.<sup>39</sup> This renewed theological vision is articulated most clearly in several foundational conciliar documents. *Lumen Gentium* offers a renewed understanding of the Church that places the priesthood within the broader mystery and mission of the ecclesial community.<sup>40</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*

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<sup>36</sup> Council of Trent, Session XXIII, “Decree on Reform, Chapters II and XVIII,” in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 734–742.

<sup>37</sup> Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, vol. 2 (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1961), 281–284.

<sup>38</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Optatum Totius*: Decree on Priestly Training, nos. 4–8.

<sup>39</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), no. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), nos. 10–11.

concentrates on the identity, life, and pastoral ministry of priests within the Church.<sup>41</sup> *Optatam Totius* establishes foundational principles for priestly formation, emphasizing a holistic approach that integrates human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development.<sup>42</sup>

In the decades following the Council, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, national and regional episcopal conferences around the world intensified their efforts to implement and further develop conciliar teachings by establishing renewed norms for priestly formation.<sup>43</sup> These initiatives were intended to enhance both the intellectual and spiritual formation of future priests, enabling them to engage effectively with contemporary cultural challenges and the evolving pastoral needs of the faithful, while remaining firmly rooted in the Church's theological and spiritual tradition.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, the Congregation for the Clergy and the Congregation for Catholic Education issued a series of significant postconciliar documents aimed at enhancing various dimensions of seminary formation. Some of these texts focused on the renewal and modernization of academic curricula, "including studies in patristics, philosophy, canon law, and homiletics, while others emphasized spiritual, liturgical, and pastoral formation."<sup>45</sup> Comprehensive guidelines were also developed to provide a holistic framework for the life and ministry of priests. When read in conjunction with other

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<sup>41</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), nos. 2–3.

<sup>42</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Training) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), nos. 4–8.

<sup>43</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1970; rev. ed. 1985); cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992).

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), nos. 5–6, 43; cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985).

<sup>45</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 87–94.

foundational documents of the Holy See such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Code of Canon Law* these texts underscore “that priestly formation is an ongoing and dynamic process requiring continual discernment, evaluation, and adaptation.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the challenge for Catholic seminaries lies not merely in acknowledging these authoritative documents but in effectively integrating them into academic curricula, communal life, and pastoral training programs.

In response to the complex demands of postmodern society, the Catholic Church has continued to reassess and renew its approach to priestly life and formation. “Over the past five decades, each of the six Popes who have guided the Church since the Second Vatican Council has actively contributed to this process of renewal, consistently calling for priests to cultivate a deep spiritual life rooted in prayer, sacramental fidelity, and pastoral charity.”<sup>47</sup> Their teaching highlights the necessity of forming priests who serve the faithful with integrity, compassion, and missionary zeal.

In conclusion, it is essential to acknowledge with gratitude the steadfast guidance and providential care of God in sustaining and nurturing priests during these transformative moments in the life of the Church. The ongoing renewal of priestly formation reflects a living dialogue between tradition and contemporary realities, as seminaries strive to prepare future leaders capable of responding faithfully to the spiritual needs of their communities in an ever-changing world.

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<sup>46</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 1536–1600; *Code of Canon Law* (1983), cann. 232–264.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), nos. 19–26; Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), nos. 23–26; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), nos. 262–283.

## 1.8. Sports in the History of Christianity: A Very Brief Overview

Early Christianity emerged within a strongly ascetical context that emphasized spiritual discipline and the formation of the soul. The concept of *askesis*, a term originally used in Greek culture to describe athletic training and physical discipline, was adopted by early Christians to refer instead to spiritual discipline, self-denial, and growth in holiness rather than merely physical competition<sup>48</sup>

Scripture provides clear examples of ascetical living in figures such as John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, and Saint Paul. In particular, John the Baptist's austere life in the desert characterized by fasting, simplicity, and renunciation embodies the prophetic tradition, which places a priority on spiritual readiness rather than comfort, leisure, or recreation.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the earliest Christian communities were primarily focused on proclaiming the Gospel and discerning its implications across diverse cultural contexts. "Their theological deliberations centered on matters such as marriage, dietary laws, ecclesial structure, and fidelity to Jewish customs, often guided through communal discernment under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."<sup>50</sup>

Within the Greco-Roman world, public spectacles including athletic competitions and gladiatorial games were widespread and culturally influential. "Early Christians debated whether participation in or attendance at such events was compatible with

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<sup>48</sup> William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17–25.

<sup>49</sup> See Matt. 3:1–4; Mark 1:6; Luke 1:80; cf. Matt. 11:18.

<sup>50</sup> Acts 10–15 (NABRE); Gal. 2:1–10 (NABRE); see also Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 256–263.

discipleship, particularly given the moral excesses associated with Roman spectacles.”<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, athletic culture remained a powerful cultural reference point, especially in cities shaped by Greek ideals of physical excellence and Roman public entertainment.

Over time, the Church’s attitude toward sport evolved significantly. While early Christian writers expressed caution, later ecclesial teaching came to recognize the value of physical activity when integrated within a balanced anthropology. “The Catholic tradition increasingly affirmed sport as a means of promoting human flourishing, provided it is practiced with moderation and ethical integrity.”<sup>52</sup> “Contemporary Church teaching emphasizes sport’s capacity to foster virtues such as discipline, solidarity, perseverance, and respect, particularly among the young.”<sup>53</sup>

Saint Paul offers a pivotal bridge between athletic culture and Christian spirituality. “Writing to communities familiar with Greek athletic traditions such as Corinth and Philippi Paul frequently employed athletic metaphors to describe the Christian life. Drawing on imagery from the Isthmian Games, he likened discipleship to disciplined training and a competitive race aimed at an imperishable crown.”<sup>54</sup> Through these metaphors, Paul reframed athletic discipline as a model for spiritual perseverance, moral self-control, and faithful adherence to the Gospel.

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<sup>51</sup> Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 79–89.

<sup>52</sup> Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Sport at the Service of Humanity* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), no. 1.

<sup>53</sup> John Paul II, “Homily for the Jubilee of Sports People,” October 29, 2000, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2026/april/documents/20260409-giochi-olimpici.html>.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Cor. 9:24–27 (NABRE); Phil. 3:12–14 (NABRE); see also Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 211–214.

Influenced by Pauline theology, early Christian writers continued to employ athletic imagery to articulate themes of discipleship, martyrdom, and monastic discipline. “This engagement with Greek cultural forms established an enduring pattern of inculturation, shaping how Christianity dialogued with surrounding cultures throughout late antiquity and the medieval period.”<sup>55</sup>

### **1.9. Catholic Approach to the Definition of Sport**

A general definition of sport describes it as a structured activity involving physical effort, skill, and rules, typically practiced for enjoyment, competition, or professional purposes.<sup>56</sup> From a Catholic perspective, however, sport cannot be reduced to a single fixed definition. In the document *Giving the Best of Yourself*, Pope Francis emphasizes that sport is historically and culturally conditioned and therefore resists a definitive definition. As he notes, “sport is subject to historical change... there will never be a final definition of sport.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the document identifies several essential characteristics that help explain what sport is and how it contributes to human development.

The first characteristic is that sport fundamentally involves the human body in motion. Although some activities considered sports require less physical exertion than others, sport generally includes bodily movement, exercise, and physical engagement. Activities such as bowling, golf, table tennis, or darts demonstrate that sport does not always require intense athleticism, yet still involves coordination, skill, and physical

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<sup>55</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 327–331.

<sup>56</sup> Cambridge University Press, “Sport,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sport>.

<sup>57</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City: Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, 2018).

participation. Thus, sport can include a wide range of physical activities, from recreational games to highly competitive athletic performance.<sup>58</sup>

Second, sport is described as a **ludic activity**, meaning that it has value in itself rather than being merely a means to an external goal. Pope Francis explains that “sport is not an activity in order to achieve an external purpose but has its purpose in itself.”<sup>59</sup> Internal goals of sport include improving personal performance, developing skills, cooperating with teammates, and striving to win a competition through fair play. At the same time, modern professional sports often serve external purposes such as economic profit, political prestige, or national identity, as seen in international competitions like the Olympic Games or the World Cup. However, when external goals completely overshadow the intrinsic purpose of sport, the activity risks becoming mere labor rather than play.<sup>60</sup>

A third essential element of sport is the presence of rules. Every sport operates within a structured set of regulations that determine how the game is played and how participants compete. These rules create fairness, consistency, and order within the sport. Athletes pursue internal goals such as scoring points, improving performance, or winning competitions, but they must always do so within the established rules of the game. The existence of rules ensures that competition remains fair and meaningful, and it also adds strategic complexity to sporting activities.<sup>61</sup>

Fourth, sport is inherently competitive. Competition is not limited only to organized tournaments or professional athletics; even recreational athletes often compete against their

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<sup>58</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, no. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nos. 10–11.

<sup>60</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*. No.11.

<sup>61</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, no. 12.

own previous performance or personal limits. As noted in Church teaching on sport, even an amateur athlete who trains for enjoyment still competes by attempting to improve personal performance or reach specific goals.<sup>62</sup> This competitive dimension motivates athletes to train, improve, and strive for excellence, making competition a central component of sport.

Finally, a fundamental principle of sport is equality of opportunity. Fair competition requires that participants begin under reasonably equal conditions. For this reason, sporting events typically organize competitors according to categories such as age, sex, performance level, weight class, or disability classification. These categories help ensure fairness and allow participants to compete against others with similar abilities and conditions.<sup>63</sup> Events such as major marathons illustrate this principle by organizing runners into divisions based on age groups, qualifying times, and performance levels, thereby promoting fairness, participation, and mutual respect among competitors.

From a Catholic perspective, these characteristics demonstrate that sport is not merely physical activity or entertainment but a human activity with educational, social, and moral dimensions. When practiced ethically and in moderation, sport contributes to human development, fosters virtue, and promotes community and solidarity among participants.

### **1.10. Theological Approaches to Sport**

In the realm of theology, we acknowledge the profound truth that we are created in the image and likeness of God, often referred to as “*imago Dei*.” Participation in sports

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<sup>62</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nos.12-13

<sup>63</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nos.13-15

and various forms of play offers a unique opportunity for individuals to explore and reflect on their inherent nature. These activities can deepen our understanding of the divine qualities that enrich our humanity, illuminating the connections between our physical pursuits and our spiritual essence. Such engagement fosters a holistic appreciation of both our individual and collective experiences.

Lincoln Harvey, a systematic theology professor, states that “sport is to do with our true nature. It is to do with who we really are. It is a question of our created being.”<sup>64</sup> This means that engaging in sports connects individuals to their fundamental identity as human beings, reflecting a core aspect of our existence. Essentially, participation in sports facilitates the expression of an intrinsic part of ourselves through play and competition. Harvey argues that sports possess intrinsic value that goes beyond mere utility or the achievement of goals; they embody a significant aspect of our humanity. He views play, which is central to sports, as a way to engage with our authentic selves, free from the constraints of everyday life. By participating in sports, individuals connect with the intrinsic goodness of creation and fully embrace the joy of being human.

Robert Ellis presents a unique perspective on the theology of sport in his book, *The Games People Play*. His view, distinct from that of Harvey, is a compelling exploration of the role of play in our relationship with God. Ellis asserts, “Play is not simply the mode of God’s act of creation; it is also a means by which creatures become open to receiving life as the Creator’s gift and therefore, open to the Creator in relationships and potentiality.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport* (Great Britain: Cascade Books, 2014), xi.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2014), 147.

This perspective, where play fosters an openness to God, leading to transcendent encounters, is a thought-provoking addition to the discourse. Ellis's exploration of the concept of human achievement is a dynamic and engaging one. He constructs his argument through an Irenaean interpretation of the *imago Dei*, contending that humanity is not created complete; rather, we are inherently open to God and to the possibilities of growth and flourishing. This view of humanity as constantly striving for perfection, aiming to transcend and connect with God as seen in the *imago Dei*, is a call to action. "Humanity in the *imago Dei* is a dynamic creature of potential, reaching beyond itself to God, and sport exemplifies this human characteristic in a distinctive way. This human restlessness, is starving for better, and is the ultimately as striving after God."<sup>66</sup> Sport, in Ellis's view, "serves as an ideal medium for this pursuit, exemplifying the human characteristic of restlessness and yearning for improvement that ultimately reflects a striving after God."<sup>67</sup>

While it is understood that God did not directly create games and sports, it is recognized that He has endowed individuals with the physical abilities necessary to engage in activities such as running, jumping, kicking, swimming, and catching. These inherent talents manifest themselves in organized sports, allowing individuals to demonstrate these divine gifts. As beings created in His image, we recognize that our athletic abilities are blessings from God. Consequently, it is our obligation to utilize these talents not only for personal enjoyment but also to honor our Creator by glorifying Him through virtuous conduct, placing Him at the core of all our endeavors. Each sport, whether it is a team-based endeavor like soccer or basketball, or an individual challenge such as tennis or

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<sup>66</sup>Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 243-44.

<sup>67</sup>Ellis, *The Games People Play*, 147.

swimming, provides a structured environment for us to actively engage with and cultivate these God-given abilities. Through the competitive elements of sports, we not only learn how to enhance our physical fitness and coordination but also discover invaluable life lessons about perseverance, discipline, and strategic thinking. Moreover, sports often involve challenging ourselves, pushing our limits, and setting personal goals, which fosters personal growth in various dimensions of life.

Engaging in sports and various forms of play with a deep sense of integrity is essential. It is crucial to recognize the significance of being truthful and genuine in our interactions on and off the field, while consciously avoiding any form of pretense or dishonesty. Upholding the established rules of the game is not just about fair play; it also reflects a commitment to higher principles that guide us. Seeking divine guidance in our actions can help us navigate the challenges of competition and teamwork alike. Additionally, a true expression of love and camaraderie in sports often manifests in how we support and uplift our teammates. Listening to the needs of others and responding through our actions is vital not just for individual success, but for fostering a strong sense of community and collaboration. This commitment to helping one another should be paired with a relentless pursuit of personal excellence, where we consistently strive to give our very best for the benefit of the group.

Looking back at my journey from college through my time at the seminary, I appreciate the vital lessons I learned along the way. One of the most significant shifts I experienced was learning to temper my intense desire to win. At the Franciscan seminary, the role of sports shifted from a mere competitive arena to an opportunity for meaningful connections with my Franciscan brothers. It became less about victory and more about the

joy of participating, engaging in physical exercise, and cherishing the moments spent in each other's company. This newfound perspective emphasized the importance of building relationships and enjoying the activity itself, rather than focusing solely on the outcome.

Pope Francis talks about how the human individual, created in the image and likeness of God, holds greater significance than sports. It is imperative to recognize that individuals are not designed to serve sports; rather, "sports should serve human individuals in their integral development."<sup>68</sup> "As has been mentioned, the person is a unity of body, soul and spirit, this means that the embodied experiences of play and sport necessarily also involve and impact young people at the level of soul and spirit. For this reason, they can be a part of the education of the whole person."<sup>69</sup> Pope Francis has voiced his support for the inclusion of play and physical activity in a well-rounded education that addresses intellectual, emotional, and physical development, encompassing cognition, emotion, and action. He believes that modern formal education places excessive emphasis on intellectual complexities while neglecting other important aspects. The Pope advocates for the incorporation of informal education, such as sports, as a complement to formal education. "There is no humanism, and where there is no humanism, Christ cannot enter!"<sup>70</sup>

### **1.11. Sports in the Teaching of the Catholic Church**

The Church's teaching authority is vested in each of the bishops worldwide. It encompasses two forms of teaching: the ordinary teaching, which refers to the daily

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<sup>68</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City: Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, 2018), no. 1.2.

<sup>69</sup> Francis, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, no. 43.

<sup>70</sup> Francis, "Address to the Participants of the World Congress 'Education Today and Tomorrow: A Passion that Is Renewed,'" Paul VI Hall, November 21, 2015.

teachings of the bishops, and the extraordinary magisterium, which pertains to teachings promulgated in a Council or through a dogmatic declaration of the Pope. The connection between sports and the teachings of the Church is apparent. The utilization of sports as a means of evangelism has a longstanding tradition within the global Catholic Church, with numerous popes historically endorsing this practice. This approach underscores the belief that sports can cultivate community, promote teamwork and perseverance, and provide a platform for disseminating the Christian faith. For instance, sports events can be used as a platform to share the Gospel, or sports teams can be formed within the Church to build a sense of community and faith. Notable figures such as Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have made significant contributions to this discourse by acknowledging the substantial influence of sports on culture and outreach efforts. Their teachings frequently highlight the necessity of engaging with young individuals through athletic activities, bolstering moral development, and advocating for social justice within sports. As a Catholic priest with a profound passion for sports, I have become acquainted with these historical contributions and the ongoing initiatives to bridge Catholicism and the sports world. I recognize that this unique intersection where faith and sports converge, fosters spiritual growth and enhances the sporting experience for individuals and communities.

#### **1.12. Papal Perspectives on Sport**

Throughout the history of the Church, several Popes have conveyed favorable perspectives regarding sports. Pope Pius X notably contributed to this effort by establishing connections with various sports organizations. In 1905, he graciously hosted the inaugural international gymnastics competition at the Vatican, extending a warm reception to the

participating athletes. During his address to the participants, Pius X said, “The material exercises of the body will admirably influence the exercises of the spirit.”<sup>71</sup>

Pope Pius XII stressed the spiritual advantages of sports. He viewed sports as a chance to impart Christian principles and contribute to the nurturing of spiritual life, especially for young people. In a communication to Italian athletes in 1945, Pius XII expressed the following: “Sport is a school of loyalty, courage, endurance, resolve, universal brotherhood, all the natural virtues.”<sup>72</sup>

Pope John Paul II strengthened the Catholic Church's interest in sport by considering it as a means for the development of both body and soul. He also used sport as an important tool for evangelization. He held two international sports gatherings in which he spoke to numerous athletes, sports associations, and other organizational leaders about the power of sports. In 1991, he addressed athletes and emphasized the significance of sports. “Foster the orderly and harmonious development of the body at the service of the spirit.”<sup>73</sup>

Pope Francis viewed sport as a means to build peace. In a video message before the start of the 2014 World Cup, he said, “Sport is not only a form of entertainment, but also and I would say above all a tool to communicate values which promote the good of the human person and contribute to building a more peaceful and fraternal society. Just think

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<sup>71</sup> Jaime Morales Jr., “The Church Has Long Used Sports to Evangelize,” *Herald Malaysia*, accessed October 19, 2024, <https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/the-church-has-long-used-sports-to-evangelise/77339/14>.

<sup>72</sup> Francis, “Audience with the ‘Athletica Vaticana’ Sports Association,” January 13, 2024, Holy See Press Office, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/01/13/240113a.html>.

<sup>73</sup> “The Catholic Church Is Using the Paris Olympics to Engage Young People,” *UConn Today*, accessed July 28, 2024, <https://today.uconn.edu/2024/07/the-catholic-church-is-using-the-paris-olympics-to-engage-young-people/>.

of loyalty, perseverance, friendship, sharing, solidarity. There are, in fact, many values and attitudes which football promotes, and which prove to be important not only on the field but in all fields of existence, and specifically in building peace. Sport is a school of peace; it teaches us how to build peace.”<sup>74</sup>

### **1.13. Catholic Beliefs and Values through Sport**

Pope Pius XII emphasized the profound spiritual benefits of engaging in athletics, viewing sports not merely as physical activities, but as valuable opportunities to instill Christian values and foster spiritual development, particularly in the lives of young individuals. In a notable address delivered to Italian athletes in 1945, he articulated sports’ essential role in shaping character. He remarked, “Sport serves as an education in loyalty, bravery, perseverance, determination, worldwide brotherhood, and all the inherent virtues.”<sup>75</sup> This statement underscores his belief that athletics can cultivate essential life skills and moral virtues, serving as a unique platform that educates participants in Christian values. Through sports, he saw a path for youth to grow not only physically but also ethically and spiritually, learning lessons that extend beyond the playing field and into their daily lives.

The expression of Catholic beliefs and values through sports encompasses a variety of principles that guide the way athletes, coaches, and communities approach competition and physical activity. At the heart of this is the idea of sportsmanship, which reflects respect

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<sup>74</sup> Francis, “Video Message of Pope Francis on the Occasion of the Opening of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil,” June 12, 2014, The Holy See, accessed October 21, 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140612\\_videomessaggio-mondiale-calcio-2014-brasile.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140612_videomessaggio-mondiale-calcio-2014-brasile.html).

<sup>75</sup> Pius XII, “Address to Italian Sportsmen,” May 20, 1945, The Holy See, accessed October 21, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/speeches/1945.index.html>.

for opponents, honesty in play, and grace in both victory and defeat. Catholic teachings emphasize the dignity of the human person, which translates into treating all participants in sports with fairness and respect. This includes fostering inclusivity and encouraging teamwork, as Catholic values that highlight the importance of community and collaboration. Moreover, perseverance and the pursuit of excellence in sports mirror the Catholic call to strive for personal growth and virtue. Athletes are encouraged to embrace challenges as opportunities for development, mirroring the faith's emphasis on personal sacrifice and commitment. Additionally, sports can serve as a platform for charity and service, reflecting the Catholic mission to help others and engage in community outreach. Whether through fundraising events, mentorship programs, or community sports leagues, the intersection of faith and athletics can lead to a positive impact beyond the sports field. In summary, Catholic beliefs and values expressed through sports underscore the importance of integrity, community, personal growth, and service, creating an environment where both faith and athleticism can flourish together.

Pope John Paul II is widely acknowledged for his transformative impact on the Catholic Church's relationship with sports. He firmly believed that sports could serve as an influential medium for promoting both physical health and spiritual wellness among individuals. To formalize this vision, he established the "Office of Church and Sport" within the Pontifical Council of the Laity. This move marked a significant step towards integrating the realms of athletic endeavor and spiritual development. One of the central tenets of Pope John Paul II's philosophy was the concept of holistic development. He envisioned sports as much more than mere entertainment or competition; for him, they were a vital means of fostering comprehensive personal growth. His emphasis on holistic

development highlighted the importance of nurturing both physical fitness and spiritual maturity, arguing that the two are interconnected aspects of a well-rounded life. Additionally, John Paul II recognized the potential of sports as an evangelization tool. He actively leveraged athletic events and the culture surrounding sports to disseminate Christian values and teachings to a broader audience. By doing so, he sought not only to engage existing believers but also to reach out to those who might be distant from the Church, using the language of sports to communicate messages of hope, solidarity, and faith.

