

Sporting Catholicism

By Ed Willock.

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1240a (1956)

I am one of that class of people to whom Abraham Lincoln was referring when he said, “You can fool some of the people some of the time.” Modest though I am, I refuse membership among his second group of citizens, “You can fool some of the people all of the time.” There is a limit to my gullibility. You can’t fool me all of the time. After an incredible length of time, I catch on. It is because of this slow but eventual perception that I have finally concluded that there is more to the business of sports than meets the eye.

The occasion of my first awakening was about eleven years ago. I had been trying in an enthusiastic but bungling fashion to stir up my friends to some kind of Catholic social action. We were all recently out of school and currently out of work. It had occurred to me that we might put our heads together and try to make sense out of our common misfortune, although, I admit, I was a bit vague about what we could do about it.

My attack on the lads’ inertia was as effective as a bow and arrow assault on an aircraft carrier. In a hyphenated word, I received the “brush-off.” Just about the time that I had become accustomed to the social standing of a pariah, a new prospect loomed on the horizon. He was a school friend who had entered the seminary but was recalled by an aging mother, who needed his support. “Ah!” I thought, “Here is a welcoming ear. A young fellow who had aspired to the priesthood should be just the boy to interest in Catholic social action.” My hopes were short-lived.

The ex-seminarian immediately found a new outlet for the zeal he could no longer turn to the priesthood. It wasn’t the lay apostolate. It was the league of Saint Sporty. He became a sports fanatic.

For three months, I waged a losing campaign. I suggested a study club... he went to the sports centre to play tennis. I thought we might read the papal encyclicals... we read the sports page. I hoped we might stir up some new converts... we stirred up new team-mates. When the three months were up, I had developed an excellent backhand, I knew the most intimate details of every member of the Australian cricket team, I had a spectator tan, I was hoarse from shouting above the strident voice of the announcer... but I had lost a lay apostle.

Since that time, I have become aware of the new brand of Catholic action: the League of Saint Sporty. I have attended many meetings, lectures, study clubs, and discussions. The topics covered at such meetings ranged from unionism to the liturgy. These meetings, which are the necessary preliminary to any kind of social action, were almost always predominantly attended by women.

The women are militant, zealous, and more than willing to do their share. The boys and men are, with but few exceptions, I find, in the Saint Sporty League.

To find out where the men were throwing their weight, one needed only to look at the sports page of, even the catholic papers. The thing read like a litany: ‘Saint Athanasius swamps Our Lady of

Sorrows.’... ‘The Friars nose out a victory over the Crusaders.’... ‘Francis X. O’Hara, coach of Saint Athleticus, predicts downfall of Sacred Heart.’... ‘Father Aloysius McGee feted at Holy Name Society Sports Night.’... ‘Sodalists pay tribute to winner of marathon.’... Et cetera.

It is a noteworthy fact that the Catholic teenagers who at the present time are gracing the cricket and the football fields are the very age, and class, and sex of Catholics who in Europe constitute the backbone and spearhead of Catholic Action. The JOC in Belgium, (that’s the French for ‘Young Christian Workers’) the most glorious group of militants the Church has produced, are, in the main, teenage youths.

Supposing, for a moment, that the Church could dispense with the services of the young fellows and leave them to their games, how about the older men? What becomes of them when the paunch appears, and the breath comes harder? They merely move from the League of Saint Sporty, Junior to the League of Saint Sporty, Senior. They are the perennial spectators. From spring to autumn their minds and hearts, TV, news pages, and radio dials, turn to the cricket. Between times, they placate their appetite for sports with football, hockey, golf, tennis, et cetera.

The amount of attention and daily meditation given during the cricket and football seasons to the history being made on the field, if turned by the same Catholic men to the history of the Church, would give Christopher Dawson and Hilaire Belloc as wide an audience in the Church as sports writers. The same assiduous attention given to the rules and procedures of games and sports, if directed to the moral law and its application by the same Catholics, would remove the necessity of repeated Sunday sermons on elementary catechism. The same determination to master the cryptic language of the sports prophets, if turned, say, to mastering liturgical Latin, would show quickly how little the need is for translating the Mass into the vernacular.