The creation of the Office of Church and Sport was a pivotal moment in this initiative (2004). This office was dedicated to cultivating a deeper connection between the Church and the world of sports, providing resources, guidance, and support for athletes, coaches, and sports organizations. It aimed to promote initiatives that uphold the dignity of athletes and encourage ethical practices in sports that align with Christian teachings. Pope John Paul II's personal affinity for sports also played a significant role in his outreach. An avid soccer fan and enthusiastic skier, he was often affectionately referred to as the "athlete pope." His genuine love for sports resonated with many, allowing him to connect with people from diverse backgrounds and ages. Through this relationship with sports, he championed the idea that physical activity could lead to spiritual fulfillment and community building, echoing his broader vision for a Church that actively engages with the realities of contemporary life.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN PRIESTLY FORMATION

#### 2. Introduction

This chapter aims to engage deeply with Osmer's concept of the "empirical task" by closely examining the role of sports within the evolving practices of priestly formation in various contexts of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church throughout the United States. This discussion encompasses a diverse range of team sports including basketball, soccer, and golf and various individual sports, such as walking and running, as well as recreational activities involving board and table games.

The analysis delves into how these sports and recreational activities contribute to the personal and professional development of individuals who hold the priestly vocation in high regard. It explores not only the physical aspects of participation in sport, but also the social dynamics and interpersonal relationships that arise within team environments. This chapter investigates how engagement in sports fosters essential skills and attributes, including self-discipline, teamwork, leadership, and perseverance. These traits are not only pivotal for success in athletic endeavors but are also critically relevant to the priestly vocation and its myriad challenges, a role that commands respect and reverence.

Additionally, this chapter critically evaluates the validity of prevalent beliefs regarding the idea that sport serves as an effective medium for character development. Such beliefs have been expressed in various ways, including such things as the use of the term "sport" in biblical translation. For example, in his work on the theology of sport, Erik

Dailey maintains that “Sport is cultural manifestation rooted in God’s creation. Humanity was created by God in freedom not for God to accomplish something, but purely for the abundant joy of creating. And creation is also to engage in play.”<sup>76</sup> And at least one English translation of Psalm 104 proclaims, “Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it” (Ps 104: 25-26).<sup>77</sup>

This study utilizes empirical evidence, along with personal narratives, to demonstrate how such experiences can influence the growth of future leaders within the Church. By providing practical examples drawn from my own experiences and data from various seminaries, this chapter offers a nuanced understanding of the role that sports, and recreational activities play in the holistic development of candidates for the priesthood, all backed by solid empirical evidence.

Incorporating sports and recreational activities into priesthood training programs is therefore an investment in the holistic development of future priests. It promotes not only physical fitness and mental well-being but also enriches their spiritual lives, helps them to build resilience, and strengthens their ties with the community they aspire to serve. Ultimately, by emphasizing the value of teamwork, discipline, and perseverance cultivated through sports, seminarians and priests enhance their effectiveness as future leaders in the Church, equipping them with the necessary tools to guide their flocks with compassion and strength.

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<sup>76</sup> Erik W. Dailey, *The Fit Should Inherit the Earth: A Theology of Sport and Fitness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 80.

<sup>77</sup> Ps. 104:25–26 (NRSV).

## **2.1. Sports and Games that are Played in Today's Catholic Seminaries**

Sports and games played in seminaries encompass a diverse range of both team and individual sports, each offering unique benefits and experiences for participants. Team sports are characterized by collaborative efforts among players, where teamwork, strategy, and coordination are crucial for success. In these sports, athletes must communicate effectively, understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, and work harmoniously towards a common goal. Traditional team sports play a vital role in Catholic seminaries, serving as a key component in promoting collaboration and effective communication among participants. Sports like basketball, soccer, volleyball, frisbee, golf, and various table games not only enhance the spirit of teamwork but also foster the development of essential life skills such as leadership, strategic thinking, and conflict resolution. These skills are not just for the playing field but can be applied to seminary life. For instance, the leadership skills learned in sports can be applied to leading a prayer group, and strategic thinking can be used in planning community events.

In contrast, individual sports are competitions where a sole athlete competes against others independently. In these sports, the emphasis is placed on personal skill, discipline, and self-motivation, as athletes strive to achieve their best performance without the support of teammates. Examples include tennis, where players engage in a fast-paced duel on a court; track and field events, which encompass various sports such as walking, running, jumping, and throwing disciplines; and swimming, where competitors race against one

another in the water. Individual sports often cultivate a strong sense of personal accountability and resilience, as athletes must rely on their own abilities to succeed.

In contemporary Catholic seminaries, a diverse range of sports and games are actively incorporated into the daily routines of the seminarians. These activities not only serve as a means of physical fitness but also play a crucial role in building essential life skills. Participating in team sports fosters a sense of fellowship and collaboration among the seminarians, allowing them to develop strong bonds that enhance their communal life. Furthermore, engaging in athletic activities encourages self-discipline, as it requires commitment, practice, and perseverance to improve one's skills and performance. Leadership qualities are also cultivated through these sports, as seminarians take on various roles within teams, learning to motivate and inspire their peers while navigating challenges and celebrating successes together. The focus on physical activities promotes a holistic approach to formation, emphasizing the balance between spiritual, intellectual, and physical development, which is vital for future leaders in the Church. Finally, the integration of sports and games within seminary life enriches the formation experience, preparing seminarians for both their pastoral missions and their roles in the wider community.

Examples of popular team sports include basketball, where players aim to score points by shooting a ball through the opposing team's hoop; soccer, which involves maneuvering a ball to score goals while adhering to gameplay rules; and volleyball, where teams attempt to hit a ball over a net to ground it on the opponent's side. These sports not only promote physical fitness but also foster social skills, as players learn the importance of cooperation and trust within a group setting. Each of these sports requires participants

to work together towards a common goal, teaching them the importance of cooperation and understanding diverse perspectives. While I was in the seminary, every Tuesday after dinner, we used to gather and play table games. One of my favorite games is called Mafia, which is a social deduction game where players are secretly assigned to one of two groups: the mafiosi or the villagers. Playing it helps to enhance reasoning skills for making better decisions by playing different characters.

In tandem with the benefits of team sports, individual activities are held in high regard as well at seminaries. Pursuits such as running, cycling, swimming, and kayaking offer participants a chance to challenge themselves personally and set individual fitness goals. These activities not only promote physical endurance and health but also play a significant role in promoting mental health and well-being. Engaging in individual sports encourages a mindset centered on personal achievement and growth, fostering intrinsic motivation and a long-lasting appreciation for the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

## **2.2. Basketball**

Every year, Mundelein Seminary, located in the picturesque landscape of northern Illinois, becomes a hub of vitality and fellowship as hundreds of seminarians from diverse dioceses across the United States converge for an important formation event. This gathering typically occurs during the last week of January, setting a dynamic tone for the seminary's winter season. Unlike traditional gatherings that focus on spiritual retreats or theological discussions, this event uniquely emphasizes basketball to foster a strong sense of community, teamwork, and healthy competition among future clergy.

For instance, in the previous year's thrilling tournament, ten seminaries displayed their skills on the court, each striving for the prestigious chance to progress into the coveted Championship Bracket. The atmosphere was charged with excitement as the seminarians not only relished the game's thrill but also forged lasting friendships and deepened their bonds in the shared experience of sportsmanship and faith. This annual event is a powerful testament to the importance of harmonizing spiritual growth with physical activity and community spirit in the lives of those preparing for the priesthood.

Throughout my four years at Mundelein Seminary, one annual event always stood out as a pinnacle of the season: the seminary basketball tournament. Winters in Illinois can be harsh, with biting cold and heavy snowfall, yet coming together with fellow seminarians in a spirit of fellowship was a refreshing escape. Each year, anticipation swelled as we prepared for this occasion, which not only fostered competition but also celebrated the talents and dedication of our peers. This event, more than any other, reminded us of the strength found in unity and shared passion, and its impact on my personal journey was profound.

My last year at the seminary, I was given the responsibility of managing the livestreaming of the event. At that time, before the widespread adoption of live streaming due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our setup was rather rudimentary. All we had was a basic camera and a simple streaming platform, which pales in comparison to the sophisticated technologies available today. Nevertheless, the live stream proved to be an invaluable tool; it enabled friends, families, and alumni from different seminaries and locations to tune in and experience the excitement of the day remotely. It was heartwarming to see viewers

leave specific encouraging comments like 'Go Team Blue!' and cheer for their teams from afar with comments like “You can do it, John!”.

I also noticed the presence of some parents who made the journey to support their sons on this special event. Their presence brought an added layer of joy and pride to the event, filling the air with warmth and support. It was touching to witness the strong bonds of encouragement that reinforced the sense of community among us seminarians. This blend of competition, support, and family made the event truly unforgettable, and it reminded me of one of my fondest memories from my time at primary school, where some of my family members came to support me when I was starting to play soccer.

Mundelein Seminary is just one of several theological institutions across the United States that organizes basketball tournaments. Among these, St. Francis de Sales Seminary in Milwaukee is also noteworthy for its enthusiastic participation in similar sporting events. The anticipation surrounding the upcoming training for this competition was palpable among my classmates, who were excited about the chance to showcase their athletic skills and foster camaraderie. One year, their basketball tournament saw robust participation from a total of 13 seminaries, highlighting a growing trend of inter-seminary competition that not only promotes physical fitness but also strengthens community ties among future clergy. Each year, these tournaments serve as a platform for fellowship, teamwork, and friendly rivalry, making them a cherished tradition. “Participants mostly came from major seminaries preparing men for the diocesan priesthood, but also included minor seminaries, like St. John Vianney in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, as well as houses of

formation for men in religious life, like the Congregation of the Holy Cross' Moreau Seminary, located at the University of Notre Dame.”<sup>78</sup>

### **2.3. Soccer**

Soccer, widely recognized as the world's premier sport, is making a significant impact on the hearts of many across America, particularly within seminaries. Mundelein Seminary is fortunate to have a dedicated soccer field and exceptional facilities that could host a large-scale tournament. The seminary eagerly anticipates the day it can bring this vision to fruition, a day that promises to be filled with excitement and friendship. In the meantime, Mundelein's passionate soccer team is actively competing, embodying the spirit of teamwork and determination. It was a tremendous honor to be part of this team for four years, representing Mundelein in various tournaments across the nation. Mundelein Seminary has been graciously invited to participate in tournaments by several seminaries in the United States, reflecting the growing interest in soccer within our educational institutions.

Among the tournaments that Mundelein passionately participates in, two stand out prominently: the Josephinum Soccer Invitational Tournament, held annually near Columbus, Ohio, and another well-regarded event hosted by the Benedictines at Conception Seminary in Kansas. These tournaments not only provide teams with the opportunity to platform their skills on the field but also foster connection and friendly competition among seminaries. Each match serves as a chance to strengthen bonds with

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<sup>78</sup> “Basketball and Brotherhood for the Win at Annual Seminarian Hoops Tourney,” *National Catholic Register*, February 13, 2024, <https://www.ncregister.com/features/basketball-and-brotherhood-for-the-win-at-annual-seminarian-hoops-tourney>.

fellow seminarians and share each team's passion for the game. From the thrill of scoring goals to the challenges presented by closely contested matches, the experience is enriching on both personal and spiritual levels, inspiring seminarians to grow and develop in all aspects of their lives. I participated in both tournaments, and the journey truly began with the team's dedicated training sessions. Although we did not engage in professional-level drills, we consistently gathered for practice at least twice a week. Those sessions were more than just training; they were filled with camaraderie and laughter, allowing us to build friendships while keeping our focus on preparing for the upcoming soccer tournaments.

The journey from Mundelein to the Kansas Seminary was a significant part of the experience. It was an adventure that stretched several hours, providing us with ample time to share stories, reflect on our aspirations, pray together, and enjoy meals in each other's company. As we drove further away from home, the beginning of autumn set a perfect backdrop for our games, with the crisp air and colorful leaves enhancing our experience. At the Seminary, we met a diverse group of seminarians and priests from various seminaries across the United States. After our matches, one evening stands out vividly in my memory. We gathered in a cozy open space, indulging in delicious pizza, crispy chicken wings, and various drinks. During this social gathering, we truly bonded, sharing laughs, discussing our journeys, and realizing that we were part of something much larger than ourselves; we were not alone in pursuing the calling of priesthood. Our journey that year was remarkable, culminating in the final game. However, we faced a tough match against the local minor seminary, whose team was backed by a fervent crowd of parishioners. Their passionate support created an electrifying atmosphere, and I believe it was a significant

factor in their victory. Despite the loss, the thrill and adrenaline of that experience were unforgettable, leaving us with memories that would endure.

In the years that followed, the impact of those tournaments and the friendships we made continued to resonate. Some of the talented seminarians from the local team that we faced in the finals joined us at Mundelein Seminary for their theological studies, strengthening our team. As I look back on my last year at the seminary, I can vividly recall the soccer tournament in Columbus, Ohio. Like the ones before, it was a mix of competition and camaraderie, creating memories that I will always hold dear.

#### **2.4. Golf**

Golf is a sport that draws a diverse group of players, including seminarians and priests. For instance, some of my priest friends in Orlando took up golf after their ordination rather than during their time in seminary. They often express how enjoyable the game is, highlighting that it serves as an excellent way to cultivate friendships and strengthen bonds among clergy members. The peacefulness of the course, the focus required for each shot, and the patience needed for a good game all resonate with the spiritual aspects of our faith. As for me, I am still navigating the intricacies of the game. I often find that I need more swings to reach the green. Yet each outing on the course is a joyous experience. It provides a unique opportunity for meaningful conversations while enjoying the great outdoors. The blend of sport and fellowship creates a truly enriching pastime for priests.

Many seminaries across the United States host golf tournaments to significantly support the development and education of their seminarians. These events not only raise

essential funds but also foster community engagement and fellowship among participants. The significant donors who attend these events not only enjoy the beautiful grounds of the seminaries but also play a crucial role in supporting the seminarians and their education. Here are several notable tournaments organized by various seminaries. For instance, the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary Golf Classic<sup>79</sup> is a popular event that offers attendees a full day of golfing excitement followed by a gourmet dinner and an engaging auction. The proceeds from this tournament directly contribute to the formation programs of the seminarians, helping to provide them with the education and resources they need to succeed in their future roles. Another unique experience is Sacred Heart Major Seminary's Desert Golf Classic.<sup>80</sup> Set against the picturesque backdrop of Saint John's Resort in Plymouth, Michigan, this tournament serves a unique purpose. "The tournament supports the Desert Formation Experience, a thirty-day spiritual pilgrimage made every spring by first-year graduate seminarians. Traditionally, the Desert Formation Experience is an opportunity for seminarians to visit the Holy Land and experience the places Christ lived and ministered."<sup>81</sup> It primarily helps fund the Desert Formation Experience; a transformative spiritual pilgrimage designed for first-year graduate seminarians. Participants not only enjoy a day on the course but also play a vital role in supporting the spiritual growth of these future leaders. One more golf tournament, called The Saint Francis de Sales Seminary Golf Outing, is an event that allows people to directly contribute to the seminarians' educational journey. This event combines a day of golf with a delicious lunch and concludes with an

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<sup>79</sup> St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, "Golf Classic," *St. Charles Borromeo Seminary*, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.scs.edu/golf-classic>.

<sup>80</sup> Saint Francis de Sales Seminary, "Seminary Golf Outing," *Saint Francis de Sales Seminary*, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.sfs.edu/golf-outing>.

<sup>81</sup> "Teeing Off for a Cause: Sacred Heart Major Seminary's 42nd Annual Desert Golf Classic," *Mosaic Seminary*, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://mosaic.shms.edu/teeing-off-for-a-cause-sacred-heart-major-seminarys-42nd-annual-desert-golf-classic>.

elegant cocktail reception. The outing offers various sponsorship opportunities, allowing businesses and individuals to contribute significantly while enjoying a friendly day of competition and networking.

Mundelein Seminary also has a golf event, called the Seminary Annual Rector's Classic Golf Outing,<sup>82</sup> usually occurring in the second week of September at the scenic Pine Meadow Golf Club in Mundelein; this outing invites participants to support the formation of seminarians. Through golf, networking, and sponsorship opportunities, attendees play an instrumental role in ensuring that seminarians have the necessary support and resources to thrive. During my time as a seminarian, my fellow-seminarians and I used to take on different roles; some were responsible for the parking lot, while others oversaw the golf carts. One year, I was asked to help with photography, and that was fun because I got to take shots from the field, and I saw seminarians and parishioners having a good time. These golf tournaments provide financial aid to important seminary programs and create a fun and engaging atmosphere where participants can connect while contributing to a vital cause in their communities.

## **2.5. Walking and Running**

Running has become a beloved sport among seminarians, offering an opportunity for physical fitness and fellowship that can be enjoyed both individually and with others. At Mundelein Seminary, the sprawling campus presents an idyllic setting for running, particularly with the scenic route around the lake that measures over three miles. This

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<sup>82</sup> University of Saint Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary, "Rector's Classic Golf Outing," University of Saint Mary of the Lake, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.usml.edu/rectors-classic-golf-outing>.

expansive landscape enhances runners' experience and serves as a venue for various events, including multiple 5K walks and runs that occur throughout the academic year.

For my internship project, I organized a 5K walk and run for my former parish, situated in Mundelein, conveniently close to the grounds of Mundelein Seminary. This decision stemmed from my desire to foster community spirit, encourage healthy living among parishioners and the seminary community, and raise funds to develop a soccer field at the local parish. The event was a resounding success; we held it twice during my time there, and I am proud to say that it has continued as an annual tradition, with the sole exception of a hiatus in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These events not only promote physical fitness but also provide a platform for social interaction and community building, fostering a sense of belonging and unity among the participants.

In the two events that I led, I saw remarkable participation from over two hundred individuals, a diverse group that included my parishioners, participants from neighboring parishes, and some enthusiastic seminarians. The friendship was palpable as we gathered for the run, with seminarians not only participating but also training for other prestigious races, most notably the Chicago Marathon.<sup>83</sup> This marathon stands out as a hallmark event for runners and is renowned for drawing participants from around the globe, creating an atmosphere that celebrates sportsmanship and perseverance. Additionally, in my time as a seminarian at Mundelein Seminary, I had the privilege of meeting several participants of the Chicago Marathon, and I also had the opportunity to train alongside seminarians who were gearing up for this race. The dedication and passion of these runners were inspiring,

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<sup>83</sup> Bank of America Chicago Marathon, "About the Chicago Marathon," *Bank of America Chicago Marathon*, accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.chicagomarathon.com>.

emphasizing how sports can bring people together, regardless of their backgrounds. It was particularly heartwarming to see the presence of religious sisters, including the Franciscan sisters, who participated in the marathon not only to challenge themselves, but also as part of their charitable endeavors for the parish of St. Mary of the Angels. Their commitment to combining faith, fitness, and service exemplifies the profound impact that running and community events can have in bridging divides and fostering unity among various groups.

## **2.6. Board and Table Games**

As a community, Seminarians partake in diverse recreational activities that allow them to relax and forge connections during their downtime at the seminary. The most cherished pastimes are board games and tabletop games, which offer engaging experiences promoting teamwork, strategy, and friendly competition. One of the standout features of their leisure time is the spirited ping-pong matches held in the common areas. Participants frequently polish their skills and challenge one another to enhance their gameplay, creating a vibrant atmosphere filled with laughter and fellowship.

Unlike the fast-paced ping pong, many seminarians find solace in quieter moments spent engaged in intense chess matches. These games not only provide a mental workout but also nurture profound conversations as players discuss tactics and the philosophies underpinning their strategies. Moreover, various card games introduce a fun and interactive dimension to their recreational time. Open to all, these games range from classic trivia challenges that test knowledge across a broad spectrum of topics to immersive storytelling games that ignite creativity and spark the imagination. “Play is not the opposite of work

but an essential part of human flourishing and community building.”<sup>84</sup> Such inclusive and enjoyable activities enable the seminarians to appreciate each other’s company, share laughter, and deepen their friendships as they navigate these engaging experiences together.

These recreational activities, beyond serving as a respite from their rigorous studies, play a crucial role in the seminary experience. They provide a much-needed break, foster a sense of community, encourage joy and laughter, and strengthen the bonds of friendship among the seminarians, ultimately enhancing their overall experience at the seminary.

## **2.7. The Impact of Sports and Play on Personal and Professional Growth**

Engagement in sports and games plays a pivotal role in shaping both personal and professional development. These activities serve as a platform for cultivating essential leadership skills, allowing individuals to take initiative, make decisions, and guide their peers. Additionally, participation in team sports can significantly boost self-confidence, as individuals navigate challenges and achieve goals together, reinforcing their belief in their own abilities. The physicality inherent in sports promotes a healthy lifestyle, which is crucial for those in vocations such as the priesthood. “Almost without exception the most successful people not only worked hard but played with equal intensity. Furthermore, if their work was chiefly physical, they turn into their play to something cerebral (e.g., athletes often enjoyed meditation or reading.)”<sup>85</sup> Regular participation in physical activities not only builds stamina and instills a sense of dedication and energy but also

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<sup>84</sup> Brian Edgar, *The God Who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 45–50.

<sup>85</sup> Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 137.

fosters personal growth and development. This energetic commitment is vital for managing the diverse responsibilities that come with spiritual leadership, including community engagement, pastoral duties, and personal well-being. The journey of personal growth through sports can inspire and motivate future leaders.

Teamwork is another critical area enhanced through sports, as players learn to collaborate toward a common objective, embrace diverse roles, and support one another in both successes and setbacks. This collaborative spirit is invaluable in professional settings, where the ability to work effectively with others is crucial for achieving organizational goals. Furthermore, engaging in sports facilitates the improvement of communication skills. Athletes must constantly convey strategies and feedback to one another, honing their ability to articulate thoughts clearly and listen actively. This skill set is transferable to career environments where clear communication is key to maintaining productivity and fostering positive relationships.

Resilience is yet another important attribute developed through sports and play. Encountering losses and overcoming obstacles teaches individuals how to adapt, persevere, and maintain a positive outlook in the face of adversity. This mindset is not only beneficial in sports but also in professional pursuits where setbacks are inevitable. Moreover, sports instill a strong work ethic, as the discipline required for training, practice, and competition translates into a commitment to achieve goals in other areas of life. The dedication and effort athletes invest in their physical skills can mirror the persistence needed to excel in academic and professional arenas.

The competitive nature of sports offers valuable lessons that extend beyond the playing field, particularly in the context of spiritual leadership. Engaging in sports fosters a sense of humility in defeat and encourages individuals to exhibit grace in victory. These qualities are essential for future spiritual leaders, as they help cultivate a balanced approach to success and failure, grounding their character in empathy and resilience. Sports also serve as a unique platform for social interaction, allowing future priests to forge connections with people from various backgrounds and experiences. These interactions are invaluable, as they not only broaden one's perspective, but also enhance understanding of the complex spectrum of human experiences. By engaging with diverse groups through sports, future leaders can develop an open-minded and understanding approach, making them more effective in their spiritual missions. Building such networks can foster a deeper sense of connection and compassion, ultimately enriching pastoral care and outreach efforts within the community.

These various skills are particularly pertinent for seminarians who are preparing for their future roles as priests. As they embark on their spiritual journeys, the lessons learned through sports and play will equip them to lead their communities effectively, communicate compassionately, and exemplify the resilience required to navigate their vocations. The impact of sports and play extends far beyond physical well-being, laying a strong foundation for holistic growth in both personal development and professional success. These events provide seminarians with an invaluable opportunity to showcase their skills and talent, while also strengthening relationships with their peers. More than just a game, they build companionship, develop a sense of belonging, and cultivate a robust community spirit that extends beyond the playing field through participation in these

tournaments. Both team sports and individual activities contribute to a balanced approach to physical fitness, providing participants with varied opportunities to grow, connect, and thrive within their communities. These activities are not just about fun and games, but also about promoting a healthy lifestyle, and physical and spiritual well-being. “The practice of virtues requires at the same time effort, hard work and discipline (called “asceticism” by the Fathers in order to fight against the passions that have taken their place as a consequence of sin, to reduce their power, and ultimately eliminate them.”<sup>86</sup>

## 2.8. Self-Discipline

The Catholic Church emphasizes the importance of self-discipline as a vital practice for spiritual growth and moral integrity.<sup>87</sup> Self-discipline... empowers individuals to govern their actions and choices.<sup>88</sup> Practicing self-discipline within the Catholic faith encompasses a variety of spiritual activities and commitments.<sup>89</sup>

“Westerners have been conditioned to think that prayer is mostly a mental activity, largely located in the brain. But prayer is not a bodiless experience done only in the head, nor only in the heart. It is an experience of the whole person. It is compatible with other activities such as looking at art, writing, walking or swimming.”<sup>90</sup> For instance, engaging in daily prayer is a fundamental discipline that fosters a personal and intimate relationship with God. This time spent in reflection and communication encourages believers to align their thoughts and actions with their faith, creating a deep sense of connection. Attending

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<sup>86</sup> Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Donley (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), 55.

<sup>87</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1809.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 55, a. 1.

<sup>89</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 35.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Rayan, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

Mass and participating in the sacraments, such as the Eucharist and Reconciliation, are crucial practices that require commitment and discipline. Regular attendance allows congregants to deepen their understanding of faith and community, while the sacraments provide grace to help them resist temptation and navigate life's challenges, making them more resilient and prepared for life's ups and downs. A commitment to self-discipline reveals an unwavering faith in God and yearning for Him above everything else. God blesses self-discipline, deepening its connection with Him. This is highlighted in the passage, "But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties are trained by practice to discern good and evil" (Heb 5:14).<sup>91</sup>

Self-discipline, when extended to how individuals interact with others, is a manifestation of love within the Catholic faith. Being merciful and just toward others involves not only ethical behavior, but also a conscious choice to act out of love rather than self-interest. Some people assert that the roots of discipline lie in love specifically, a love that seeks the good of others and honors God's commandments. "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control," (2 Tm 1: 7).<sup>92</sup> Practicing self-discipline for the sake of love enriches the spiritual journey, allowing individuals to live fully as sons and daughters of God, rather than succumbing to the chains of sin. Through these practices, believers can cultivate a life marked by moral strength, compassion, and a deepened connection to their faith. "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it," (Heb 12:11).<sup>93</sup> Engaging in prayer is not merely a devotional

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<sup>91</sup> Hebrews 5:14, NABRE.

<sup>92</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7, NABRE.

<sup>93</sup> Hebrews 12:11, NABRE.

act but a form of spiritual combat, requiring discipline, perseverance, and intentional effort. Much like athletic training, it involves a struggle against resistance whether physical fatigue in sport or interior distractions, temptations, and weaknesses in the spiritual life. Prayer demands a continual commitment to growth, as one seeks to align one's life with the values and intentions expressed before God. In this sense, the acknowledgment of one's limitations does not signify failure but becomes a source of strength, fostering resilience, humility, and deeper spiritual maturity. Just as athletes are formed through repeated practice and endurance, so too the Christian is formed through the consistent and disciplined practice of prayer.<sup>94</sup>

Participating in sports provides individuals with a significant opportunity to develop self-discipline, primarily through the essential dynamics of teamwork. In a sporting context, players must collaborate effectively, striving towards a shared objective and adhering to the strategies and guidance established by coaches and teammates. This collaborative nature not only underscores the importance of discipline but also fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose, as each team member's contribution is crucial to achieving success. Throughout my experiences as a seminarian and organizer of soccer events, I frequently took a moment to pray at the beginning of the game. My intentions were focused on seeking divine protection for all participants, with a special emphasis on ensuring our safety and well-being, while also fostering an environment where everyone could fully enjoy the activities and have a positive experience.

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<sup>94</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 2725–2745; cf. 1 Cor. 9:24–27; Eph. 6:12.

Additionally, commitment is a vital component in fostering self-discipline within sports. Athletes frequently undertake a series of commitments, including attendance at practices, competitions, and training sessions. This dedication is critical not only for personal growth, but also for sustaining the team's integrity. By fulfilling these responsibilities, athletes experience a profound sense of accomplishment, learning the significance of reliability and accountability, lessons that are transferable to other areas of their lives. I firmly believe that consistent practice plays a crucial role in achieving success. For example, in the context of running, for anyone preparing for a marathon, the foundation of that success is rooted in a well-structured training plan. This training not only helps to build physical endurance but also plays a significant role in enhancing mental resilience, making the runner feel empowered and mentally strong. It is essential to gradually increase the mileage, incorporate varied workouts such as tempo runs and interval training, and allow for adequate recovery. By dedicating time and effort to this comprehensive training approach, the runner significantly improves his chances of crossing the finish line strong and achieving his personal best. Training in sports is not for the faint-hearted. It demands both rigorous physical and mental effort. Athletes must adhere to a structured regimen that typically includes intense workouts, skill enhancement sessions, and strategic planning. This necessitates perseverance and commitment. The sacrifices made during this training period, such as forgoing time with friends or other hobbies, further fortify an athlete's capacity to maintain discipline amidst distractions.

Goal setting also plays a fundamental role in the sports experience. Athletes often establish specific, measurable goals that direct their training and performance efforts. This process not only necessitates prioritization of their development and skills enhancement

over other recreational pursuits but also empowers them, reinforcing the values of focus and determination. Setting and striving for these objectives requires substantial effort and sacrifice, encouraging athletes to push their limits and achieve higher standards. The lessons learned in sports are not limited to the field or court. The self-discipline, teamwork, and commitment developed through sporting experiences are universally applicable, extending to academic pursuits, personal relationships, and professional endeavors. The skills acquired in sports, such as effective time management, resilience, and communication, are not just useful; they are invaluable. These skills equip individuals to navigate challenges and succeed in various aspects of their lives, particularly in roles such as ministers and administrators in the priesthood.

## **2.9. Teamwork**

Teamwork in sports plays a vital role in enhancing players' overall performance and experience by enabling them to collaborate more effectively. Among the key elements of successful teamwork is effective communication, where players actively share their ideas, strategies, and feedback. This open exchange of thoughts fosters a deeper understanding of one another's strengths and weaknesses, allowing the team to function more cohesively. "I also hope you can taste the beauty of teamwork, which is so important in life. No individualism! No to playing for yourselves. In my homeland, when a player does this, we say: 'This guy wants to devour the ball all by himself!' No, this is individualism: don't devour the ball, be team players. To belong to a sports club means to reject every form of selfishness and isolation, it is an opportunity to encounter and be with

others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in brotherhood.”<sup>95</sup> For instance, in baseball, knowing how to play with others, with an emphasis on teamwork, ensures that players are coordinated and can react quickly to changing situations, whether it is a hit, a steal attempt, or a defensive play. Good communication helps players make split-second decisions with confidence.

“Sport teams create social bonds, group identity, and a sense of belonging that contributes to psychological well-being and motivation.”<sup>96</sup> Being part of a team creates a supportive community where individuals not only work towards a common goal but also form meaningful relationships. These bonds are often strengthened through shared experiences, such as training sessions, victories, and setbacks. As players grow closer, they learn to trust each other, which is essential during high-pressure situations on the field or court. The emotional benefits of belonging to a team cannot be overstated. Feeling connected to teammates contributes significantly to boosting self-esteem and confidence. When players see their contributions recognized and valued by peers, it helps them navigate challenges, such as dealing with failure or disappointment. This support system can be crucial, particularly in competitive environments where the stakes are high.

Additionally, the lessons learned from teamwork in sports extend far beyond the playing field. The skills developed such as collaboration, communication, and conflict resolution are applicable in various aspects of life, including academic and professional settings. The ability to work effectively with others prepares individuals for success in

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<sup>95</sup> Francis, “Address to Members of the Sports Associations for the 70th Anniversary of the Foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center),” June 7, 2014, Vatican, <https://www.vatican.va>.

<sup>96</sup> Daniel Gould and Ronald E. Smith, *Psychological Foundations of Coaching: Similarities and Differences among Intercollegiate Coaches* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 78–82.

future endeavors, highlighting the importance of teamwork as a foundational skill in both sports and life.

Every church, regardless of its size, relies on the dedication and efforts of its staff members to manage the parish and its various activities effectively. These staff members, each with their unique gifts and talents, play a crucial role in the Church's life, and their involvement should extend into the wider community. By utilizing their unique gifts and talents, they can significantly contribute to the diverse projects and activities that the Church undertakes. This idea resonates with the message found in the first letter to the Corinthians, which states, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord” (1 Cor 12:4-5).<sup>97</sup> This biblical affirmation not only highlights the diverse talents of staff members but also acknowledges that parishioners possess unique gifts that can enhance the Church’s mission, particularly in fostering new evangelization. Within the rich tapestry of the Church community, individuals from diverse backgrounds and beliefs are united by a shared goal: to attain salvation and reach heaven. My experiences have shown me the power of building relationships through shared activities, such as sports. Initially, I encountered many individuals who hesitated to step foot in church. However, by engaging with them on the sports field, I was able to establish connections and earn their trust over time. As relationships deepened, many of these individuals gained the confidence to attend church and contribute their talents and ideas for new projects that further the mission of the Church.

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<sup>97</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4–5, NABRE.

The concept of teamwork first blossomed through my experiences in sports, laying the groundwork for collaboration in pastoral ministry. For instance, I assisted a vibrant youth group at Santa Maria del Popolo Parish in Mundelein, Illinois. During the challenges of the pandemic, several members of this group proposed the innovative idea of live streaming our Mass services. This initiative allowed us to maintain connectivity during the isolation of lockdown and expanded our reach to a broader audience. More importantly, it fostered engagement within our community and stimulated spiritual growth, showing the power of our Church community in inspiring and motivating each other.

From a theological perspective, teamwork is not merely a practical strategy, but a foundational principle rooted in God’s design for human relationships. Scripture affirms that human beings are created for communion and collaboration, reflecting God’s own relational nature and serving the mission of the Church. The wisdom tradition underscores this truth, noting that shared labor enhances effectiveness and mutual support: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.”<sup>98</sup>

The New Testament further develops this vision of communal life. Saint Paul repeatedly emphasizes unity and cooperation within the Body of Christ, urging believers to be bound together by love, which sustains harmony and mutual responsibility.<sup>99</sup> Such love forms the spiritual glue of Christian community, fostering belonging, shared purpose, and collective mission.

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<sup>98</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:9, NABRE.

<sup>99</sup> Colossians 3:14, NABRE.

Within pastoral ministry, this theological vision of teamwork becomes both practical and transformative. Parish communities flourish when clergy and lay members collaborate to revitalize ministries and invite new generations into active participation. Working together allows individuals to recognize and share their gifts for the good of the whole, ensuring that faith is not only preserved but dynamically transmitted. Through shared responsibility and collaborative leadership, the Church becomes a living sign of communion, vitality, and hope.

## **2.10. Perseverance**

One of the most significant formative benefits seminarians derive from participation in sports is the cultivation of perseverance a virtue essential not only for athletic performance but also for spiritual growth and academic formation. “Every Christian is called to become a trained athlete of Christ.”<sup>100</sup> Athletic training, particularly in endurance disciplines such as running, requires consistent effort, discipline, and the willingness to endure physical and mental fatigue in pursuit of long-term goals. Scripture affirms this dynamic of sustained effort and delayed fulfillment: “Those who sow in tears shall reap with rejoicing” (Ps 126:5).<sup>101</sup> Perseverance, therefore, emerges as a necessary condition for growth and fruitfulness in both human and spiritual endeavors.

Athletic experience offers a concrete embodiment of this biblical wisdom. As Pope John Paul II observed, meaningful athletic achievement is attained only through disciplined and demanding training, echoing the psalmist’s assurance that labor undertaken with

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<sup>100</sup> John Paul II, “Homily for the Jubilee of Sports People,” October 29, 2000, Vatican, <https://www.vatican.va>.

<sup>101</sup> Psalm 126:5, NABRE.

patience ultimately yields joy.<sup>102</sup> This principle closely mirrors the demands of seminary life, where rigorous academic study, pastoral engagement, and communal responsibilities require sustained commitment and resilience in the face of challenges.<sup>103</sup>

At the same time, perseverance must be balanced by prudence. Just as athletes must pace themselves to avoid burnout or injury, seminarians must learn to integrate study, ministry, rest, and recreation in a healthy rhythm. Periods of physical exhaustion or mental fatigue call not for relentless exertion but for intentional rest and renewal. Physical activity, when practiced in moderation, can serve as a restorative practice, refreshing the mind and enhancing concentration rather than detracting from academic productivity.

Spiritual perseverance, above all, is sustained through fidelity to prayer.<sup>104</sup> Prayer is not an optional practice but the essential source of strength that enables seminarians to remain rooted in their vocational call. “Sport can help develop perseverance, endurance, and the spirit of sacrifice.”<sup>105</sup> In moments of spiritual dryness or discouragement, perseverance in prayer nurtures resilience, deepens trust in God, and reorients the seminarian toward the ultimate purpose of formation. By attending to physical, intellectual, and spiritual well-being, seminarians learn to persevere with balance, integrity, and hope as they journey toward priestly ministry.

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<sup>102</sup> John Paul II, “Homily for the Jubilee of Sports People,” October 29, 2000, The Holy See, <https://www.vatican.va/>; see also Ps. 126:6 (NABRE).

<sup>103</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed., nos. 33–37.

<sup>104</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, sec. 47–50.

<sup>105</sup> John Paul II. “Homily for the Jubilee of Sports People.” October 29, 2000. Vatican. <https://www.vatican.va/>.

## 2.11. Leadership

Participation in sports offers seminarians a formative context in which essential leadership skills can be cultivated and practiced. Athletic engagement fosters teamwork, resilience, discipline, and strategic thinking qualities indispensable for effective pastoral leadership. Through shared training, competition, and mutual support, seminarians learn to collaborate, communicate clearly, and assume responsibility for the well-being of others, reflecting the communal nature of ecclesial ministry.

Sport also shapes leaders by teaching them to navigate success and failure with humility and integrity. Perseverance, developed through sustained athletic effort, equips future pastors with the capacity to set meaningful goals and to commit themselves faithfully to the demanding work of ministry. When leaders act with virtue and righteousness, their influence extends beyond efficiency to the morale and spiritual vitality of the community. Scripture affirms this dynamic, observing that “when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan. (Prov 29:2)”<sup>106</sup> Effective leadership thus fosters joy, trust, and a shared sense of purpose within the Christian community.

Throughout my college years, I had the privilege of playing soccer at a competitive level and serving as the captain of my team. This role was not only an honor but also a significant responsibility. As captain, my primary focus was to devise and implement strategies that would lead our team to success in games. I embraced the challenge and relished the opportunity to lead my teammates, fostering a collective understanding of our

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<sup>106</sup> Proverbs 29:2, NABRE.

objectives and reinforcing our resilience. These personal experiences have deeply shaped my leadership perspective, making me more connected and more understanding. However, during my time in seminary, my perspective on leadership evolved. The drive to win shifted to a more profound appreciation for the experience itself. While we played to enjoy the game and bond with one another, the weight of competition was tempered by the understanding that our main goal was not merely to win but to forge lasting friendships and create cherished memories with fellow seminarians. This joy and fulfillment in playing sports inspired me to lead with a more profound understanding of the game. “If the joy connected with love of one’s sport and one’s teammates is a reality that sport psychologists associate with our best performances and something that keeps players returning again and again to participate, then this can be a way for the coach or sport leader to draw parallels between sport practice and the practice of faith.”<sup>107</sup>

Sport psychology supports this insight, noting that joy, relational connection, and intrinsic motivation are closely linked to sustained participation and optimal performance.<sup>108</sup> These same dynamics offer a valuable analogy for faith formation, where joy and meaningful relationships sustain commitment and deepen engagement. Pope Francis likewise emphasizes that sport, when practiced authentically, promotes respect, teamwork, and inclusion, serving as a powerful tool for human and spiritual development.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Francis, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, no. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Ronald E. Smith and Frank L. Smoll, *Sport Psychology for Youth Coaches* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 67–72.

<sup>109</sup> Francis, “Address to Participants in the Conference ‘Sport at the Service of Humanity,’” October 5, 2016, Vatican, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/>.

Ultimately, leadership shaped through sport is not centered on dominance or personal achievement, but on service, encouragement, and integrity. The companionship formed on the field or court nurtures bonds of trust that are essential for ministry, enabling future priests to lead communities with empathy, collaboration, and hope. When approached with openness and reflection, sports can significantly contribute to the formation of effective, joyful, and relational pastoral leaders.

## CHAPTER III

### TELLING OUR STORIES: THE INFLUENCE OF SPORT ON PRIESTLY PHYSICAL, SPIRITUAL, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

#### 3. Introduction

This chapter aims to create a cohesive connection between Osmer's empirical task and his explanatory task by delving into the personal narratives of seven carefully selected Catholic priests. The careful selection of these priests was a crucial part of the research process, ensuring that their personal narratives provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between their individual stories and the broader themes related to Osmer's framework. To uphold confidentiality and honor the privacy of the interviewees, unique pseudonyms have been assigned to each of them. The priests are identified as follows: "Fr. Paul," "Fr. Peter," "Fr. Anthony," "Fr. Francis," "Fr. John," "Fr. Mario," and "Fr. Alan." These names are explicitly referenced in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, underscoring the ethical responsibility to respect their privacy.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences for purposes of this thesis, I developed a structured interview format consisting of several open-ended questions, which were designed to elicit detailed responses about their spiritual journeys, challenges, and the roles they play within their communities. This approach allows for a rich exploration of the intersection between their individual stories and the broader themes related to Osmer's framework. The questions used are as follows:

1. Would you mind sharing a bit about your background?

2. How did you come to discern your calling to the priesthood?
3. What is your earliest memory of playing sports? (Teams sports or individual)
4. Do you draw a connection in your life between sport and the priesthood? Tell me about that.
5. Do you have a story about when you first made the connection between sport and the priesthood?
6. How much do you feel that sports influenced your path to becoming a priest?
7. [If response to Q6 is focused largely on the positive impact...] Have you ever personally experienced, or know of others who have experienced sports playing a negative role in priestly formation? Can you tell me about that?

This chapter also explores how sports and various forms of recreational play have influenced my interviewee's physical, spiritual, and personal development over the years. Through their reflections, these individuals express how their experiences in sports have fostered a sense of connection and empathy with the audience. By focusing on the unique life stories of these priests who consider sports to be a significant aspect of their lives and vocational calling, this chapter aims to rigorously examine the hypothesis that participation in sports can cultivate a range of virtues. These virtues, including discipline, perseverance, teamwork, excellence, and leadership, are vital for personal and professional growth and closely align with the foundational Catholic values and ideals underpinning priestly formation and the broader Christian life.

Furthermore, this chapter delves into the mental health benefits that sports can offer, particularly in the context of catholic seminaries, which place a strong emphasis on the holistic idea of well-being. This chapter explores whether the integration of physical activity into one's life fosters a healthier psyche and how this interacts with the spiritual journey of the priests involved. Through in-depth analysis of these personal testimonies, this thesis aims to uncover sufficient documented lived experiences that substantiate the argument that sports can profoundly enhance the connection among the mind, body, and spirit. Ultimately, this paper aspires to illustrate how such a connection can lead to a richer, more fulfilling life and a more meaningful priesthood. This exploration intends not only to shed light on the transformative power of sport in the lives of these priests, but also to inspire the reader with its broader implications for the greater Catholic faith community.

### **3.1. Sports in Their Lives**

This study provided the opportunity to interview seven priests, each sharing his unique journey with sports that reveals a profound connection to his childhood and personal growth. Each one of them shared a unique and vibrant tapestry of experiences with sports that significantly shaped his life before he entered the seminary. The faith journey experienced by each, intertwined with sports experiences, is a testament to the transformative power of both. One of the seven priests interviewed had physical limitations: Fr. John. As a child, he faced the daunting challenge of severe asthma, which greatly limited his ability to engage in physical activities. The mere act of running or participating in any sport would often trigger an asthma attack, creating a barrier between him and the athletic pursuits he longed for. As Fr. John recounted, "It was late when asthma left me, probably around junior or senior year in high school." This turning point marked

the beginning of a new chapter in his life. Once his asthma became manageable, he eagerly embraced a variety of outdoor activities, including running, hiking, skiing, and skating. He vividly remembered his first experiences on the slopes, saying, “I remember when I started skiing and just how meaningful it was for me. To be able to ski was a true blessing, a sense of freedom. In my childhood, I could not engage in sports, but now here I was, skiing down the side of this mountain.” Fr. John’s remarkable resilience and resourcefulness shone through as he actively sought opportunities to engage in physical activity that had once felt out of reach. His story is a powerful testament to the impact of passion and determination, illustrating how these qualities can help one overcome significant obstacles and embrace newfound joys in life. It reminds us that the human spirit can triumph over adversity, transforming challenges into moments of empowerment and fulfillment.

For the remaining six priests, sports were an integral part of their childhood and formative years. Fr. Paul, for instance, embarked on his athletic journey at the tender age of five when he joined a local swimming team. Growing up in a small town with limited recreational activities, he found that sports provided a vital outlet for fun and social interaction. His family home was often filled with the excitement of various sporting events on television, which sparked his interest in a wide array of activities. As he matured, Fr. Paul gravitated towards sailing, basketball, football, tennis, and soccer, often participating in these sports alongside his cousins, forging lasting bonds and cherished memories.

Another priest, Fr. Peter, comes from a remarkably athletic family. His father, a passionate coach, managed 49 soccer teams throughout his career. In addition to his work in the legal profession as a lawyer, he devoted significant time and energy to nurturing the athletic talents of Fr. Peter and his other five sons. For Fr. Peter, family life was often

centered around recreational activities, traveling to various games on Saturdays, and building enduring friendships with teammates. Fr. Peter reminisces warmly about how these experiences cultivated a strong camaraderie and imparted essential lessons in resilience, dedication, and teamwork; these were principles that would serve him and his teammates well throughout their lives. Their sporting experiences were not merely individual lessons, but a collective journey they embarked on together. Some key takeaways included the discipline of regular practice, the importance of collaboration, and the ability to bounce back from defeats.