Once one becomes aware that the primary enemy of the Church is the yawn... indifference, and, once one realizes that indifference indicates that the heart is elsewhere, and, once one realizes where the hearts of most Catholic men lie... then, one wonders whether the enemies’ banners, rather than being inscribed with the hammer and sickle, should not be emblazoned with balls and bats.

‘What’s the Score?’

The foregoing was written by a man who delights in sports. I enjoy playing a poor game or watching a good one. There is no antagonism between taking delight in music and decrying the practice of fiddling while Rome burns. There is a time and place for all good things. Games are a necessary part of childhood development and they certainly have a place as a form of adult recreation. Within the Christian context, a more valid defense of sports can be offered than the usual arguments presented by the current defenders. When the true worth of the game is fully appreciated, it is easier to distinguish between use and abuse.

Games are as integral a part of childhood as work is a part of adult life. In essence, games are make-believe problems stripped of the complexities and seriousness, which attend the real problems to which they are analogous. Many talents being developed in the child find an opportunity for obvious development in games. The child can see his own progress in skill, strength, adaptability, and co-operation with his team-mates. With each new effort, there is a compensating reward. Failures are punished, but not so seriously as to discourage renewed efforts. The usual steps are from individual effort, alone or in competition with others, to teamwork.

In teamwork, he comes to realize that his abilities must be coordinated with the co-operative scheme or else they are fruitless.

Certain social viruses present among the adult generation have contagiously spread among today's children. One of these is the desire to excel, to beat the other fellow. This competitive spirit is a natural instinct, a fact sufficient to recommend it to today's pagans.

The Christian parent, however, recognizes that instinct is hardly the proper basis for human behavior. The spirit of co-operation is eminently more human; and, in the child's games, can be a disposition to supernatural virtue. It disposes the child to charity and justice. He learns to subordinate his own desires to the common good, and thus on the football and cricket field, he can learn his first lesson in social justice.

Another social virus, which has entered the domain of childhood sports, comes as a consequence of spectatorism. When I was a child, we called the disease "grandstanding." In my neighborhood, we took great delight in beating the stuffing out of "uniformed" teams. We had a hearty distaste for the team or player who played to the gallery, who played to be admired. I have discovered that now many city fellows won't play cricket or football unless they have uniforms and an audience. By some strange combination of good intentions and bad sense, some parochial groups consider it a work of charity to outfit their children's teams in flash uniforms. An elementary knowledge of the purpose of the games in relation to childhood development would prove to them that the introduction of spectatorism into games robs them of whatever value they have in developing virtues in the child. The purity of intention, the concentration of enthusiasm on one goal, the total giving — all these wonderful qualities of hard playing, are all weakened by the introduction of the spectator complex. In their place, one sees the weakness of today's adults perverting the innocence of childhood: the mixed motive, the half-try, the mediocre ideal, the dramatic pretense and human respect.

When games and sports are thus perverted not only do they fail to build virtue in the boy, they actually soften him up so that he will conform more readily to the similarly false standards common in the adult workaday world.

The mother's hand is very noticeable in the growing campaign against physical risk in sports.

The school sportsman now takes the field with safety and litigation a major concern. The physical risk has been reduced to about the same level as that of boarding a train at rush hour. It has been overlooked that physical risk is a normal part of living. Courage in the youth can hardly be quickened when he meets no more fearsome danger than the possibility of a scratched hand.

Assurance in the face of travail will not be evoked unless a more formidable problem is posed than that of avoiding a barked shin. Admittedly, in spite of the precautions, some bones are broken, but not with half as much frequency as those of old ladies who cross busy streets.

Games are for children what work is for men. One must notice how seriously children take their games. Children do not play for fun, they play intently. They are not just killing time. The process of growing up does not change in any way the attitude of the children to those things, which occupy their time. The same seriousness, concentration and enthusiasm, which children have at their games, must be retained as the interest graduates from make-believe problems (games) to real problems (work). Nothing is changed except the object of the youths' attention. In games, the situations are

serious within their childhood context. When they pass from games to work, their handling of the situations becomes serious within a family or community context.