Fr. Francis's sports journey began at the tender age of eight, thanks to his parents' decision to enroll him in a local basketball team. This early engagement with team sports introduced him to the joy of competition and ignited a lasting love for basketball, which has since become a cornerstone of his life. "The thrill of the game fostered valuable friendships and life lessons such as teamwork, discipline, and resilience that have persisted into adulthood, shaping his social and personal identity."

Fr. Anthony, reflecting on his childhood in Africa, shared heartwarming memories of improvisation and camaraderie. He and his schoolmates would creatively craft makeshift soccer balls out of cloth, turning even the rainiest days into opportunities for play. Those simple, joyous moments underscored the universal love for sports, a love that unites people across the globe, irrespective of their circumstances or backgrounds. The spirited games were not just about competition; they fostered community and resilience among the children, making them all a part of a larger, global community.

Another fascinating story comes from Fr. Alan, who entered the seminary in his early forties. He reminisced about a childhood filled with little tricycles and bicycles, where he and his siblings would race around their neighborhood, discovering the thrill of speed and adventure. Biking and swimming remain his favorite activities, providing him with a sense of freedom and joy that anchors him physically and spiritually.

The last priest interviewed for this study was Fr. Mario, a lively Latino priest who highlighted soccer as the most beloved sport in his culture. I had the privilege of sharing the seminary experience with him, and I vividly remember his fierce competitiveness on the field. Playing alongside or against him was always exhilarating; his drive to win pushed everyone to elevate their game. Fr. Mario shared that sports played a crucial role in steering him away from negative influences, including drugs and alcohol, a testament to the transformative power of sports. His dedication to the sport shaped his physical abilities and reinforced his commitment to leading a healthy, purpose-driven life, inspiring us all with his journey of resilience and hope.

In conclusion, most of the priests interviewed recognized that early engagement in sports had a lasting and formative impact on their lives. They highlighted the importance of recreation, meaningful time with family and friends, and the enduring relationships cultivated through shared athletic experiences. The discipline, training, perseverance, and commitment required in sports equipped them with transferable life skills that supported both personal development and vocational discernment.

Many of these priests explicitly drew parallels between the demands of athletic participation and the responsibilities of priestly ministry. Skills such as teamwork,

resilience, self-discipline, and goal-oriented perseverance shaped their approach to pastoral leadership, community life, and sustained ministry. Their narratives reveal that sports functioned not merely as leisure activities but as formative practices that fostered character, collaboration, and accountability.<sup>110</sup>

More profoundly, these experiences contributed to their spiritual formation. Participation in sports offered occasions for self-reflection, humility, and growth, reinforcing an integrated understanding of the human person as body and spirit. Collectively, the priests' testimonies underscore the power of sports as a holistic formative influence one that weaves together personal growth, communal belonging, resilience in the face of challenges, and a deepened spiritual journey.<sup>111</sup>

### **3.2. Sports in the Vocational Journey to Priesthood**

Fr. Paul reflects on two key aspects of sports that have informed his journey to the priesthood: training and perseverance. He emphasizes the necessity of diligent practice, learning proper techniques, and receiving guidance. "You must train hard and engage in these activities repeatedly," he explains. He recognizes that training is vital for his vocation as a priest. "One important aspect is the realization that I require formation through training. The second is perseverance. It will be challenging, but it will become more manageable with continued effort." He also introduces a third aspect: teamwork. "I cannot

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<sup>110</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 50–52.

<sup>111</sup> Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Sport at the Service of Humanity* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), no. 3.

undertake this journey alone; I must rely on those around me. When we collaborate, we can achieve great things together.”

Fr. Francis saw his time at the seminary as an opportunity to show that he was just like everyone else: a person who enjoys playing sports, going to the movies, watching cartoons, etc. Fr. Francis was assigned to the cathedral in his diocese as part of his pastoral year, which is a prerequisite before becoming a deacon. It is an experience that many dioceses incorporate into their priesthood curriculum., At the cathedral, he participated in the youth group and had the chance to engage with the children from the school. He understands that through sports, he can embody a father figure by spending time with them on the soccer fields or the basketball court, inspiring them to strive for their best, recognize the role of sports in their personal development, and hope that one day they might surpass him in skill.

Fr. Francis’s sports background was not just a personal interest but was also a practical training ground for his future priesthood. He primarily played team sports, and through this, he learned to appreciate his unique talents and how to leverage them for the team’s benefit. He stated, “In a team setting, you must learn to be part of the group, but you also need to understand your gifts and talents what you are capable of and how to utilize those effectively for the team’s success.” This lesson, he found, was directly applicable to his seminary experience. He was able to identify his gifts and talents, understand what he excelled at, and discern how God was calling him to use those abilities in his priesthood. His background in sports made it easier for him to recognize these gifts as a priest, as he was already aware of their existence within himself and had also utilized some of those talents during his time at the seminary.

Fr. Anthony and Fr. Mario, who embarked on their priestly studies in the United States from Africa and South America respectively, found that soccer became a vital connection point among seminarians hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds. Amid their demanding academic schedules and spiritual formation, the shared passion for the sport fostered lasting friendships and deep bonds among the seminarians, transcending cultural differences. Fr. Anthony articulated the sentiment perfectly, stating that sports are a universal language, bridging divides and fostering profound connections, thereby underscoring the essential role of sports in creating a robust sense of community among seminarians.

For Fr. Peter, the virtues he learned through sports inspired him to pursue life in the seminary. He described virtues such as responsibility, perseverance, sacrifice, excellence, hard work, and the commitment to early morning prayers as essential to his daily routine in seminary life. He remarked, “The same virtues instilled in me through the cross-country team were also instrumental in developing my faith and other areas of my life.” Fr. John, who faced physical limitations during childhood, found running his primary sport while in seminary. He noted that many of his fellow seminarians also participated in running, fostering a strong sense of community. His nephews often invited him to compete in marathons, to which he replied that he would be fine just by running five or six miles instead.

On the other hand, Fr. Alan, who entered the seminary at a later age, confronted the unique challenge of keeping pace with his younger peers. Recognizing that physical sports might not be his forte, he turned to card and table games to engage and bond with fellow seminarians. He pointed out that games such as Uno are widely recognized and played

around the globe, thus allowing him to connect with others, despite potential language barriers. Through friendly competition around the game table, Fr. Alan discovered an enjoyable means to foster relationships with his peers, enriching his seminary experience and contributing to a sense of community. The strategic thinking and social interaction involved in these games greatly assisted him in developing essential skills and deepening relationships, demonstrating that connection can manifest in various forms, both on and off the field.

### **3.3. Ambiguities and Risks in the Practice of Sport**

While sport is often promoted as a valuable means of fostering human development, contemporary empirical research indicates that its formative potential is not intrinsically positive but is deeply influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded. Studies such as those by Simon Lütkevitte suggest that participation in organized sports, particularly within male-dominated environments, may contribute to the reinforcement of certain gendered ideologies, thereby reflecting and perpetuating existing cultural norms rather than critically transforming them.<sup>112</sup> This insight is particularly significant for priestly formation, as it highlights that sport, like any human activity, cannot be assumed to foster authentic growth without intentional guidance. Rather, it must be integrated within a coherent framework of Christian anthropology. Absent such formation, athletic participation risks encouraging excessive competitiveness, exclusionary dynamics, or diminished respect for the inherent dignity of the human person. By contrast, when sport is informed by the Gospel and grounded in a theological understanding of the person, it

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<sup>112</sup> Simon Lütkevitte, "Sports Participation and Beliefs about Male Dominance: A Cross-National Analysis of Sexist Gender Ideologies," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 4 (2023): 207, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12040207>.

can serve as a privileged context for cultivating virtue, strengthening fraternal bonds, and promoting genuine respect for others. Accordingly, the formative value of sport within seminary life depends not merely on participation itself, but on the presence of a deliberate and well-structured formative vision that aligns athletic practice with the Church’s teaching on human dignity and the vocation to communion.<sup>113</sup>

Contemporary theological reflection on sport has increasingly emphasized the importance of recovering its original character as “play,” understood as an activity pursued for its own sake rather than for external rewards. Patrick Kelly argues that when sport is lived authentically as play, it fosters joy, relationality, and self-transcendence, thereby contributing to integral human development.<sup>114</sup> In this sense, the formative value of sport does not lie merely in discipline or competition, but in its capacity to engage the whole person, body, mind, and spirit, in a unified and meaningful experience. However, when sport becomes overly dominated by performance, productivity, or external validation, it risks losing its playful essence and, consequently, its capacity to promote genuine human flourishing.<sup>115</sup> This perspective is particularly significant for priestly formation, as it underscores the need to situate athletic activity within a broader theological vision that prioritizes the dignity of the human person and openness to transcendence.

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<sup>113</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City, 2018), nos. 4–7, 18–20; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), nos. 72–78; John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), nos. 43–45.

<sup>114</sup> Play, Sport, and Spirit, Patrick Kelly, *Play, Sport, and Spirit* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), 31–60.

<sup>115</sup> Kelly, *Play, Sport, and Spirit*, 120–145.

### **3.4. Sport as a Medium for Cultivating Virtue**

The life journeys of the seven priests I had the privilege to interview provide invaluable insights into the profound impact that sports have had on their personal development and vocational calling. Each priest shared how their engagement in athletic activities transcended mere leisure or competition; it evolved into a pivotal formative experience that significantly shaped their character, values, and spiritual paths. As they recounted their experiences, a clear consensus emerged around the transformative virtues cultivated through sports. One of the most prominent qualities they discussed was discipline. This trait is not only critical for maintaining consistent training and personal commitment but also plays a crucial role in fostering spiritual discipline, which is essential for their ministerial duties. The priests reflected on how the rigorous training routines and the sacrifices required for athletic success mirrored the dedication needed in their spiritual lives, allowing them to grow in both areas simultaneously.

*Perseverance* has emerged as a vital virtue among the priests, underscoring the significance of resilience in the face of setbacks, whether in sports or their spiritual journeys. They shared stories of challenging moments on the field, recounting experiences of defeat and how these challenges taught them to rise again with renewed determination. This spirit of perseverance became a foundational element in their ability to confront the various challenges encountered in pastoral work and community service. Additionally, within the seminary, the seminarians faced the necessity of perseverance throughout the seventh of eight years of their formation.

*Teamwork* emerged as another significant virtue emphasized by the priests. They spoke of how participation in team sports nurtured a profound understanding of collaboration and collective effort, mirroring the communal nature of the Church itself. The lessons learned in fostering trust, encouraging one another, and working towards a common goal on the field translated seamlessly into their roles within their parishes, emphasizing the importance of unity and support in the faith community.

*Excellence* was another key theme in their narratives. The priests illustrated how striving for excellence in athletics instilled a sense of balance that extended beyond physical exertion to their personal and spiritual lives. This drive for improvement and commitment to quality resonated deeply with their pursuit of holiness and integrity in their priestly vocation.

Furthermore, they highlighted the essential leadership skills gained from their involvement in sports. Engaging in athletic activities provided them with a dynamic environment to cultivate attributes such as strategic decision-making and problem-solving. These competencies, honed through competition and teamwork, are invaluable in their roles as spiritual leaders, guiding their congregations and addressing the various challenges faced by their communities.

The priests articulated how these virtues not only contributed to their personal growth but also prepared them for the multifaceted roles they now fulfill within their communities. They recognized that the qualities developed through sports resonate deeply with the foundational Catholic principles and ideals that inform priestly formation, ultimately enriching their broader Christian life and ministry. Their reflections make it

clear that the intersection of sports and spirituality has played a significant role in shaping their identities as both athletes and priests.

### **3.5. Discipline**

Discipline within Catholic seminaries refers to the structured framework of rules, expectations, and practices designed to cultivate a sense of order, respect, and commitment among those pursuing priestly formation. This discipline encompasses various aspects, including adherence to community living guidelines, academic integrity, personal conduct, and spiritual formation practices. Seminaries typically implement a regimen that promotes prayer, study, and community service, fostering an environment conducive to spiritual growth and intellectual development. Regular evaluations and guidance from faculty and spiritual directors reinforce the importance of accountability and personal responsibility. Overall, the discipline observed in Catholic seminaries is integral to preparing future priests to fulfill their pastoral duties effectively while embodying the values of the Catholic Church. “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Heb 12: 11).<sup>116</sup> Fr. Anthony said, “If you are not disciplined, sports are not for you because you need discipline in training and good eating habits to be in good shape. Same in the priesthood: if you are not disciplining, your ministry is going to suffer. You need to get your prayer done, just the way you manage your time and your appointments, your tasks, and your spiritual life. You must remain fair to the Lord; otherwise, you risk spiritual dryness. Saint Paul used the image of an athlete who must train to be ready for the Olympics.”

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<sup>116</sup> Heb. 12:11, New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE).

### 3.6. Perseverance

Engaging participation in sports cultivates essential virtues such as perseverance, disciplined goal setting, and fidelity to a structured plan, qualities that closely parallel the demands of seminary formation. Both athletic training and priestly formation require sustained commitment over time, resilience in the face of challenges, and trust in a process whose fruits emerge gradually. “Seminary formation, by design, is a long-term and transformative journey that prepares candidates for a life of ecclesial service through intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and human development.”<sup>117</sup>

This formative process typically begins with philosophical studies, usually spanning three years, during which seminarians are grounded in critical thinking, ethics, and the philosophical foundations necessary for theological reflection. This stage fosters intellectual discipline and self-awareness, both of which are indispensable for mature perseverance. It is followed by approximately four years of theological study, where seminarians engage deeply with Scripture, doctrine, moral theology, and pastoral practice. Each stage builds progressively upon the previous one, requiring patience, consistency, and endurance.<sup>118</sup>

Practical and ministerial formation further strengthens perseverance by integrating theory with lived experience. During theological studies, seminarians are entrusted with specific instituted ministries that gradually increase in responsibility. The ministry of

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<sup>117</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 1–3.

<sup>118</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Optatam Totius (Decree on Priestly Training)*, no. 14, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

acolyte immerses them in the Church's liturgical life and cultivates faithful service at the altar, while the ministry of lector deepens their relationship with the Word of God through its public proclamation in the liturgy. These ministries demand preparation, attentiveness, and sustained commitment, reinforcing habits essential for lifelong ministry.<sup>119</sup>

The culmination of seminary formation is ordination, first to the diaconate and later to the priesthood. As ordained ministers, seminarians assume increasing pastoral responsibilities that test their perseverance in concrete and demanding ways. This extended formation journey marked by rigorous study, spiritual discipline, and pastoral engagement requires steadfast dedication. In this sense, the perseverance learned through sports provides a valuable formative analogy, helping seminarians internalize the discipline, patience, and resilience necessary for faithful and enduring priestly service.<sup>120</sup>

### **3.7. Teamwork**

Participating in sports activities not only helps us discover and develop our unique talents but also helps us confront and understand our limitations. More importantly, it fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. This feeling of togetherness is essential for enjoying life and reaching our aspirations together. Engaging in sports teaches us the fundamental principles of teamwork and collaboration, emphasizing how collective effort can lead to extraordinary achievements. These principles of teamwork and collaboration extend seamlessly into seminary life, where the emphasis on working together is equally vital. As we navigate our studies and ministry preparations, we are encouraged to

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<sup>119</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Ministeria Quaedam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1972), nos. 2–5.

<sup>120</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 87–94.

contribute our distinctive gifts and talents to the community, enriching the collective mission. For example, during pastoral tasks and research projects, we often collaborate in groups. This collaboration not only enhances our understanding, but also our effectiveness, making us feel empowered and capable. Fr. Francis emphasized the team aspect of work when he said, “The church has a community focus, God saves the people, and I am sent to a community of people, and it’s the same, ... you know, in sports you have your job on the team and you play your position; it’s about sacrificing for the greater good.”

Within this communal context, teamwork strengthens individual capacities while fostering a supportive and cohesive environment. Embracing collaboration in seminary formation mirrors the essence of authentic sportsmanship and ecclesial communion, cultivating unity, perseverance, and shared responsibility. These formative experiences prepare future priests to lead not as isolated figures, but as collaborators who value participation, mutual support, and the collective pursuit of the Church’s mission.<sup>121</sup>

### **3.8. Excellence**

Scripture frames excellence not as perfectionism, but as faithful stewardship of one’s gifts in service to God. Saint Paul exhorts Timothy to pursue integrity and competence in ministry: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”<sup>122</sup> This biblical vision of excellence resonates strongly with the discipline of sport, where peak performance depends upon the balanced integration of physical, mental, and emotional

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<sup>121</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), no. 9.

<sup>122</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15, NABRE.

well-being. When athletes struggle with physical challenges such as illness, injuries, overtraining, or inadequate nutrition, it often leads to a decline in their mental well-being.<sup>123</sup> For instance, an athlete recovering from a severe injury may experience increased stress and anxiety due to the fear of not being able to perform at their previous level. This decline can manifest as increased stress, anxiety, or a loss of motivation, ultimately hindering their quest for excellence. Athletes, driven by a relentless pursuit of their highest potential, must prioritize their physical and mental resilience to succeed.

Fr. Peter's reflections on the parallels between sports and the priesthood stress the importance of community and collaboration. He states, "We are in it together. We sacrifice for one another and pursue excellence collectively; these aspects are directly connected to the priesthood." This emphasis on community and collaboration should make the audience feel the sense of belonging and shared mission, whether in the field or in the church. His vision of the Church as the body of Christ, where everyone is bestowed with unique vocations and roles, further reinforces this sense of shared mission. "Each person is expected to contribute his part to the body of Christ," he explained, highlighting the importance of every member's involvement in fostering a thriving spiritual community.

In sports, the role of skilled coaches is not just important, it is paramount. They guide athletes toward excellence, just as proficient priests are vital within a faith community. Both are instrumental in identifying and nurturing individuals' talents. Effective coaches help athletes recognize their strengths and improve their skills, ultimately leading them to greatness. Fr. Mario, who was actively involved in sports during

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<sup>123</sup> Daniel Gould and Alan S. Kornspan, *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7th ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2019), 402–410.

his seminary years, reflected on how his athletic experiences enriched his pastoral abilities. He noted that sports participation fostered teamwork and discipline and enhanced his capacity to connect with others. Occasionally, he shares this perspective in his sermons, illustrating how the values learned through sports have significantly contributed to his development as a compassionate and effective pastor. This emphasis on the role of coaches and priests in nurturing talents should make the audience feel the importance of their roles in their respective fields.

### **3.9. Leadership**

Joining participation in sports provides a dynamic formative environment in which leadership skills are intentionally developed and practiced. Athletic contexts require teamwork, strategic decision-making, communication, and problem-solving competencies that extend well beyond the playing field. Through shared challenges and collective goals, participants learn to collaborate effectively, negotiate differences, and assume responsibility for the good of the group. These experiences cultivate habits of leadership grounded in cooperation, accountability, and mutual trust.

Within the context of priestly ministry, such skills are particularly significant. Priests are called to serve as leaders within diverse communities composed of individuals from varying cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. This pastoral responsibility demands empathy, inclusivity, and the capacity to listen attentively while guiding communities through complex pastoral and social challenges. The resilience, adaptability,

and collaborative instincts fostered through sports equip future priests to navigate these demands with confidence and sensitivity.<sup>124</sup>

Several priests interviewed emphasized that their involvement in sports fostered a deep sense of belonging and community, allowing them to form lasting relationships and develop leadership capacity in concrete ways. Many recalled serving as team captains, roles that required leading by example, motivating others during demanding training, and sustaining morale in both success and failure. These leadership experiences strengthened skills in communication, teamwork, and perseverance, which they later carried into their priestly vocations.

Fr. Peter highlights that participation in sports can serve as a constructive outlet for individuals, fostering relationships across diverse cultural backgrounds. He noted, “Sports brought everybody together the Hispanic students, the Anglo students, the African students, and the Filipino students. We all came together to play soccer, creating enduring friendships in a very human way.” This interaction highlights the vital importance of the human dimension of formation. Through these shared experiences, individuals develop their athletic skills and cultivate a sense of belonging and unity within the broader community.

Taken together, these testimonies suggest that athletic participation contributes meaningfully to the formation of pastoral leaders. By shaping leaders who value collaboration, relational engagement, and shared responsibility, sports offer a practical and

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<sup>124</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 1; Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 94–100.

embodied framework for leadership development that aligns closely with the Church's vision of ministry as service to communion.<sup>125</sup>

### **3.10. Mental Health Benefits of Sports in the Catholic Environment**

Mental health is a vital component of our well-being, shaping our thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of life experiences. It is the key to personal happiness and satisfaction in life. Nurturing positive mental health significantly impacts our capacity to experience joy and fulfillment across various facets of life, including work, relationships, and leisure activities. In a Catholic environment, which places a strong emphasis on community and personal growth, the importance of fostering good mental health is even more pronounced. This environment provides a unique platform for individuals to actively maintain their mental well-being, preparing them to realize their full potential, effectively navigate life's inevitable challenges, and cultivate healthy, productive habits that contribute to their overall growth.

Engaging in sports and physical activities often leaves us physically exhausted, but this fatigue can also serve as a reset for our mental and spiritual states. Additionally, restorative practices, comparable to taking breaks or resting, are crucial for improving our mental well-being. I have often reflected on my experiences at seminary, where the demands of numerous assignments and rigorous coursework frequently left me mentally exhausted. I remember one particular instance when I was struggling with a theology paper, feeling overwhelmed and unable to focus. I decided to take a break and went for a walk around the serene lake on the seminary grounds. The fresh air and the beauty of the

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<sup>125</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, no. 43.

surroundings helped me clear my mind, and I returned with a refreshed perspective, which ultimately led to a breakthrough in my paper. This experience reinforced my belief in the power of participating in sports activities, not just for physical restoration but as a means to enhance creativity and mental clarity.

In recent years, the connection between physical activity and mental health has gained increased recognition, particularly within the context of the Catholic environment. Sports provide an avenue for physical fitness and foster a sense of community, belonging, and personal development, all of which are essential components for mental well-being. For Fr. Paul, sports have always figured greatly in his life. He related that: “Sports have always been part of my life, and I need sports to stay healthy in my humanity, and I need sports to stay healthy emotionally.” Sports have given him space and kept him healthy physically and emotionally during his time at Seminary and now as a priest. Similar to Fr. Paul, sports have helped Fr. Anthony stay in good shape: “If you are not in good shape... well, you won’t be able to do a lot, you will be tired all the time, get fat, and even kneeling you will have a hard time kneeling.” Sports always help him to realize the stress he is under, when he finds it a relief “just to go out and enjoy being a kid again by running around and around.” He also added that seminarians need to release and use their energy in good ways, such as in sports. Otherwise, stress can hurt you in negative ways.

Participation in sports within a Catholic context enables individuals to experience teamwork and cooperation, promoting social interactions that can alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation. This communal spirit is often supported by the teachings of the Church, which emphasize the importance of fellowship and the shared experience of engaging in activities that promote physical and mental health. Moreover, being part of a

sports team can instill a sense of discipline, resilience, and purpose. These attributes are vital for young people navigating the complexities of life. Sports also offer structured opportunities for prayer, reflection, and growth, aligning athletic pursuits with spiritual development. This holistic approach can lead to a more balanced lifestyle and a greater sense of self-worth.

It has been extensively documented that engaging in regular physical activity alleviates symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, leading to improved mood and enhanced cognitive function. “Exercise may improve mental health by helping the brain cope better with stress. Contemporary research consistently demonstrates that regular physical activity reduces symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress while enhancing mood and cognitive function.”<sup>126</sup> When integrated into a Catholic framework, sports also reinforce a theological anthropology that views the body as a gift entrusted by God and as a “temple of the Holy Spirit” deserving of care and respect.<sup>127</sup> This integration provides spiritual meaning to physical activity, encouraging individuals to attend to their mental health as an expression of responsible stewardship. This alignment with spiritual beliefs provides a meaningful context for physical activity. Integrating sports into the Catholic framework offers a unique opportunity for individuals to take control of their mental health. The connections formed through shared objectives, collective achievements, and mutual support can significantly enhance personal well-being and strengthen community ties. By

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<sup>126</sup> Harvard Medical School, “Exercise and Mental Health,” *Harvard Health Publishing*, <https://www.health.harvard.edu>; see also John J. Ratey, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 38–45.

<sup>127</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, NABRE.

participating in sports, individuals can actively reinforce their mental health, nurturing their spiritual and social development.

### **3.11. Sports: Integrating Mind, Body, and Spirit**

Participating in sports extends far beyond the mere enhancement of physical fitness; it also plays an essential role in bolstering mental health. Engaging in physical activities triggers the release of endorphins and various neurotransmitters, which serve to elevate mood and alleviate feelings of stress and anxiety. This biochemical response is significant, as exercise increases blood flow and oxygen delivery to the brain while lowering stress hormone levels like cortisol. Experiences often described as a “runner’s high” or the calm achieved through practices such as yoga illustrate how embodied movement can positively affect mental health and interior balance.<sup>128</sup>

Participation in sports also instills essential life skills such as discipline and effective goal setting. These attributes, crucial for success in sports, are equally vital for personal development and growth in everyday life. The structured nature of sports teaches individuals how to set objectives, assess their progress, and adjust their strategies, which are skills that can inspire and motivate in all areas of life. Regular physical activity promotes resilience and sharpens cognitive functions, improving focus, memory, and problem-solving abilities. When paired with the stress-relieving and anxiety-reducing effects of exercise, this boost in mental capabilities contributes significantly to overall well-being. As Leetun (1996) highlights, “High-level wellness results from an integration of the

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<sup>128</sup> John J. Ratey, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 37–45.

mind, body, and spirit in conjunction with maximum functioning within an existing environment.”<sup>129</sup> This holistic perspective encourages individuals to unlock their full potential physically, mentally, and spiritually while remaining intellectually engaged and adaptive to their surroundings. Participating in sports enables individuals to enhance their physical capabilities and cultivate a well-rounded and resilient approach to life.

Additionally, sports demand acute mental focus and strategic thinking. Athletes learn to cultivate discipline and resilience as they navigate the triumphs and challenges of competition. They develop essential problem-solving skills, as they must swiftly adapt their strategies during gameplay and overcome obstacles, whether from physical limitations or unexpected challenges posed by rivals. This mental engagement not only enhances performance in sports but also translates into valuable skills for everyday life. Brian Edgar underscores the spiritual significance of play in his book *The God Who Plays*. He notes, “Without the ability to engage in healthy, interactive relationships with other people, one will inevitably struggle in developing a healthy relationship with God.”<sup>130</sup>

In my interviews, numerous priests pointed out that sports significantly contributed to fostering better relationships with their fellow seminarians. From my own experience, I have seen how sports expand one’s mindset and open one’s heart; in the shared pursuit of a game, a natural bond of trust is formed. Moreover, Brian Edgar emphasizes that play can facilitate our attunement to God. He explains, “It is the way our brain rhythms metaphorically, emotions, minds, and souls (actually) become spiritually attuned or ‘at

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<sup>129</sup> Caroline Young and Cyndie Koopsen, *Spirituality, Health, and Healing: An Integrative Approach* (San Diego, CA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2011), 19.

<sup>130</sup> Edgar, Brian. *The God Who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.

tone.”<sup>131</sup> He adds, “Speaking in the language of play underscores the joyfulness, freedom, dynamic interactivity, and friendship intrinsic to this attunement.”<sup>132</sup>

Fr. John highlighted sports’ multifaceted support across physical, spiritual, and emotional dimensions. He shared a reflection, saying, “In challenging times, such as during exam preparations at the seminary, running became my sanctuary. It provided a moment for spiritual reflection, allowing me to clear my mind and reconnect with my inner self.” This insight emphasizes how sports can serve as a refuge, offering a physical outlet and a pathway for introspection and personal growth amidst life’s demands. Sports, in this way, become a catalyst for personal growth, motivating individuals to strive for their best.

Reflecting on the figure of Jesus Christ can help us explore a profound connection between sport and faith. Jesus exemplified the fullness of humanity, seamlessly integrating both body and soul into his earthly experience. He engaged in hard work, acquired various skills, and was attuned to the physical demands imposed upon him. As he participated in carpentry alongside his earthly father, Joseph, he likely recognized the importance of staying physically fit to fulfill his responsibilities. Beyond his earthly tasks, Jesus demonstrated remarkable athleticism, often retreating to the mountains to pray and seek guidance from his heavenly Father. This practice showcases his physical endurance and highlights a deeper reliance on the spiritual strength that God provided him. Such dual reliance prompts us to contemplate the intricate relationship between physical abilities and spiritual fortitude.

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<sup>131</sup> Edgar, *The God Who Plays*, 45.

<sup>132</sup> Edgar, *The God Who Plays*, 46.

As athletes, it is crucial to cultivate and nurture our spiritual strengths alongside our physical abilities. I vividly recall my teenage years spent in Ecuador, where the majestic Andes mountains, a testament to the awe-inspiring power of nature, served as an inspiring backdrop to my daily life. These mountains serve as both a physical challenge and a source of inspiration. I frequently embarked on hikes lasting anywhere from six to eight hours, pushing my limits to reach breathtaking summits. One particularly memorable hike was to the stunning peak of Cotopaxi with a group of college seminarians. Despite being in our early twenties, we were trailing behind our guide, a priest in his late sixties who moved easily over the rugged terrain. His speedy pace was not just a result of physical conditioning; he embodied a lesson that has resonated deeply with me: “We cannot rely solely on physical strength to navigate life’s challenges. Instead, we must also cultivate the strength of spirit.” This realization, inspired by our guide’s effortless movement, has stayed with me, transforming my approach to every hike and climb. Now, when I stand at the base of a mountain, I not only prepare my body for the exertion ahead but also take the time to pray for God’s strength to uplift and sustain me in my endeavors. This holistic approach to physical and spiritual preparation enriches my experiences, instilling a more profound sense of purpose and resilience in all I undertake.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN CLERICAL MINISTRY FORMATION AND PASTORAL MINISTRY

#### 4. Introduction

This chapter offers a unique perspective on Osmer's third "normative task," focusing on the often-overlooked role of sports and play. It argues that these activities are not just vital and effective mediums for priestly formation, but also transformative instruments in Catholic pastoral ministry. The insights presented are not the usual academic discourse but rather stem from personal narratives gathered from interviews with seven priests. This unique approach provides a fresh and engaging take on the topic. Some of the following questions were used in the interviews:

8. What role, if any, do sports play in your ministry? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.
9. How would you characterize the real or potential impact of sports on priestly formation?

This chapter further argues that engaging with sports and play is crucial for the 'new evangelization,' as envisioned by Pope Francis. This approach aligns with his call for an authentically 'synodal' Church, particularly in outreach to youth and young adults. By creating a bridge between faith and the universal appeal of sports, the Church can foster deeper connections and involvement among younger generations, who often seek community and engagement through recreational activities. "Youth ministry needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an

opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God.”<sup>133</sup>

Moreover, this chapter provides a hopeful perspective on the Church’s future, suggesting that few ministerial practices possess the potential to develop the faithful into genuinely synodal missionary discipleship as effectively as do sports and recreational play. The chapter explores successful methodologies employed by priests who have integrated sports into their pastoral initiatives to illustrate and substantiate these arguments. This includes detailed descriptions of programs such as youth sports camps, community tournaments, and church-sponsored leagues, illustrating how these activities promote physical wellness, nurture community ties, and enhance spiritual growth, instilling a sense of optimism and confidence about the future of the Church.

In conclusion, this chapter aims to illuminate the multifaceted benefits of sports as a medium for reaching and engaging the faithful, which ultimately contributes to the broader mission of the Church in a rapidly changing world.

#### **4.1. Sports and Various Forms of Play as Vital and Effective Media for Human Formation**

Engaging in sports and various forms of play is not just enjoyable but is also a vital tool in the holistic formation of individuals pursuing a priestly vocation. As discussed in the previous chapter, insights from the seven priests I interviewed highlighted the multifaceted benefits that physical activities provide. These practices not only foster

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<sup>133</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit: Apostolic Exhortation to Young People* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), no. 204.

physical fitness and enhance mental and spiritual well-being, but also instill essential values such as discipline, perseverance, teamwork, excellence, and leadership.<sup>134</sup> These attributes play a significant role in developing the character necessary for effective human formation in seminaries, a foundational aspect for priests to serve their communities effectively. Fr. Anthony stated that sports in priestly formation “will help candidates preparing for the priesthood to develop discipline and maintain good health. Conversely, if a seminarian lacks discipline or is in poor health, he may struggle to complete his journey and may not become an effective shepherd for his people. I am not suggesting that a seminarian needs to be an accomplished athlete; rather, I’m highlighting that the skills and virtues learned through sports can be beneficial during the journey to the priesthood.”

When we refer to human formation within seminaries, we emphasize the importance of a balanced lifestyle. This balance is crucial as it enables priests to be compassionate and effective pastors in the lives of the people in their congregations.<sup>135</sup> “The basic principle of human formation is found in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the human personality of the priest is to be a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the human race.”<sup>136</sup> The values cultivated through sports and play are integral to this formation, as they help enhance spiritual resilience and the commitment to obedience, which are core aspects of the priestly life. For instance, priests commit to celibacy, symbolizing their marriage to the Church and the call for fidelity to their vocation. Similarly, they promise obedience to their bishops and successors.

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<sup>134</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City: Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, 2018), nos. 9–15.

<sup>135</sup> USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation*, nos. 87–90.

<sup>136</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Westchester, PA: Ascension Publishing Group, 2023), 92.

Lessons learned through teamwork in sports, where players must adhere to collective strategies and rules, parallel the obedience required within Church structures. This commitment to a team mirrors the dedication priests have toward the Catholic Church and its teachings.

Moreover, perseverance is a central theme in priestly formation. It is often helpful to draw parallels to the apostles who were sent out to spread the Gospel. The journey of Saint James, particularly along “El Camino de Santiago,” serves as a spiritual example. Initially, after witnessing Jesus’ crucifixion, the apostles were paralyzed by fear of the authorities. However, the transformative experience of witnessing the resurrection ignited their faith and mission, fueling their motivation as they embarked on their respective journeys to evangelize.

In addition to supporting their spiritual development, the priests I interviewed underscored the importance of sports and recreational activities as essential avenues for joy, camaraderie, and relaxation. For instance, Fr. Mario shared an emotional memory from his recent birthday celebration. He reminisced about a delightful moment when he playfully tossed balloons with children from his parish school, which beautifully embodied Jesus’s teaching of embracing a childlike spirit. Engaging in such lighthearted activities brings joy and plays a crucial role in alleviating the stress that often accompanies the demanding responsibilities of parish life, particularly during challenging tasks like parish council meetings or planning sessions. These moments of joyfulness are vital reminders of the importance of balance and the need to nurture one’s well-being amid service, highlighting the crucial need for self-care and well-being in our lives.

Lastly, pursuing professionalism is a common aspiration, especially within the context of the priestly vocation. Each priest endeavors to excel in his ministry, striving to embody the highest standards of their faith and practice. The values of excellence and leadership, foundational components fostered through involvement in sports and play, are crucial for priests to illuminate and uplift their communities through effective pastoral engagement. By integrating these values into their formation, priests can cultivate a fruitful ministry characterized by service, dedication, and inspiration to those they serve.

#### **4.2. Sports and Various Forms of Play as Vital for Effective Catholic Pastoral Ministry**

Engaging in sports and diverse forms of play is crucial for fostering effective Catholic pastoral ministry. By integrating a focus on play and sports into pastoral initiatives, parishes can create inclusive environments that resonate with individuals of all ages. This approach can lead to positive change, as shared experiences in play often pave the way for deeper connections, personal growth, and spiritual development within the community. Ultimately, such integration can reflect the joy of living a faith-centered life and inspire others to participate in the Church's mission.

The challenges that the Good News of the Gospel encounters in today's society are widely recognized, particularly among young people and emerging generations. As contemporary society continues to distance itself from its historical foundations, particularly the Christian principles that once shaped its moral and cultural framework, many believers express concern over the rise of values that contradict the Gospel. This transformation is reflected in everyday life, where secular worldviews frequently take

precedence over spiritual and religious convictions.<sup>137</sup> “Many young people are taken in by ideologies, used and exploited as cannon fodder or a strike force to destroy, terrify or ridicule others. Worse yet, many of them end up as individualists, hostile and distrustful of others; in this way, they become an easy target for the brutal and destructive strategies of political groups or economic powers.”<sup>138</sup>

Through sports and play, pastoral ministry can respond creatively to contemporary challenges, offering young people concrete experiences of belonging and purpose. These practices provide accessible entry points into community life, foster trust between pastoral leaders and participants, and open pathways for deeper catechesis and spiritual formation. As such, sports and play are not peripheral to pastoral ministry but constitute powerful tools for evangelization, accompaniment, and the renewal of faith within today’s cultural landscape.<sup>139</sup>

### **4.3. Priestly Vocations Through Sports**

Sports and spirituality can coexist in a profoundly enriching way, creating a meaningful framework for nurturing vocational aspirations, especially for those considering the priesthood.<sup>140</sup> As I navigated my discernment journey with the Franciscans, I frequently reflected on how my passion for athletics intersected with community life. Over time, I realized that my sports involvement significantly enhanced

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<sup>137</sup> See *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), nos. 52–56; and *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.

<sup>138</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit: Apostolic Exhortation to Young People* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), no. 73.

<sup>139</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), no. 37.

<sup>140</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, nos. 8–10.

my spiritual growth. It transcended mere physical activity; every game and practice became a classroom for life's valuable lessons that are directly applicable to my spiritual journey and commitment to service. For instance, the discipline and perseverance required in sports mirror the dedication and endurance needed for spiritual growth. The teamwork and mutual support in sports reflect the communal nature of spiritual life. The humility in victory and grace in defeat in sports echo the spiritual virtues of humility and acceptance.

This realization can serve as a source of inspiration for young individuals contemplating the priesthood. My first discerning retreat, which lasted fifteen days and included seventeen candidates, offered a unique opportunity for exploration and growth. During this retreat, daily sports activities became integral to our experience, playing a crucial role in building fellowship and strengthening the bonds within our community. For example, our soccer matches evolved into more than competitions focused solely on winning; they became opportunities to learn vital lessons about trust, collaboration, and mutual support. Each game encouraged us to work together, cultivate teamwork, and engage in friendly competition, all of which helped deepen our understanding of our vocations.

The universal appeal of sports creates an exceptional platform for engaging a diverse audience, particularly youth. Sports activities foster inclusive environments that help individuals connect through shared interests, ensuring that everyone feels welcomed and valued. A prime example of this inclusivity is Father Paul, who works as a vocational director in his Archdiocese. He embodies the spirit of community that sports can cultivate, often sharing how his athletic pursuits keep him physically healthy and foster meaningful relationships. Through his encouragement, he emphasizes how sports help to build a

vibrant community among priests, seminarians, and anyone discerning their vocation, making us all feel connected and part of a larger whole. Such experiences affirm that sports can serve as effective entry points for vocational accompaniment, offering young people tangible experiences of community, joy, and shared purpose within the life of the Church.<sup>141</sup>

#### **4.4. The Importance of Sports and Diverse Play Activities in the Context of New Evangelization**

In the realm of faith-based outreach, the innovative integration of sports and play stands out as a unique and powerful strategy for promoting the New Evangelization. Within the framework of the New Evangelization, sports and play thus emerge as valuable pastoral instruments that support relational accompaniment, human formation, and the joyful transmission of faith.<sup>142</sup> Unlike traditional methods of evangelization, sports have the distinct ability to attract individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities, serving as an effective medium for building meaningful relationships and fostering a sense of belonging among participants.<sup>143</sup> Father Peter, a strong advocate of this approach, notes, “Our people watch sports and love sports; there’s a relatability to play. When I can weave that into my priesthood, I find that I can connect with the people on a much deeper level.” This approach not only resonates with sports enthusiasts but also opens the door for deeper discussions about faith and spirituality.

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<sup>141</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, no. 143.

<sup>142</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 37.

<sup>143</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 25–35.

Play transcends mere competition; it encompasses creativity, cooperation, and enjoyment, enabling individuals to express themselves in ways that resonate with their spiritual journeys. Engaging in recreational activities can facilitate a deeper understanding of the Gospel, as principles such as teamwork, perseverance, and respect resonate well with Christian values. By integrating sports and play into evangelization efforts, communities can create inclusive environments that invite individuals to explore their faith in a dynamic and approachable manner, making them feel included and valued.<sup>144</sup> This approach not only attracts those who might feel alienated from traditional church settings but also nurtures a sense of joy and connection among participants, laying the groundwork for spiritual growth and community engagement.

This document also seeks to emphasize the role of sports as a vital educational tool that can holistically support the development of individuals, particularly children and young adults. Such encouragement focuses on greater integration of sports within various institutions, such as schools, parishes, Catholic clubs, mission trips, and youth groups. These organizations strive toward goals that surpass mere athletic achievements, aiming instead to nurture the mind and spirit while serving the Gospel. These institutions recognize the importance of imparting human and Christian values as integral to their mission, especially in the formative years of youth. The importance of sports is readily apparent; however, viewing it as a complementary element in the broader objective of conveying the Gospel message is crucial. Evangelization can be likened to planting seeds that require a well-prepared environment to thrive.<sup>145</sup> The seed, which symbolizes the “sown word of

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<sup>144</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit*, nos. 203–210.

<sup>145</sup> Matt 13:3–9 (NABRE).

God,” needs the conditions to germinate and bear fruit. While sports should never overshadow the primary focus of direct evangelization, they possess a unique ability to stimulate the mind and spirit, making individuals more receptive to spiritual teachings.

#### **4.5. Mission Trips**

Reflecting on my experience as a Franciscan friar, I recall annual mission trips aimed at accompanying communities in underserved areas. During these missions, we regularly organized catechetical talks intended to invite reflection on the Gospel. Despite sincere efforts, attendance was often limited, revealing the challenge of engaging communities through verbal proclamation alone. This experience underscored the need for more relational and culturally resonant approaches to evangelization.<sup>146</sup>

A pivotal moment occurred when I invited local youth to join us for a soccer game the following day. What began as a simple gesture quickly transformed our pastoral presence. The invitation drew a large number of teenagers and young adults, creating an atmosphere of joy, trust, and shared experience. Through playing soccer together, barriers dissolved and relationships were formed in ways that words alone had not achieved. This shared activity fostered a sense of belonging and mutual respect, opening space for authentic encounter.<sup>147</sup>

The communal experience of sport became the foundation for deeper conversations about faith and spirituality. Once relationships were established, discussions about the

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<sup>146</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 42–43.

<sup>147</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 24.

Gospel emerged naturally and organically.<sup>148</sup> Soccer functioned as a relatable and accessible point of contact, preparing hearts to receive the message of Christ and inviting participants to reflect on the model of humanity embodied by Jesus. In this way, sports served not as a replacement for proclamation, but as a pastoral bridge facilitating encounter, trust, and openness to the Gospel.<sup>149</sup>

This experience illustrates how sports can play a vital role in missionary contexts, particularly among young people. By engaging individuals at the level of shared humanity and embodied joy, sports create fertile ground for evangelization, echoing the Church's call to accompany people where they are and to proclaim the Gospel through relationships rooted in presence, joy, and authentic encounter.<sup>150</sup>

#### **4.6. Cycling**

Integrating sports into outreach initiatives presents a compelling opportunity for evangelization, thereby strengthening community connections.<sup>151</sup> A notable illustration of this approach is Fr. Alan, a retired priest whose enthusiasm for cycling has evolved from a childhood hobby into a significant component of his ministry. Rather than simply cycling for personal enjoyment, this form of mobility becomes part of pastoral ministry and missionary presence among the people.<sup>152</sup> Fr. Alan articulated, "As a priest in the city throughout my life, I conduct much of my ministry on my bike... it facilitates efficient travel. Within a distance of eight or ten miles, provided the weather is favorable, I can visit

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<sup>148</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit*, nos. 203–210.

<sup>149</sup> Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Sport at the Service of Humanity* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), no. 3.

<sup>150</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 42.

<sup>151</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 20–24.

<sup>152</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nos. 6, 9.

hospitals and nursing homes, conduct home blessings, and attend Mass or meetings at other parishes.” In a vast urban environment such as Chicago, traffic congestion presents a considerable obstacle to timely ministry and securing parking. During these visits, he administers sacraments such as the anointing of the sick and offers comfort and spiritual support to those in need. Additionally, he performs emergency baptisms in urgent circumstances, ensuring that individuals seeking salvation receive it promptly. Through visiting hospitals, nursing homes, and parishioners, this ministry reflects the Church’s call to go out to the people and bring the Gospel through presence, service, and sacramental ministry.<sup>153</sup>

Incorporating sports equipment, particularly bicycles, into ministry not only improves access to religious services but also inspires parishioners to engage with their faith in innovative and dynamic manners. By leveraging the diverse benefits that activities like cycling can provide, organizations can more effectively address the varied needs of their communities. This unique outreach methodology promotes physical health and fosters spiritual development, demonstrating how sports can bridge divides and draw individuals closer to their faith. It is a journey of health and faith by which we can all be inspired.

The role of sports and recreational activities within the framework of contemporary evangelization is both significant and multifaceted. Sports serve as avenues for physical activity while simultaneously providing a platform for community building, fostering relationships, and promoting values such as accountability, communication, and openness, and as Fr. Alan remarked, “It is intriguing that even today... people note that I ride a bike,

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<sup>153</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 42–43.

thus establishing a recognizable connection that resonates particularly with children.” Within the scope of evangelization, these activities can enhance engagement with individuals who may not typically participate in conventional church settings. Moreover, Fr. Alan sees his bicycle as a tool for continuing the journey of evangelization, comparable to the disciples who were sent out to travel from place to place proclaiming the Gospel and serving the people<sup>154</sup>.