Consequently, two facts emerge: that play is childhood work, and that the attitudes cultivated at play will determine the eventual attitude the child will have to his work.

To permit such perversions of games as hyper-competitiveness or “grandstanding” is not merely to abuse the games, but also to weaken the work qualities of the child.

‘Professionalism’.

In professional sports, one observes all of the social evils, which characterize any field, which is commercialized. The Midas touch freezes everything into a golden, sterile image of what it had been before his coming. The introduction of the mammon motive into sports causes a completely new orientation of the game. So great is the change that professionalized, the game is liable to produce the opposite effect to that educed in its normal state.

Amateur childhood sports contribute greatly to making men out of boys; professional sports contribute greatly to making boys out of men. Those who are at all intimate with professional sportsmen know what a childish lot they are. Their off-hour interests are usually some games other than the ones they are paid to play. Their public demands in them the undisciplined behavior of children. The sports writers call it “colour”. Even the virtues they manifest are the virtues of a boy rather than a man. The tendency among them is to freeze into a schoolboy pattern, giving a public testimony of eternal adolescence.

A mysticism of innocent and virile virtue has been quietly woven around the sports hero, and it persists despite the obvious fact of a social intimacy between professional sports and the more disreputable areas of society. The breakfast food people juxtapose the sports heroes with smiling ruddy-cheeked boys within the family circle, while the sportsmen themselves, in their choice of off-hour associates (except during the training ritual) frequently are found at home in the vicinity of race tracks, casinos, hotels, and night clubs. A sports reporter keeping track of his celebrities would find himself in surroundings that would make a Boy Scout somewhat embarrassed. He would inadvertently become acquainted with more doubtful characters, criminals, drug dealers, and girls/women you wouldn't want your mother to meet, than he would ever be able to forget. I am not accusing the sportsmen of vice, but I am not so naive as to further their canonization as espoused on the cornflakes box. My sons will get neither the flakes nor the corn. Neither is very nourishing.

In the Adult Division.

Professional sports set the tone in recreation for the Australian male. As I have pointed out, the professional-spectator brand of sports, vary in kind, that is, in purpose, intention and motive, from the childhood amateur-participant variety. One form does not evolve from the other. The child-participant is too young to assume a burden of work, so he practices at manhood with the devised situations of games. The adult sport-spectator is a horse of a different color. In most cases he is a man unwilling to assume his share of community burdens, preferring to leave them to the government, his boss, or to chance solution, and turns instead to the imaginary problems of the sports page. As manifested in Catholic circles, this defection accounts for the scarcity of men in the lay apostolate, that new and special obligation prescribed by the Church and made necessary by the times.

It is very easy to understand why men in our times concern themselves so reluctantly with the social order and so fervently with sports. It is not so obvious why such a practice is considered normal, if not virtuous, in some Catholic circles. A man goes to a sporting event today to see one of the few kinds of modern enterprises conducted on simple, logical, moral and just principles (I'm referring to the game itself, not the commercial institution). Cricket dramatically poses problems, which are resolved in a manner to delight the human heart. To gain victory on the field, the player must work for it. His reputation, chicanery, or knowing the right people cannot be used as substitutes for good bowling, good fielding, or good batting. The score is proportional to skill and effort. All of these qualities appeal to man's moral sense, and to his elementary justice. In cricket, there is a logical sequence of causes and effects. Will the batsmen be able to overcome the vagaries of the pitch and good bowling to triumph, or will the bowlers have their day? Here is logic to please the simplest soul! Here is drama without sophistry!

What a far cry this make-believe world is from the modern political forum, the sales-room, the stock exchange! In the realm of politics, what relation is there now between merit and office? In business who would dare say that reward is in relation to honest effort? The hard worker barely gets along, if that. The shrewd calculator, the man who does the deals, secures the trappings of success. What logic is there in unemployment? What logic is there in the current housing shortage? We are now audience to the spectacle of our political leaders turning their backs on crises at home and abroad while they load the electoral dice. These processes, political and economic, without logic, without justice, without deference to moral law, drive the citizen to the sporting venues for a renewal of his shaken belief in sanity and conscience.