#### **4.7. Pope Francis’s Vision for a Synodal Church Among Youth and Young Adults**

Firstly, a synodal Church prioritizes listening not only to the Holy Spirit, but also to the diverse voices within the Church community, especially those of young people.<sup>155</sup> This emphasis on attentive discernment is crucial in understanding and responding to God's will. The Church, in its commitment to youth engagement, creates environments that promote dialogue, ensuring that the perspectives and concerns of the younger generation are not just heard, but valued in decision-making processes.

Secondly, synodality embodies “walking together” on a shared faith journey. This metaphor underscores the idea that youth and young adults are not just passive observers, but active collaborators in the Church’s mission.<sup>156</sup> The Church’s mission, which is more urgent and relevant than ever, can be more effectively carried out by fostering partnerships with young people, encouraging shared responsibility<sup>157</sup> and promoting the core values of the faith, while navigating contemporary challenges.

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<sup>154</sup> Luke 10:1–9 (NABRE).

<sup>155</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican City: International Theological Commission, 2018), nos. 6–7.

<sup>156</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 9.

<sup>157</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 106, 169–173.

Thirdly, Pope Francis encouraged the Church to harness young people's creativity, enthusiasm, and fresh perspectives. He believed that their innovative ideas can help the Church explore new avenues for evangelization and community engagement, all while remaining anchored in the foundational teachings and traditions of the faith. This approach revitalizes the Church's outreach efforts and empowers young people to take ownership of their faith journey.

Moreover, Pope Francis regarded young people as the “living hope of the Church on the move.”<sup>158</sup> He called on them to actively share their unique insights, talents, and experiences, recognizing that their contributions can enrich the Church community. This vision highlights the importance of viewing young people as recipients of faith and integral participants who can inspire and lead.

Finally, for young people to thrive within the Church, they must receive adequate guidance and support. Families, parishes, and broader community networks play vital roles in this nurturing process. Mentorship from dependable Christians who provide encouragement, direction, and a listening ear is not just crucial, but it is a sacred duty. By establishing supportive relationships, the Church can help young people navigate their spiritual journeys and foster a sense of belonging within the faith community.

#### **4.8. Creating a Dedicated Space for Sports and Recreation in a Synodal Church**

Unlike many other social platforms, sport has a unique ability to unite a wide range of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including the downtrodden, marginalized

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<sup>158</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit*, March 25, 2019.

communities, immigrants, natives, the wealthy, the influential, and the impoverished. This shared passion for athletic events and team spirit creates an environment where people come together, often in the same exact physical location, regardless of their differences. For the Church, this dynamic presents an opportunity to reach out and connect with individuals who may feel excluded or disconnected from traditional religious settings<sup>159</sup>

While the Church maintains an open-door policy, welcoming everyone who seeks spiritual guidance, it also recognizes the importance of actively engaging with the broader community beyond its walls. By doing so, the Church not only addresses the spiritual needs of more individuals, showing compassion, but also contributes to social cohesion, empathy, and mutual understanding in a diverse world. As Pope Francis said, “The way of the Church is precisely to leave her four walls behind and to go out in search of those who are distant, those on the ‘outskirts’ of life. [...] Not only to welcome and reintegrate with evangelical courage all those who knock at our door but to go out and seek, fearlessly and without prejudice, those who are distant, freely sharing what we freely received.”<sup>160</sup>

As we journey as a synodal church, we recognize the importance of cultivating a sense of community among believers through a dedicated space for sports and recreation. This venue can significantly promote physical activity while fostering relationships, encouraging teamwork, and nurturing fellowship among congregants of all ages. This missionary and synodal vision encourages the Church to create spaces of encounter,

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<sup>159</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 9–15.

<sup>160</sup> Francis, “Homily at Holy Mass with the New Cardinals,” February 15, 2015, accessed March 17, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150215\\_omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150215_omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html).

dialogue, and community life.<sup>161</sup> By integrating sports into our church life, we can champion healthy lifestyles and create an atmosphere filled with joy and collaboration. The space could host team sports, exercise classes, and family-friendly events, all designed to promote inclusivity and make us proud of our role in promoting healthy living.

#### **4.9. Ministerial Praxes**

Integrating sports into ministry practices provides a dynamic and engaging platform for reaching unreached nations with the gospel message.<sup>162</sup> This approach facilitates the sharing of faith and plays a crucial role in positively impacting individuals' lives through physical activity and healthy competition. By promoting sports, ministries can foster strong, supportive communities where fellowship thrives, creating lasting relationships among participants. Furthermore, this initiative inspires and motivates young athletes around the globe to embrace the teachings of Jesus Christ. Sports play a significant role in promoting values of faith, perseverance, and teamwork, making the audience members feel inspired and motivated. This encourages them to develop their physical talents while instilling these values. Overall, the intersection of sports and ministry is a powerful tool for transformation and outreach in diverse cultural contexts.

Sports can evoke intense passions and deep emotions in individuals and communities alike. However, the true purpose of pastoral engagement in sports goes beyond simply sparking these feelings; it aims to create a lasting and meaningful impact that resonates in everyday life. For Father Francis, sports are not just for the young but also

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<sup>161</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, nos. 6–7.

<sup>162</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 127, 169–173.

their parents. He notes, “Parents find you more approachable because you spend time with their kids. You show love for their children in a way no other priest does simply by being present at their practices or games. Suddenly, this allows them to feel comfortable approaching a priest.” This impact extends beyond the field or the court, influencing how people perceive and interact with their faith in their daily lives. Sports, as a communal activity, also allow priests to meet the rest of the family, including siblings, relatives, and friends who come to support the young athletes. These enjoyable interactions not only strengthen the bond between the priest and the community but also bring families closer. They may lead parents to ask questions they might not feel comfortable asking otherwise. Thanks to these moments, they gain confidence in their relationship with the priest.

Engaging youth through sports has proven to be a powerful way to foster connections and build self-confidence. This newfound confidence often translates into a greater willingness to participate in Church activities. During my time as a seminarian in my parish, I took the initiative to gather a diverse group of children, adolescents, and young adults who actively contributed to the Sunday Mass by reading the liturgical texts. Remarkably, many of these individuals I initially met on the soccer field, where we bonded over teamwork and shared experiences. It is inspiring to see how these former sports participants, who were once just players on the field, have transformed into active church members, contributing meaningfully to our community.

As they began to engage more deeply with the Church, their enthusiasm became contagious, inspiring others within the congregation to join. This ripple effect has created a vibrant community where youth feel a profound sense of belonging and significance. In my current parish, children, adolescents, and young adults participate in many roles beyond

serving at the altar as acolytes. They take on important responsibilities as lectors and ushers, welcoming parishioners at the entrance and distributing the Sunday bulletin. This involvement fosters a warm and inviting atmospheres for all attendees. Others have stepped up to assist with live-streaming the Mass, an important service that allows those unable to attend in person, mainly the sick and homebound, to stay connected with the community. These diverse roles, from ushering to live-streaming, exemplify the depth and breadth of their contributions, enriching our parish life and creating an engaging and inclusive environment for all congregation members.

#### **4.10. Missionary Disciples**

A missionary disciple is a devoted Christian who has experienced a personal encounter with Jesus and consciously decides to follow Him, actively sharing his or her faith with others.<sup>163</sup> Pope Francis’s vision was that the formation to the priesthood is an experience of ongoing discipleship, since “priests never stop being disciples of Jesus, who follow him.”<sup>164</sup> This journey of discipleship, often referred to as “missionary discipleship,” is a more active and outward-focused form of discipleship. It begins with a commitment to learning from Jesus, which involves listening to His teachings and striving to obey them. As emphasized in Luke 6:40, “No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher.”<sup>165</sup> This passage highlights the transformational nature of discipleship, where the goal is to embody the qualities of Christ in our lives.

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<sup>163</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 120–121.

<sup>164</sup> Michael Mullaney et al., eds., *Models of Priestly Formation: Assessing the Past, Reflecting on the Present, and Imagining the Future* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), xxvii.

<sup>165</sup> Luke 6:40, NABRE.

Furthermore, Jesus entrusted His disciples with the vital task of spreading the good news following their spiritual formation. In Matthew 28:16-20, He commissions them with the words, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. Moreover, behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>166</sup> This Great Commission not only underscores the global scope of evangelism but also provides a comforting reassurance of His constant presence and support in our mission, strengthening our resolve and faith.

Acknowledging the challenges many priests face in fulfilling this evangelical call in today’s world is crucial. In a rapidly changing culture, where traditional methods may fall short of capturing people’s attention, creativity becomes an essential and empowering tool in engaging with others. For instance, some individuals use music, dance, and art to create meaningful connections and capture the interest of youth. In today’s world, creativity becomes an essential tool in evangelization, as demonstrated by figures such as St. John Bosco, who reached young people through activities, games, and education.<sup>167</sup> This emphasis on creativity encourages us to think outside the box and innovate in our evangelistic efforts.

Within this framework, sports, games, and outdoor activities emerge as valuable instruments of missionary discipleship. Far from being merely recreational, these activities create relational spaces where trust is built and dialogue becomes possible.<sup>168</sup> Organizing

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<sup>166</sup> Matthew 28:19–20, NABRE.

<sup>167</sup> Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work* (New Rochelle, NY: Salesian Publishers, 1985), 112–120.

<sup>168</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 30–33.

sports events, game nights, or outdoor gatherings that include moments of prayer or reflection allows pastoral ministers to integrate faith naturally into shared human experiences. Through such encounters, missionary disciples can form authentic relationships, invite meaningful conversations about faith, and gently guide others toward a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>169</sup>

#### **4.11. Effective Methods and Strategies Priests Employ in Their Pastoral Work through Sports**

In recent years, the role of sports in pastoral work has gained increasing recognition among priests and Church communities. “The parish is not an outdated institution: precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.”<sup>170</sup> Clergy members employ practical methods and strategies to engage with their congregations and the broader community through athletic activities.<sup>171</sup> One key approach involves organizing recreational sports programs that foster teamwork and camaraderie. By creating inclusive environments where people of all ages can participate, priests not only promote social interaction, but also build a sense of community, making everyone feel connected and part of a larger whole. These programs encourage physical health and provide a platform for spiritual growth and moral development.

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<sup>169</sup> Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Sport at the Service of Humanity* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), no. 5.

<sup>170</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 15.

<sup>171</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, nos. 52–60.

Moreover, priests can effectively integrate sports into their pastoral work by organizing activities that serve both spiritual and community-building purposes.<sup>172</sup> Engaging in tournaments, leagues, and friendly matches fosters camaraderie among parishioners while encouraging healthy competition and teamwork. These events can be tailored to include various age groups and skill levels, ensuring inclusivity for all congregation members. In addition to competitive sports, priests can also take advantage of outdoor activities such as camping trips and mountain climbing. These experiences allow participants to bond in a natural setting, reflecting on their faith while enjoying the beauty of creation. Such trips promote physical fitness and mental well-being, offering a wholesome break from everyday life. Walking or running events, such as charity races, can also be powerful tools for pastoral work. These events promote physical health while raising awareness and funds for community needs, aligning physical activity with acts of service. Participants come together meaningfully, experiencing the joy of collective effort and mutual support, inspiring and motivating each other.

Furthermore, many priests incorporate sports-related discussions into their sermons and teachings. They draw parallels between athletic principles such as discipline, perseverance, and teamwork and the teachings of the Gospel. For example, I often use sports in my homilies, and I can see that people feel connected. I have a parishioner from France who attends my English Sunday Mass. He is always happy when I ask him about Real Madrid, a soccer team from Spain, especially since his favorite player, Kylian Mbappé, plays on that team. I frequently contrast sports with virtues like perseverance, teamwork, or obedience which helps cultivate a deeper understanding of faith among

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<sup>172</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nos. 6, 9.

participants, making spiritual lessons more relatable and engaging. This approach not only makes the audience feel connected but also spiritually enriched.

Additionally, integrating prayer, reflection, and faith discussions into sports activities further connects athletic experiences with spiritual formation and pastoral ministry.<sup>173</sup> This integration is not just about personal growth, but also about community building and outreach. The role of clergy, church leaders, and community organizers, is crucial in fostering this connection. Whether it is leading a moment of silence before a game, facilitating discussions about the faith challenges encountered in sports, or organizing sports-based outreach programs, community religious leaders can help intertwine the concepts of faith and physical activity, reinforcing the belief that sports can serve as a channel for divine connection. Fr. Peter shared a story about his high school cross-country coach, who emphasized the importance of focusing on the kind of men they were becoming and how they worked together as a team to perform well. “It was a life lesson beyond just the sport, so it was always in my mind. I began to make connections between those virtues in sports and how they animated my vocation as I moved toward the seminary.”

Lastly, sports can serve as an effective tool for outreach efforts and evangelization, especially among youth and families.<sup>174</sup> By collaborating with local organizations and schools, priests can extend their ministry beyond the parish, reaching marginalized communities and fostering inclusive dialogue. These partnerships often lead to meaningful relationships and enhance the visibility of the Church’s mission. For instance, many

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<sup>173</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 25–35.

<sup>174</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit*, nos. 221–230.

parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago have affiliated schools, and where there are schools, there are also sports programs. In terms of ministry, it is evident that even more can be done. Fr. Alan mentioned that religious education could be more dynamic if we incorporate sports and games, inspiring us to make our teaching more engaging. “Kids will be eager to attend if they have the opportunity not only to learn about catechesis but also to enjoy moments of entertainment.”

These strategies, which include organizing sports programs, incorporating sports-related discussions into sermons, and engaging in outdoor activities, enhance community spirit and spiritual growth while promoting healthier lifestyles. They demonstrate how the integration of sports within pastoral work can lead to a more vibrant, engaged, and cohesive parish community. Through these multifaceted strategies, priests effectively harness the power of sports to enrich their pastoral work, fostering stronger communities united in athletic and spiritual pursuits.

#### **4.12. Camping**

Priests often organize camping trips that serve a dual purpose: providing recreational opportunities while fostering spiritual growth and community bonding. These excursions typically include various outdoor activities, prayer sessions, and discussions encouraging participants to reflect on their faith in a serene natural setting.

During my time as a seminarian, I was given the responsibility of leading a new youth group each year. In my early twenties, I was brimming with energy and enthusiasm, and one of my primary goals was to organize a camping trip for the group, much like the experiences I had during my high school and college years. To gauge interest, I asked the

youth if they enjoyed camping, and their overwhelming and enthusiastic response was truly inspiring. Among them, three individuals were exceptionally knowledgeable about camping, while two had even undertaken hiking adventures in the Andes region, exploring the breathtaking landscapes of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. It became clear to me that several youths were already involved in outdoor activities, some even at a professional level, and they were more than willing to share their expertise and passion for the great outdoors. With their enthusiasm as a backdrop, we collaboratively planned a series of camping trips, one for each month. Every trip was infused with a Christian theme, drawing inspiration from Biblical passages to deepen our spiritual experience.

For instance, one memorable excursion took us to “Mount Tabor” in Ecuador, where we contemplated the transfiguration of Jesus. This event is beautifully depicted in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of Luke recounts, “Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John with him and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. Moreover, he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Lk 9, 28.)<sup>175</sup> This experience helped the disciples to catch a glimpse of Jesus in his divine glory, often interpreted by scholars as a foreshadowing of his resurrection. The next part of the passage resonates deeply with our experiences in those sacred moments. Peter’s response, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,”<sup>176</sup> expressed a longing to stay in that holy encounter. As he spoke, a bright cloud

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<sup>175</sup> Luke 9:28–29, NABRE.

<sup>176</sup> Luke 9:33, NABRE.

overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud proclaimed, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”<sup>177</sup>

Our camping trips were more than just ordinary outings; they were unique experiences that provided an enchanting backdrop for meaningful activities, including exercise, contemplation, meditation, and engaging with scripture. A particularly memorable moment occurred when we climbed a mountain. At the summit, we dressed in white as a symbolic act of reverence, which allowed us to meditate on God’s glory. As we set up our tents, a profound sense of peace and belonging enveloped us, reminiscent of Peter’s desire to build three tents on the mountain. This act of camping became a symbol of our connection to God and one another. During these moments, we engaged in deep discussions about the intricacies of faith, exploring themes such as resurrection, heaven, and what it truly means to live in the presence of God. These shared experiences created lasting impressions, strengthening our bonds and deepening our understanding of spiritual truths that often elude us amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

#### **4.13. Tournaments and Leagues**

Through the organization of sports tournaments and leagues such as soccer, basketball, and volleyball priests can foster an environment where individuals of all ages can engage in friendly competition. These events not only promote teamwork, sportsmanship, and a sense of community, but also provide a platform for priestly engagement and mentorship. The establishment of sports leagues among church members encourages regular interaction and camaraderie, promoting consistent physical activity

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<sup>177</sup> Luke 9:34–35, NABRE.

through organized practices and games. This not only deepens relationships among congregants but also contributes to the overall health and well-being of the community.

The goal is to engage and inspire the new generation of the faithful within our community. To achieve this, the Catholic Church must commit to organizing a series of dynamic sports tournaments. These events, hosted by the Church, will not only promote physical fitness and teamwork but also foster a spirit of camaraderie and inclusivity among participants of all ages. More importantly, they will provide a platform for our youth to step into leadership roles, guiding and inspiring their peers. Featuring a variety of sports, such as basketball, soccer, and volleyball, the tournaments will ensure that there is something enjoyable for everyone. Fr. Alan mentioned that when parish buildings were closer together in the past, they organized tournaments among these nearby parishes.

Each tournament, a product of our community's collective effort, encourages participation from local schools, youth groups, and families, creating opportunities for community members to come together in a positive and supportive environment. In addition to the competitive aspects, parishes incorporate workshops and discussions focused on sportsmanship, faith, and leadership, aligning with our core values and enhancing the overall experience for all involved. This is a testament to the power of our community to come together and create something meaningful. The values learned through sports such as perseverance, discipline, and teamwork reflect the Christian life itself, which Saint Paul compares to running a race that requires discipline and endurance.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, NABRE.

#### 4.14. Mountain Climbing

Organizing mountain climbing expeditions provides priests with opportunities to engage their communities physically and spiritually, allowing participants to encounter God through the beauty of creation and the experience of perseverance and shared struggle. These experiences often become moments of reflection, contemplation, and spiritual growth, as participants recognize God's presence in the natural world and in their personal journeys.<sup>179</sup> Throughout Scripture, mountains are often places of encounter with God, where individuals experience revelation, transformation, and deeper understanding of their vocation and mission.<sup>180</sup>

Climbing a mountain requires more than just physical endurance; it also calls for deep spiritual resilience. This inner strength allows climbers to connect more profoundly with their environment, experiencing the majesty of God's creation in a way that transcends the ordinary. The awe-inspiring vistas often encountered on such journeys provide not only breathtaking beauty but also moments of profound insight, revealing the vastness of God's handiwork. Even the smallest details in nature, like delicate wildflowers growing in crevices, can serve as poignant reminders of God's love and the intricate care He invests in all aspects of creation.

Fr. John, an experienced outdoor enthusiast, shared his own adventures of embarking on backpacking trips through stunning mountain ranges and pristine national

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<sup>179</sup> Francis, *Christus Vivit*, nos. 223–229.

<sup>180</sup> Psalm 121:1–2, NABRE.

parks. One of his most memorable experiences was spending five days in the majestic Rocky Mountains, where he carefully prepared by packing essential supplies along with his Bible. This combination of physical preparation and spiritual nourishment allowed him to engage in reading and meditation amidst the splendor of the natural world.

During these excursions, Fr. John discovered invaluable insights about the essence of his priesthood, particularly concerning the types of resources and support needed when embarking on mission trips. His experience as a missionary in Peru for eight years was deeply enriched by his time in nature. Immersing himself in the local culture and forming genuine connections with the community, he was able to draw many people closer to God by offering them the sacraments and sharing the message of hope and love. These experiences continue to shape his understanding of service, reminding him of the strength found both in spiritual contemplation and in the beauty of God's creation.

#### **4.15. Run/Walk Events**

Hosting run/walk events such as charity races provides opportunities for community members to engage in healthy living while supporting charitable causes and strengthening parish unity.<sup>181</sup> These initiatives reflect the Church's social mission to promote solidarity, service, and the common good.<sup>182</sup> Priests and spiritual leaders can play a significant role by leading by example, and inspiring participants to blend fitness with a mission of service and compassion for others. It is this mission that drives us and unites us in our efforts.

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<sup>181</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 30–35.

<sup>182</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est: Encyclical Letter on Christian Love* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), nos. 20–25.

During my internship at my assigned parish, I took the initiative to develop a comprehensive plan for organizing a 5K walk and run. Throughout my time there, I successfully led this event for two consecutive years, collaborating closely with local organizations and volunteers to ensure its success. To enrich the experience and broaden participation, I contacted various community groups, encouraging them to join us as participants and in various roles, such as volunteers and sponsors. The overwhelming response from the community, with numerous individuals stepping forward to contribute their time and resources, was a clear demonstration of their commitment and support to our cause. Their involvement was instrumental in the success of the 5K walk and run.

On the event days, the energy was palpable. I was truly moved to see families, friends, and neighbors come together, united by a common goal of supporting our chosen causes. The funds and efforts we gathered allowed us to build a soccer field for the youth of our parish, a tangible result of our collective action. The shared laughter, determination, and camaraderie created a vibrant atmosphere, reinforcing the spirit of community that we strive to embody. Run/walk events thus serve as effective instruments of pastoral ministry, integrating health, fellowship, and service. They provide accessible entry points for participation in parish life, strengthen relational bonds, and translate communal energy into concrete acts of solidarity. In doing so, such initiatives reflect the Church's call to foster integral human development and to build communities rooted in shared joy, generosity, and mission.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 1, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

## CHAPTER V

### ENHANCING PRIESTLY FORMATION THROUGH SPORT: PRACTICAL STEPS FORWARD

#### 5. Introduction

This chapter delves into Osmer's fourth and final *pragmatic* task: offering practical suggestions to amplify and enhance the efficacy of the role of sport in priestly formation. Drawing on the insights and analyses presented in the preceding chapters, this section proposes a range of concrete strategies for integrating the formational practices of sports and play into the broader landscape of priestly formation programs in the United States. These approaches could potentially serve as a valuable framework for similar initiatives in diverse national and cultural contexts.

This chapter begins by outlining specific and practical suggestions for incorporating sports into priestly formation, such as organizing retreats centered around sports, conducting workshops that focus on teamwork and leadership skills, and facilitating community service projects that harness the energy and enthusiasm of sports to benefit local communities. These activities not only promote physical well-being but also encourage seminarians to engage actively with their surroundings in meaningful ways.

Furthermore, this chapter underscores the critical significance of physical fitness for seminarians. Regular physical activity can enhance their capacity to serve, mitigating stress and fostering resilience qualities that are vital in fulfilling their pastoral duties. This section explores various fitness programs that align with the spiritual and community-oriented goals of priestly formation, emphasizing the holistic development of future priests.

In addition, this chapter considers the important role that sports can play in fostering interfaith dialogue and promoting understanding among different religious groups. By showcasing successful real-life examples of interfaith sports initiatives from around the globe, this chapter aims to illustrate how sports can serve as a powerful tool for building relationships, breaking down barriers, and creating a sense of unity among diverse communities. Through these initiatives, individuals can harness the universal appeal of sports to engage in constructive interactions and shared experiences, ultimately paving the way for meaningful dialogue and collaboration across faith traditions.

This chapter analyzes the following questions that were asked of the seven priests in this study:

10. How would you characterize the real or potential impact of sports on priestly formation?
11. Have you ever personally experienced, or do you know of others who have experienced sports playing a negative role in priestly formation? Can you tell me about that?
12. Were you to serve on a committee of seminary administrators, faculty, students, and alumni tasked with writing a report on the actual and/or potential role of sports in priestly formation, what topics would you like to see discussed and why?"

## 5.1. Incorporating Sports and Play into Priestly Formation Programs in the US

The primary goal of human formation in the seminary is to cultivate a level of personal maturity sufficient for assuming the responsibilities of the priestly ministry. This concept of maturity is multifaceted, encompassing several critical dimensions of a person's life: physical, psychological, moral, and social. This chapter primarily focuses on the physical, psychological, and social aspects. Physical health is a crucial aspect of human formation. Maintaining good health and a structured lifestyle is essential; sports can be a practical way to achieve this. It is not about extreme measures, but about balance. A well-balanced diet, regular exercise, and overall attention to well-being are essential for sustaining the energy and vitality needed for ministry. "A person of affective maturity: someone whose life of feelings is in balance and integrated into thought and values; in other words, a man of feelings who is not driven by them, but who freely lives his life enriched by them."<sup>184</sup>

The psychological aspect is closely related to the physical aspect. Human maturity is reflected in developing a stable personality characterized by self-control and emotional balance. Individuals need to cultivate a healthy approach to their emotions and relationships, integrating their sexuality in a way that aligns with their spiritual vocation. This involves recognizing and effectively managing one's feelings and fostering resilience when facing challenges, which is a source of strength and empowerment.

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<sup>184</sup> US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation: Local Norms for Priestly Formation in the United States of America*. 6th ed., (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023), 93.

Regarding the social aspect, this dimension highlights the importance of building and nurturing relationships with diverse individuals. In US parishes, people come from various backgrounds and cultures. Practical communication skills, empathy, and the ability to engage constructively with others are essential for a priest. Social maturity fosters effective pastoral care and enhances community engagement. This reinforces the belief that the Catholic Church is universal and welcoming to everyone, and follows the example of Jesus, who did not limit His mission to the people of Israel, but reached out to all nations.

## **5.2. Implications of Incorporating Sports and Play into Priestly Formation Programs in Various National and Cultural Contexts**

Sports provide a distinctive platform for cultivating essential social skills. Collaborating with teammates enhances communication, cooperation, and leadership abilities, which are vital skills in ministry and daily interactions. Participating in sports helps us appreciate diverse cultures, underscoring the universality of the Church and our commitment to discipleship, making us feel connected and part of a larger community. Professors in theology Bevens and Rayan talk about discipleship in a cultural context. “Discipleship calls us to conversion to God, ‘to the other,’ and to ‘culture.’ But given our initial caveat, culture is a word that refers to actual people in actual social contexts, as well as to their way of life, and the traces they leave on the environment, and the understanding of life’s meaning and purpose”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Stephen Bevens, SVD, and Robin Ryan, CP, *Priesthood in Religious Life: Searching for New Ways Forward* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 106.

The camaraderie fostered through sports experiences is instrumental in nurturing a sense of belonging and community. This emotional aspect is particularly important as individuals prepare for their future roles within the Church. Throughout my seminary experience, I have been able to engage with diverse cultures, including Anglophone, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and African seminarians, and later with their communities. Fr. Anthony observed, “Sports unite everyone. Participating in sports connected me with other seminarians from various cultures profoundly, making it a vital aspect of the human dimension of formation.” This integration of sports and recreational activities into the lives of those pursuing the priesthood not only promotes a holistic approach to their personal and spiritual development but also reassures them that their well-being is genuinely understood and cared for.

In his insightful book *The Priest We Need: A Rector Speaks to His Seminarians*, my former rector at SVDP Regional Seminary in Florida offers a profound reflection on the importance of cultural awareness within the Catholic Church in the United States. He emphasizes that more than one-third of the Catholic population is Hispanic, with an additional eight percent represented by African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. This rich tapestry of cultural backgrounds contributes significantly to the vibrancy of our faith community. He said, “The healthy multicultural community manifests itself at the table of the rectory, on the sports field, and in conversations around the lake. We can certainly see the joy, beauty, and enriching nature of our community on International Night.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> David L. Toups, *The Priest We Need: A Rector Speaks to His Seminarians* (Omaha, NE: The Institute for Priestly Formation, 2019), 38.

### 5.3. Possible Negative Implications

On the other hand, it is essential to acknowledge that participation in sports can present potential drawbacks. The allure of athletics, if not approached with caution, may become an idol, diverting the attention of seminarians from their spiritual focus and commitment. Fr. Peter observes that sports can be detrimental if seminarians prioritize them excessively. He comments, “It is a significant temptation within American culture. Many youths sacrifice their faith for sports, which detracts from their relationship with God. Additionally, this involvement hampers their capacity to engage with the church community, as they become preoccupied with various activities.” Church teaching also warns that sport should never become an idol or lead to exclusion, division, or excessive competitiveness, but should instead promote fraternity, inclusion, and human development.<sup>187</sup>

Furthermore, disparities in athletic abilities among seminarians can create unintended barriers, resulting in feelings of inadequacy or exclusion among those who do not demonstrate exceptional sports skills. It is imperative to establish a balance that allows for the enjoyment of athletic pursuits while ensuring that these activities promote community and spiritual growth rather than division. Emphasizing the significance of equilibrium can alleviate any apprehension regarding the potential drawbacks of sports involvement, providing a reassuring guide for the seminarians.

Fr. Paul highlighted that some seminarians may experience isolation or disconnection due to sports. He stated, “I believe that guilt or responsibility is shared.

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<sup>187</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 7–9.

Those who excel in athletics should take the initiative to assist those who do not feel included. Sports can offer benefits; therefore, we must engage in activities collectively. While the competitive element may be diminished, we can still enjoy ourselves and find diverse ways to include everyone.” Fr. Alan additionally remarked that some seminarians experience feelings of shame, based on his observations within the seminary. He indicated, “They express sentiments such as, ‘I am not coordinated, I do not feel good in my body, and I do not move well,’ which leads to shame and discouragement. I believe we can make a concerted effort to include them, educate them, and provide them with a positive sports experience, even if it consists of simple activities such as walking or hiking in nature.” Fr. Francis recognizes that sports may not appeal to everyone; however, he believes many individuals can enjoy sports without advanced skills. He remarked, “Sports can be frustrating, particularly when participating competitively with individuals lacking familiarity with the game or in situations with a risk of injury. Nonetheless, by shifting one’s mindset away from solely focusing on victory, one can derive much greater enjoyment and open oneself up to meeting new people.”

#### **5.4. Seminaries for Whom Sport Is Not a Primary Gift**

Although athletic involvement is frequently encouraged within seminary formation for its contributions to fraternity, discipline, and human development, the lived experiences of some seminarians reveal a more complex reality. In my own formation across multiple seminaries, I encountered individuals who did not resonate with sports, whether due to lack of interest, limited ability, or personal disposition. At the same time, many of these seminarians exhibited notable talents in other areas such as music, art, poetry, carpentry, or intellectual pursuits and often preferred alternative forms of recreation, including table

games or more contemplative activities. These observations suggest that sport is not universally experienced as a meaningful avenue of integration within seminary life<sup>188</sup>

This dynamic can be understood in light of the diversity of human gifts and cultural backgrounds present within seminary communities. When athletic participation becomes implicitly associated with social belonging or fraternity, those who do not identify with sports may experience a subtle form of exclusion or marginalization. Moreover, an overly narrow understanding of recreation, one that prioritizes physical performance, can overlook other legitimate expressions of human development. The Church's vision of formation, however, affirms the integral development of the whole person, recognizing that human flourishing is expressed through a variety of capacities and charisms<sup>189</sup>

From a theological perspective, seminary formation must be grounded in a Christian anthropology that upholds the dignity and uniqueness of each person. Documents such as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Program of Priestly Formation* emphasize the importance of human formation as the foundation of priestly life, calling for the cultivation of virtues, relationships, and personal integration in a manner that respects individual differences.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, the document *Giving the Best of Yourself* affirms that sport can serve the development of the human person only when it is practiced in a way that promotes inclusion, respect, and authentic growth.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, sport should not be treated as the

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<sup>188</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), no. 88.

<sup>189</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 53; John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), no. 43.

<sup>190</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), nos. 43–44; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed., nos. 75–90.

<sup>191</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City, 2018), nos. 18–20.

sole or normative means of building community, but rather as one among many legitimate pathways through which fraternity and personal development may be fostered.

Considering these concerns, seminaries are called to cultivate a more inclusive and intentional approach to community life. This includes not only the continued promotion of athletic activities but also the recognition and encouragement of diverse talents and forms of engagement. Opportunities for artistic expression, intellectual collaboration, and alternative recreational activities should be integrated into the formative structure of seminary life. Furthermore, the ethos surrounding sport should be carefully shaped so that participation is not driven by competition or comparison, but by a spirit of fraternity, mutual support, and joy. In this way, sport alongside other forms of communal activity can contribute to a more holistic and inclusive model of priestly formation, one that reflects the richness of the human person and the unity of the Body of Christ.<sup>192</sup>

## **5.5. Physical and Mental Health**

Engaging in sports and recreational activities such as basketball, soccer, swimming, and hiking offers significant benefits for individuals pursuing the priesthood. These activities are vital for enhancing physical health by promoting cardiovascular fitness, building strength, and fostering overall wellness. Regular participation in physical exercise helps maintain a healthy weight, improves stamina, and reduces the risk of chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes. Father John emphasized the importance of highlighting the link between sports, physical activity, and overall health, particularly in the context of our

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<sup>192</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), no. 220; Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, no. 49.

ministry. “We recognize that our country is confronted with substantial challenges such as obesity, high cholesterol, diabetes, and several other health conditions that adversely affect those dedicated to their ministry. Thus, it is vital to stress the significance of maintaining good health through regular exercise and a nutritious diet.”

Furthermore, sports can significantly alleviate stress and anxiety, providing essential relief for those in demanding spiritual roles. The camaraderie and teamwork in sports cultivate community and connection, establishing valuable support networks. These experiences enable future priests to develop crucial skills such as discipline, leadership, and resilience, essential traits for those in spiritual leadership roles. Participating in sports contributes significantly to prospective priests’ physical and mental well-being. Fr. Peter stressed the significance of leisure in a priest’s life, especially considering the sacrifices involved in maintaining health and honoring the Sabbath. “It is vital to understand the true essence of celebrating the Sabbath while remaining vigilant against the perils of workaholism.” Furthermore, the Christian tradition emphasizes the importance of rest and leisure, recognizing that the Sabbath and periods of rest are necessary for human flourishing and spiritual renewal.<sup>193</sup> As is often the case in US seminaries, engaging in healthy leisure activities is fundamental for building connections with fellow priests, especially those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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<sup>193</sup> John Paul II, *Dies Domini: On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), no. 67.

## 5.6. Sports and Play Help Seminarians in their Academic Performance

Integrating physical activity into the daily routines of seminarians plays a crucial role in their holistic development, not only improving academic performance but also equipping them to face the diverse challenges inherent in their vocational journey.<sup>194</sup> Seminary formation emphasizes the importance of balance between study, prayer, community life, and recreation as part of integral human and intellectual formation.<sup>195</sup> The Professional Sports Coaching Academy in the UAE emphasizes an important principle: the connection between physical activity and cognitive function. “Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, which improves brain function. Physical activities release chemicals such as endorphins and dopamine, which enhance mood and focus. These chemicals not only help students stay attentive but also reduce stress, allowing them to approach academic challenges with a calm and focused mind.”<sup>196</sup>

Participating in sports and recreational activities plays a crucial role in improving the academic performance of seminarians. These activities not only provide a much-needed break from their rigorous studies but also foster important life skills such as discipline, teamwork, and resilience.<sup>197</sup> Through sports, seminarians learn discipline as they adhere to practice schedules and work towards personal and team goals. Furthermore, teamwork is cultivated as they collaborate with peers, understanding the value of communication and

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<sup>194</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, nos. 115–120.

<sup>195</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2022), no. 85.

<sup>196</sup> Kate Sheikh, “The Role of Sports in Academic Success: How Physical Activity Boosts Learning and Focus,” *ISM Sports*, August 22, 2023, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.ismsports.org/blog/the-role-of-sports-in-academic-success-how-physical-activity-boosts-learning-and-focus>.

<sup>197</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance* (Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), 5–12.

mutual support.<sup>198</sup> This collaborative environment builds resilience, teaching them how to face challenges and setbacks both on and off the field. Overall, engaging in these activities equips seminarians with essential qualities that will benefit them in their future roles as spiritual leaders and community members.

## 5.7. Social Skills

Sports and play also help build community within the Church. These activities encourage interaction among different groups, bridging cultural divides and creating shared experiences.<sup>199</sup> This fosters a sense of belonging among congregants and creates a more vibrant and united church community.<sup>200</sup> More importantly, including recreational activities in priestly formation enriches the lives of clergy and strengthens their ministry, benefiting the church's overall health.<sup>201</sup>

Sports, as universal languages, play a unique role in fostering relationships and collaboration among people from diverse backgrounds.<sup>202</sup> Today, sports are a part of many parishioners' lives, making it easy to connect and discuss sports, whether through playing, watching, or cheering for participants. Finally, through team sports, seminarians can learn vital leadership, teamwork, and resilience skills, preparing them for their future roles in the Church and the wider community. These roles can bring positive change and help us follow God's commands when filled with strong leaders.

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<sup>198</sup> Robert S. Weinberg and Daniel Gould, *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 6th ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2015), 547–560.

<sup>199</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 25–30.

<sup>200</sup> John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, no. 19.

<sup>201</sup> USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation*, no. 87–90.

<sup>202</sup> Jay Coakley, *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 12th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), 112–130.

## 5.8. Practical Suggestions for Integration

The intentional integration of sports and recreational activities into priestly formation programs serves not only individual development but also the cultivation of communal life within the seminary. In keeping with the vision of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which identifies human formation as the foundation of all priestly formation, seminaries are called to foster environments that promote balanced growth in body, mind, and spirit.<sup>203</sup> When thoughtfully structured, sports programs can contribute meaningfully to this goal by enhancing personal maturity while strengthening fraternity and communal engagement. The Program of Priestly Formation encourages intentional structuring of human formation activities within the seminary schedule.<sup>204</sup>

A well-designed approach to sports integration should include a diverse range of activities that accommodate varying interests, abilities, and physical capacities. Team sports such as soccer and basketball foster collaboration, leadership, and mutual responsibility, while individual activities such as running, swimming, and walking provide accessible opportunities for personal fitness and reflection. Fr. Alan highlighted the joy that sports can bring, stating, “Seminarians can engage with sports through watching games, cheering for teams, learning to discuss sports, or participating personally.”

Although many seminaries already offer informal opportunities for sports and recreation, the *Program of Priestly Formation* encourages intentional structuring of human

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43. <sup>203</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, March 25, 1992, no.

<sup>204</sup> USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation*, no. 87–96.

formation activities within the seminary schedule.<sup>205</sup> Establishing dedicated times and spaces for physical activity communicates its formative value and encourages consistent participation. When sports are integrated into the daily rhythm of seminary life, they become part of a holistic formation strategy rather than optional or peripheral pursuits.

My own formation experiences at Saint Vincent de Paul (SVDP) Regional Seminary and Mundelein Seminary illustrate the formative potential of such integration. These institutions provided rigorous theological education alongside practical human formation, supported by leadership that recognized the value of sports and recreation. The witness of leaders such as Bishop Robert Barron, Bishop David Toups, and Father John Kartje was particularly influential. They not only supported recreational activities within the seminary but also encouraged broader participation through inter-seminary athletic events, reinforcing fraternity beyond individual campuses. Their leadership exemplified how formation personnel can model balanced living and affirm the role of sports in priestly life.

It is not an exaggeration to say that sports and games are integral to daily life at US seminaries, fostering camaraderie and teamwork among future priests. The excellent sports facilities at these seminaries further enhance this aspect of seminary life. For instance, SVDP is home to a meticulously maintained swimming pool, allowing students to engage in aquatic activities for fitness and leisure. Meanwhile, Mundelein Seminary boasts a picturesque three-mile trail around Lake Saint Mary, providing an idyllic setting for

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<sup>205</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), nos. 83–88.

walking, jogging, or reflective contemplation. This serene environment encourages physical activity and offers a tranquil moment in nature.

While US seminaries already offer a range of opportunities for sports and recreation, further investment in these programs could significantly enhance seminarians' human formation. By placing a greater emphasis on physical well-being and teamwork, the Church can better prepare future priests for their ministry's collaborative and communal nature. More focus on sports and recreation can help develop well-rounded individuals who are ready to serve their communities with vigor and compassion. Such integration also reflects the Church's broader understanding of sport as a means of human and communal development.<sup>206</sup>

### **5.9. Structured Sports Program for Seminarians**

A well-structured sports program within seminaries presents a concrete and effective means of promoting physical health, fostering communal life, and supporting the holistic human formation of seminarians.<sup>207</sup> When intentionally designed, such a program encompassing both team sports (e.g., soccer, basketball, baseball) and individual activities (e.g., tennis, golf, running, hiking, swimming, and skiing) can significantly enhance the formation environment by integrating physical activity into the ordinary rhythm of seminary life.

It is time to shift the perception of sports in seminaries from mere hobbies or entertainment to essential components of personal development. While physical activities

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<sup>206</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis*, no. 93–99.

<sup>207</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, 9–15.

are generally encouraged, they often lack the formal recognition they deserve. Integrating structured schedules and designated sports spaces within seminarians' daily routines can significantly enhance participation levels and the overall student experience. By establishing regular practice times, hosting inter-seminary competitions, and creating dedicated facilities for sports, seminaries can create an environment where physical fitness is not just encouraged but prioritized. This approach not only fosters a sense of camaraderie and teamwork among students but also promotes a lifelong commitment to physical well-being.

By integrating sports more intentionally into the seminary's formative framework, seminaries can help seminarians develop lifelong habits of physical self-care and communal engagement. Such programs affirm that attention to physical health and recreation is not opposed to spiritual growth, but rather supports the endurance, availability, and relational capacity required for priestly ministry.<sup>208</sup> In this way, a structured sports program becomes a practical expression of the Church's commitment to forming well-rounded priests who are prepared to serve with vitality, balance, and pastoral generosity.

### **5.10. Sports, Classes, and Discussions**

In addition to structured athletic programs, seminaries may further integrate sports into priestly formation through intentional coursework, guided discussions, and reflective practices. Introducing a dedicated course or seminar that examines the role of sports and play in human, spiritual, and pastoral formation can serve as a valuable complement to

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<sup>208</sup> USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation*, nos. 87–96; Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis*, nos. 93–99.

existing formation curricula. Such a course would not treat sports merely as extracurricular activities, but as formative contexts through which seminarians can reflect critically on virtue, leadership, embodiment, and balance in priestly life.

Both *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Program of Priestly Formation* emphasize that human formation must foster virtues and habits that sustain lifelong ministry, including discipline, resilience, relational maturity, and the capacity for healthy leisure.<sup>209</sup> A course focused on sports and play would allow seminarians to examine virtues such as teamwork, perseverance, self-control, and fair play, exploring how these qualities shape athletic participation while also contributing to spiritual growth and pastoral effectiveness. In this way, sports become a lens through which seminarians can reflect on the integration of human experience and spiritual vocation.

Fr. Paul underscored the importance of long-term health for priests. He asked, “Can we effectively utilize the seminary formation period to instruct seminarians on maintaining their health throughout their priesthood?” What sets this course apart is the opportunity for participants to engage with renowned guest speakers, including coaches, sports psychologists, and community leaders. These experts would provide unique insights into how sports can be a powerful tool for personal development, with a focus on leadership, emotional intelligence, and community engagement. The course also stands out for its emphasis on practical activities, such as team-building exercises, competitive sports

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<sup>209</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, nos. 43–44; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), nos. 83–88.

events, and collaborative challenges, which foster camaraderie and collective problem-solving.

Fr. Alan emphasizes the significance of studying papal documents related to sports during seminary formation, noting that the Church has addressed this topic since the time of Pope Pius XII. Additionally, it is important to explore insightful articles and discussions from bishops and priests about sports. For instance, Bishop Robert Barron, former rector of Mundelein Seminary, is prominent on social media. In one of his interviews with Trevor Williams, a professional baseball pitcher, and a devoted Catholic, Bishop Barron reflects on “The Beauty of Baseball.” He states, “The playful things in life are best pursued for their own sake. You don’t attend a baseball game to achieve something else; you go because it is beautiful. This experience parallels the liturgy and fine art, which are pursued purely for their own merit.”<sup>210</sup> Those types of interviews, reflect the positive influence of sports and how athletes perceive and live their faith.

Taken together, the incorporation of courses, discussions, and reflective practices centered on sports offers a practical and theologically grounded means of enriching priestly formation. By engaging sports intellectually, experientially, and spiritually, seminaries can help future priests develop a holistic vision of ministry, one that values balance, embodiment, and relational engagement as integral to faithful and sustainable priestly life.

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<sup>210</sup> “Bishop Barron Presents: Trevor Williams – The Beauty of Baseball,” YouTube video, 47:32, posted by Bishop Robert Barron, February 20, 2025, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QNxEPIEqzs>.

### 5.11. Community Service Projects

Community service projects, in addition to academic formation, are instrumental in nurturing collaboration and strategic thinking, crucial for developing robust leadership skills among seminarians. These projects not only allow participants to connect with their local communities but also instill a profound sense of responsibility and service. Working alongside diverse groups in such projects enhances interpersonal skills and provides practical scenarios for seminarians to exercise their leadership abilities in real-time. The Church is called to go forth and serve others, especially the poor and marginalized.<sup>211</sup>

Similarly, participation in various team sports serves as another invaluable avenue for growth. It offers seminarians the chance to engage in decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict resolution within dynamic environments. The teamwork required in sports mirrors the collaborative efforts needed in ministry and community leadership, making these experiences not just valuable, but particularly relevant and engaging for seminarians. Also, strategic games, when incorporated, can further sharpen essential skills. These activities challenge seminarians to think critically and creatively, helping them outline clear objectives and devise thoughtful strategies to achieve them. From community service to team sports and strategic games, these multifaceted experiences allow seminarians to cultivate the necessary competencies to lead teams effectively and confidently in their future endeavors.

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<sup>211</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), nos. 24, 27, and 88.

## 5.12. Physical, Mental and Spiritual Fitness

Physical Fitness is the cornerstone of this thesis, as it plays a crucial role in the holistic approach to formation in the priesthood. Just as the early Church used work, prayer, study, and community life for formation, the modern Church can also use sport and play as formative environments for human growth, fraternity, evangelization, and pastoral ministry.<sup>212</sup> In the United States, many seminaries have sports fields, gyms, and facilities tailored for various athletic pursuits. By fostering a culture of physical wellness, seminarians can be encouraged to actively engage in friendly competitions and team sports, thereby enhancing physical health and cultivating camaraderie and teamwork.

Organizing community events and inviting local parishes and youth groups to participate is a powerful way to bridge the gap between seminaries and their surrounding communities. These activities not only promote physical wellness but also create meaningful connections and fellowship opportunities, reaffirming the Church's commitment to promoting wellness, unity, and engagement at all levels.

When the body, mind, and spirit are in harmony, seminarians and future priests are better prepared to fulfill their calling and effectively convey the gospel message. Fr. Alan emphasizes that a valuable topic for discussion in seminary is the concept of life balance, the pursuit of a fulfilling life that promotes health across all facets: mind, soul, and spirit. He notes the importance of exploring various sports and games that foster relaxation and recreation, enabling seminarians to engage with one another. "Participation in challenging

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<sup>212</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day), March 25, 1992, no. 43; Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City, 2018).

activities not only enhances physical well-being but also builds emotional resilience, empowering seminarians to confront life's challenges with strength and determination.” This holistic development cultivates personal resilience and prepares them to sow the seeds of faith, sharing the good news in a manner that can yield transformative and fruitful outcomes in the lives of others.

### **5.13. Spiritual Retreats and Formation Workshops**

Spiritual retreats and formation workshops offer privileged moments within seminary life for deepened reflection, communal bonding, and vocational discernment. When thoughtfully integrated into these contexts, sports and physical activities can serve as powerful formative tools that support human, spiritual, and communal development. Both *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Program of Priestly Formation* emphasize that priestly formation must attend to the whole person, fostering environments in which seminarians grow in self-knowledge, relational maturity, and interior freedom.<sup>213</sup> Incorporating sports into retreats and workshops aligns with this vision by engaging the body as an integral dimension of spiritual formation, and celebrates collective achievements, all of which contribute to a vibrant community life.

Engaging in physically demanding or cooperative activities during retreats can also lower social barriers and encourage personal vulnerability. Physical challenge often reveals both strengths and limitations, inviting participants to accept help, offer encouragement, and grow in humility. Such moments can become powerful occasions for reflection,

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<sup>213</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), no. 43.

especially when paired with guided discussion or prayer. Seminarians can be invited to draw connections between physical perseverance and spiritual endurance, teamwork in sport and collaboration in ministry, or trust in teammates and trust in God's providence. These reflective practices help integrate physical experience with spiritual insight, reinforcing the unity of body and spirit.

Additionally, the integration of sports into seminary life promotes physical fitness, which is essential for overall well-being. Physical activity not only enhances health but also encourages mental clarity and emotional resilience, crucial qualities for those in formation. This holistic approach to incorporating sports nurtures well-rounded individuals, those who are not only spiritually aware and deeply committed to their faith, but also physically empowered and connected to their communities. Ultimately, by fostering camaraderie and encouraging personal development through sports, these retreats and workshops can significantly enrich the seminarians' journey towards becoming compassionate and effective leaders in their future ministries.

#### **5.14. Physical Fitness is Crucial for Seminarians to Serve and Meet their Pastoral Responsibilities Effectively**

In my view, Jesus Christ embodies the face of the human God. When I attempt to visualize him, the image that instantly comes to mind is Jesus in excellent physical shape, always ready to traverse the mountains and hills in the vast region of what was known as Judea. This visualization highlights not only his vitality but also his readiness to engage with the world around him. I see a parallel between his readiness to engage and the spirit of sports, where athletes are always ready to face challenges and push their limits.

I firmly believe that sports play a pivotal role in uniting different generations, bridging the gap between the young and old. The connection to sports is a thread that is woven through at least two or three generations: children are often involved in various athletic activities, and their parents and grandparents actively support and encourage them in these pursuits. This shared experience creates a unique bond among family members, fostering a sense of community and belonging that transcends age.

By truly understanding and embracing the language of sports, its values, competitiveness, and camaraderie, we find common ground that allows us to connect more deeply with others. “The priest is called to develop a balanced personality, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities.”<sup>214</sup> This connection makes it easier to share and communicate the core messages of the gospel, allowing us to engage in meaningful conversations about faith, perseverance, and the importance of community. For instance, we can use the discipline and dedication of athletes to discuss the importance of perseverance in our faith journey. To me, Jesus represents the face of the human God.

### **5.15. Sport Themes in Preaching**

The integration of sport-related themes into preaching can serve as an effective pastoral strategy for communicating spiritual truths in accessible and culturally resonant ways. Contemporary Catholic preaching, particularly within parish contexts shaped by cultural diversity and changing ecclesial structures, benefits from images and metaphors drawn from everyday experience. Jesus himself frequently used images drawn from everyday life in his teaching, and the Gospel notes that “without parables he did not speak

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<sup>214</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), no. 43–44.

to them.”<sup>215</sup> In a similar way, contemporary preaching can draw from familiar cultural experiences such as sport to communicate spiritual realities in a language that resonates with the faithful. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* emphasizes that priests are called to mediate the Gospel within concrete human contexts, translating faith into language that speaks to lived experience.<sup>216</sup> In this regard, sport offers a particularly rich symbolic framework for preaching, given its widespread cultural familiarity and its inherent emphasis on discipline, perseverance, and communal effort.

The use of visible symbols and objects within the liturgical environment also reflects the sacramental nature of Catholic spirituality, which recognizes that material signs can communicate spiritual realities. As the Catechism explains, “sacramental signs are perceptible signs accessible to our human nature... Through these signs God communicates grace.”<sup>217</sup> A concrete pastoral example of this approach emerged during the 2025 Lenten season in a parish formed through the merging of three historic churches as part of the *Renew My Church* initiative in the Archdiocese of Chicago. With the encouragement and support of the pastor, Fr. Matt Eyeran, the parish adopted the Lenten theme “To Get Fit,” intentionally framing Lent as a season of spiritual training and renewal. This theme sought to unite parishioners across generational and cultural lines through a shared and easily recognizable metaphor.

The visual dimension of the liturgical environment played a significant role in reinforcing this theme. At the beginning of Lent, the sanctuary was decorated with various

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<sup>215</sup> Mark 4:34, NABRE.

<sup>216</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 26.

<sup>217</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1146.

items of sports equipment such as basketballs, tennis rackets, swimming gear, and weights symbolizing the parish's collective commitment to spiritual fitness. Parishioners were also invited to bring their own sports equipment, transforming the church space into a participatory and engaging environment. This visual catechesis functioned as a tangible reminder that spiritual growth, like physical fitness, requires intentional effort, discipline, and perseverance. Such embodied symbols align with Catholic sacramental sensibilities, which recognize the formative power of material signs in communicating spiritual realities.<sup>218</sup>

For instance, one homily was centered around the importance of consciously committing to “exercise” spiritually, drawing a parallel with the sport of running. We emphasized the significance of starting small like a beginning runner taking the first few tentative steps before gradually building up our spiritual practices. This included making time for daily prayer, participating in charitable work, and performing acts of kindness. We wanted to instill the idea that, like physical training, these spiritual exercises require dedication and consistency until they become second nature and integral parts of our lives.

On another Sunday, the focus shifted to nourishment, which is critical for physical fitness and spiritual growth. Within our Catholic tradition, we can look to the inspiring lives of the saints as guiding examples; they illustrate that the path to holiness is a journey requiring patience, commitment, and continual effort. Furthermore, we highlighted the profound significance of the sacraments, such as the Eucharist, where we partake in the body and blood of Christ, nourishing our souls. The sacrament of reconciliation also

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<sup>218</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1982), nos. 18–21.

emphasizes the vital role in healing and restoring us spiritually, enabling us to deepen our relationship with God.

Through these teachings and shared experiences, we have created an environment that encourages personal reflection and underscores the importance of community support. This Lenten season has been a testament to the value and integral role each of us plays in our parish community's spiritual journey.

#### **5.16. Sports as a Means of Promoting Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding**

Sports, with their unique power, can break down barriers and foster understanding among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. When people from various cultures gather for a sporting event, the atmosphere is charged with excitement and friendly competition, creating a hopeful and optimistic environment. These gatherings not only provide entertainment but also serve as a platform for conversations that can lead to meaningful relationships and mutual respect among participants, further reinforcing the potential for unity.

A historical model for such engagement can be found in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. During the height of the Crusades, a period characterized by deep religious conflict, Francis undertook a journey to the Holy Land, accompanied only by Brother Leo. Rather than approaching the Muslim world with hostility or coercion, Francis sought a peaceful encounter with Sultan Malik al-Kamil. Their meeting was marked by humility, respect, and dialogue, prioritizing understanding over confrontation or forced conversion.<sup>219</sup> This

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<sup>219</sup> Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 89–92.

encounter left a lasting impression, contributing to a legacy of Franciscan presence and custodianship in the Holy Land. Saint Francis's witness illustrates how peaceful engagement, rooted in shared humanity, can open pathways to trust even amid profound difference.

This narrative is a powerful testament to the transformative power of dialogue and respect. It demonstrates how such interactions can inspire change amid conflict, empowering and motivating the audience to engage in similar interactions. It underscores that sports can similarly catalyze conversations between individuals of different faiths, akin to the encounter between Saint Francis and the Sultan. Sporting events create shared experiences that transcend cultural and religious differences, encouraging participants to engage openly and promote collaboration and peace.

Additionally, organized sports initiatives that focus on inclusivity can serve as a model for peaceful coexistence, demonstrating how cooperation and teamwork transcend individual differences. Through such interactions, participants can challenge stereotypes, break down barriers, and cultivate friendships that might not occur in more segregated settings. Ultimately, Sports, with their unique power, can break down barriers and foster understanding among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. Shared athletic experiences create opportunities for dialogue, friendship, and mutual respect. As Pope Francis wrote, "Dialogue is the path toward peace; dialogue involves approaching, speaking, listening, looking at one another, coming to know and understand one another."<sup>220</sup> In this sense, sporting events can become spaces of encounter where

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<sup>220</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 198.

relationships are formed across cultural and religious boundaries. Similarly, the Vatican document on sport emphasizes that “sport can become an instrument of encounter, dialogue, and peace among peoples.”<sup>221</sup>

My class of seminarians from 2020 was incredibly blessed to embark on a transformative journey to the Holy Land for nearly three months, an enriching component of our seminary curriculum. This pilgrimage was not just a physical journey, but a profound spiritual experience that deeply impacted my personal growth. Our pilgrimage began in the vibrant city of Bethlehem, where we immersed ourselves in the local culture and spiritual heritage for the first four weeks. This was followed by another week in Nazareth, two more weeks at Tagba shore, and eventually a profound four-week stay in Jerusalem.

During this remarkable period, we balanced our academic responsibilities attending classes and participating in theological discussions with the exploration of holy sites that hold immense significance to our faith. We also engaged in various recreational activities, including six scheduled games primarily focused on basketball and soccer.

Our time in Bethlehem was not just about spiritual immersion, but also about cultural exchange. We had the unique opportunity to play basketball and soccer against students from Bethlehem University, where the majority are Palestinian Muslims. This experience fostered not just friendly competition but also enriched our understanding of local customs and perspectives. The shared love for sports transcended cultural boundaries, creating a bond that was as strong as our faith. Our time in Jerusalem was marked by more

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<sup>221</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City, 2018).

than just spiritual growth. We faced off against Armenian and Orthodox seminarians in a series of exhilarating soccer games. To our delight, we emerged victorious in all our matches, making history as the first group of seminarians from the United States to achieve such a feat. The sense of achievement was palpable, and it strengthened the bond of camaraderie among us. I must admit that my classmates were exceptionally athletic, showcasing both talent and teamwork.

Our time with the Armenian brothers was a joyous journey of shared experiences. From the spirited soccer match to the heartfelt moment of prayer in their beautiful church, we found a common ground that transcended cultural boundaries. This shared joy set the tone for the day, reinforcing the values of friendship and community that both sports and faith embody. The delightful dinner that followed, filled with traditional Armenian dishes, further enriched our bond, introducing us to their rich culinary heritage.

Our journey in the Holy Land mirrored the Salesians, Franciscans, and Catechumenate seminarians, who understand the value of building connections through shared experiences. The soccer game was more than just a match; it was a window into their deep-rooted faith, fascinating traditions, and vibrant culture. The catechumenate seminarians, proudly associated with a notable seminary near Capernaum, warmly welcomed us into their library and church, sharing insights about their formation activities. This cultural exchange was a rich source of enlightenment, highlighting their commitment to community and personal growth.

One soccer game stands out vividly against the Orthodox seminarians. It was a memorable occasion because of my personal achievement of scoring three goals that night

and the incredible support from their students, parents, and community members who gathered to cheer them on. The atmosphere was electric, filled with excitement and enthusiasm, creating an unforgettable experience for everyone involved.

Although the game was thrilling, it lacked competitiveness, ending with a humorous score of 19 to 2 in our favor. I still recall seeing some of the young children who had come to cheer on their seminarians and professors, almost crying. However, amidst this, a few of my classmates, who were not on the field, joined them in spirited cheer, chanting the names of legendary soccer players like Messi, Neymar, and Ronaldo. Their playful shouts added to the joyous atmosphere, reminding us that the essence of sports lies not just in competition but in community spirit.

As the game concluded, we all came together, players and supporters alike, shouting, laughing, and celebrating the sheer love of the game. This experience was a powerful testament to the unifying power of sports. It was not the result that mattered but our shared presence and willingness to celebrate the moment together. This unity, born out of our shared love for the game, was a source of inspiration for us all.

Reflecting on these experiences in conversation with Dr. Scott C. Alexander, Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Catholic Theological Union, I came to recognize more clearly the formative power of sports in priestly formation. Sports not only support physical well-being but also cultivate leadership, teamwork, humility, and openness to the other qualities essential for priests serving in increasingly diverse and pluralistic contexts. These insights became a catalyst for the present thesis, shaping its focus on the intersection of athletics, formation, and pastoral ministry.

## 5.17. Sports in Catholic Communities

In Catholic communities, particularly those connected to various religious orders such as the Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Salesians, and Augustinians, sports play a crucial role in fostering relationships and enhancing learning experiences among various Catholic groups. Each of these orders brings its unique charism, spiritual gifts, and focuses that can significantly enrich the sporting experience. “Different religious institutes have different gifts according to the grace given to them.”<sup>222</sup>

The Benedictine tradition, grounded in stability, balance, and communal life, naturally lends itself to an understanding of sports that emphasizes teamwork, rhythm, and mutual responsibility. Athletic activities within Benedictine contexts often reflect monastic values, fostering cooperation and harmony rather than individual achievement. Sports become an extension of community life, reinforcing the Benedictine commitment to shared purpose and common good.<sup>223</sup>

Franciscan communities, shaped by simplicity, humility, and fraternity, tend to emphasize inclusivity and joy in participation. In Franciscan settings, sports often function less as competitive arenas and more as spaces of encounter, where respect for each participant regardless of ability is paramount. This approach mirrors the Franciscan commitment to minority and mutuality, reminding participants that the true value of sports lies not in victory but in shared humanity and communal joy.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1906–1909.

<sup>223</sup> Terrence Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 45–48.

<sup>224</sup> Thompson, *Francis of Assisi*, 112–115.

Dominican communities, known for their dedication to study, preaching, and the formation of conscience, often approach sports as opportunities for both physical development and moral formation. Athletic participation becomes a setting in which virtues such as discipline, fairness, and integrity are cultivated alongside intellectual growth. Through coaching, mentorship, and post-game reflection, sports are integrated into a broader educational framework that encourages athletes to reflect on character, responsibility, and ethical decision-making.<sup>225</sup>

Reflecting on my experiences as a Franciscan, I recall many memorable sports events that catalyzed deeper connections. Those moments were often followed by essential discussions or decisions that might not have arisen in a more formal setting. For example, when we participated in games hosted by the Dominicans, the friendly competition often turned into lively debates about our respective saints, Saint Dominic for the Dominicans and Saint Augustine for the Augustinians, allowing us to defend our identities passionately while fostering mutual respect.

As a diocesan seminarian, I was fortunate to have opportunities to visit fellow seminarians across the US. These interactions frequently revolved around post-game socializing, where encounters provided natural opportunities for seminarians from different dioceses and formation contexts to share experiences, exchange perspectives, and build fraternity. Sports functioned as a shared language that dissolved initial barriers and facilitated genuine connection within the broader Catholic community.

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<sup>225</sup> William A. Hinnebusch, *The History of the Dominican Order*, vol. 1 (New York: Alba House, 1966), 203–206.

Through these shared athletic experiences, Catholic communities can celebrate diversity while strengthening unity. Sports become a bridge that connects religious orders, diocesan seminarians, and lay participants, fostering networks of friendship, collaboration, and support. In this way, athletic participation contributes to the Church's life not only by promoting physical well-being but also by embodying the ecclesiology of communion that lies at the heart of Catholic identity.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, nos. 4–6 and 18–20; Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout history, sport and recreational play have profoundly shaped cultures, communities, and patterns of human interaction. In earlier periods, physical recreation was at times viewed with suspicion, often because certain philosophical and theological currents privileged the soul while undervaluing the body. Over time, however, a more integrated Christian anthropology emerged, recognizing the human person as a unity of body, mind, and spirit.<sup>227</sup> Within this renewed vision, sport can be understood not as a distraction from higher goods, but as a meaningful human activity capable of contributing to personal growth, social cohesion, and moral formation.

In the contemporary world, sport occupies a significant place in global culture. It gathers people across boundaries of language, class, nationality, and generation. Recent popes have acknowledged the positive potential of sport when practiced ethically and in proper proportion.<sup>228</sup> Sport can build community, cultivate discipline, encourage teamwork, foster inclusion, and promote respect for rules and for others. It can teach sacrifice, perseverance, humility in defeat, and gratitude in victory. In these ways, sport contributes not only to physical well-being but also to the formation of character and the strengthening of social bonds.

Although sport is not ordinarily considered a central element of seminary education, this study has argued that it can make a meaningful contribution to the four

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<sup>227</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 155–57.

<sup>228</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Vatican City, 2018), nos. 1–7; John Paul II, “Homily for the Jubilee of Sports People,” October 29, 2000.

pillars of priestly formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral.<sup>229</sup> Within the human dimension, sport promotes physical health, emotional resilience, fraternity, cooperation, and habits of self-discipline. These qualities are especially important for future priests who must live lives of service, balance, and relational maturity. Shared athletic experiences can strengthen community life within seminaries and foster healthy friendships that endure into priestly ministry.

Within the spiritual dimension, sport can serve as a context for growth in virtues such as perseverance, humility, patience, courage, and self-mastery. Athletic training often requires sacrifice, routine, discipline, and the acceptance of limits, all of which can illuminate dimensions of the Christian life. Experiences of victory and defeat can become occasions for gratitude, examination of conscience, and deeper dependence upon God. When integrated wisely, sport can complement rather than compete with prayer, study, and sacramental life.

Within the intellectual dimension, sport can sharpen habits of analysis, prudential judgment, strategic thinking, and problem-solving. These capacities have relevance not only in athletic settings but also in pastoral leadership, preaching, administration, and discernment. Likewise, the study of sport through theological, philosophical, and sociological lenses can broaden seminary education and invite fruitful dialogue with contemporary culture.

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<sup>229</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), nos. 115–118; John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City, 1992), nos. 43–59.

Within the pastoral dimension, sport offers valuable opportunities for evangelization and accompaniment. Many young people and families readily gather around sports, recreation, and communal activities. Priests who understand the pastoral value of these spaces may be better positioned to build relationships, foster belonging, and proclaim the Gospel in accessible ways. Parish leagues, sports camps, tournaments, hiking groups, fitness initiatives, and community events can become occasions of encounter, trust, and missionary discipleship. In this sense, sport can serve the new evangelization and the synodal vision of Pope Francis by promoting participation, communion, and outreach.<sup>230</sup>

At the same time, this dissertation has intentionally acknowledged that sport is not automatically formative. The addition of the section on *Ambiguities and Risks in the Practice of Sport* highlights the need for critical discernment. Sport can also carry negative tendencies: excessive competitiveness, exclusion, vanity, aggression, unhealthy comparison, idolatry of success, or the reinforcement of harmful cultural stereotypes. Without moral guidance, sport can divide rather than unite and wound rather than heal. For this reason, the Church must approach sport not naively, but pastorally and ethically, ensuring that the dignity of the person always remains more important than performance or victory.<sup>231</sup>

Similarly, the section *Seminaries for Whom Sport Is Not a Primary Gift* recognizes that not every seminarian is naturally drawn to athletics, physically able to participate, or culturally formed through sport. Some may find their gifts expressed more fully through

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<sup>230</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City, 2013), nos. 24, 27; Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Vatican City, 2019), nos. 210–216.

<sup>231</sup> Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, no. 1.2.

music, art, intellectual pursuits, prayer, craftsmanship, service, or other forms of recreation. Authentic priestly formation must remain inclusive and attentive to diverse personalities, abilities, and charisms.<sup>232</sup> Therefore, sport should be proposed as a valuable resource but never imposed as the sole or privileged path to human growth. Formation programs must respect freedom, diversity, and the uniqueness of each vocation.

For this reason, incorporating sport into priestly formation requires prudence and balance. Practical initiatives may include organized recreational opportunities, wellness programs, retreats with outdoor activities, workshops on teamwork and leadership, service projects connected to athletics, and parish-based community events. Such efforts should always be integrated into a broader vision of formation centered on Christ, pastoral charity, and the mission of the Church.

On a personal level, this research has confirmed my conviction that sport and play can become genuine loci of theological reflection. They reveal something important about the human person: our desire to grow, to strive, to belong, to celebrate, and to give ourselves in relationship with others. Sport, when rightly ordered, can become an expression of gratitude for the gifts God has given us and a school of virtue that strengthens both body and soul.

Finally, I remain grateful to all who shared their stories and experiences through this project. Their testimonies demonstrate that the relationship between faith and sport is not theoretical alone, but deeply lived. It is my hope that this dissertation will encourage further scholarship, pastoral creativity, and practical experimentation in seminaries,

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<sup>232</sup> 1 Cor. 12:4–11 (NABRE).

dioceses, and Catholic communities. Future research may lead to courses on sport and priestly formation, expanded pastoral programs, and deeper theological engagement with play, embodiment, and human flourishing.

Sport is not the heart of priestly formation, but it can become a valuable servant of it. When guided by wisdom, charity, and a Christian vision of the human person, sport can help form healthier, more balanced, more relational, and more missionary priests for the service of the Church and the world.

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