It is to be realized that social and political problems, even under ideal conditions, would present circumstances more complex and more trying than those resolved in sports arenas. As a periodic relief from such cares, games normally will be employed for adult recreation. The fact today, however, is that sports fanaticism is less recreational than escapist. It is less a renewal of energies and perspectives than an escape from the task of resolving the real problems. Spectator sports, the world over, are increasing in popularity in inverse proportion to popular interest in matters of the common good. Games have become substitutes for work.

Catholics?

Why do sports in parochial circles have an aura of virtue about them? Why, for example, will one find the average curate more willing and capable to direct in matters of sports than in matters of Catholic Action? The fact that one can replace the other in the curriculum of parochial activities should be enough proof that the question of sports is by no means a superficial one. To my mind, this simple matter of priority is a key to the puzzle of Catholic indifference.

Catholicism as manifested by practicing Catholics is best described as being in the stage of retarded adolescence. It is big and muscular: well-attended Masses, busy novena services. It has promise: practicing Catholics in key social positions — mayors, corporation presidents, et cetera. It has a large appetite: many Communion, Confessions, and other sources of grace. In spite of these things that heighten our expectations, the Faith is not an operative force in society or in family life. At present, there is no relation between its potentialities for good and its actual effectiveness.

The same adolescence characterizes the spiritual growth of most Catholics. Our devotion is preparational, a getting ready for sanctity, a some-day-Lord-but-not-yet sort of thing. Then, of course, apostolicity is rare, and this, if not the mark of Christian maturity, is the occasion for it.

The tendency has been to freeze Catholicism at the grade seven parochial school level. This stage of development is regarded as the high point and the norm of practical Catholicism. The religious habits of this period in growth are the ones to which the adult feels conscience-bound to return. Sermons, devotional practices, the choice of hymns, are, on the whole, the kind best designed to help a seventh-grader hew to the straight and narrow.

This camp-site was supposedly chosen because all the territory that lies beyond the frontiers of the parochial school is held by the enemy. It is unexplored and unclaimed for Christ. It is the stomping ground for the world, the flesh and the devil, that unholy trinity which has reigned over the secular area for four centuries. The enemy's lines are punctured at one particular spot, and it is a slight bulge indeed. I refer to the area of sports. The Church, in her glory, seldom hits the front pages of our newspapers and never invades the editorial page, but the sports page is another thing! In the realm of sports, the Catholic can feel at home. The Catholic School footy teams have made known the existence of the Catholic Church as a formidable force, if not for producing saints, well, then, full-backs. In good conscience, without fear of challenge, the Catholic can invade any arena in Australia and hold his own. The honour is hollow but nevertheless real.

Because of their consistency with our ideals, sports have been taken to our hearts. This canonization of boy-virtue fits into the all-over pattern of adolescence. Briefly, the scandal is this: we raise the question by our choice of arenas as to whether Catholic virtue can cope with any situation beyond the boyhood stage. "Our boys will do well in the Grand Final." But I wonder what we can do as lay apostles in business, in factories, in politics. We are actually afraid to set mature Christianity in opposition to mature paganism. We are pessimistic of the results were we to invade the offices and the shops with a dynamic revolutionary Christian spirit, so we satisfy ourselves by challenging the pagans to a sporting contest.

The choice is quite clear. We can shift the emphasis in male leisure-time activities from sports to the apostolate, or we can go on kidding ourselves that Christian virtue is identical with sportsmanship. The choice is between a mature Christianity worked out or a juvenile Christianity played out. When Catholic Action in the fields of work, of politics, of law, of medicine, of the family, win them the same laurels and the same respect (and, of course, the same kicks in the head) that the activities of Catholics now earn on the football field we will have begun to make an impression. Mature Christians will be facing up to mature problems. When that time comes, what crank could complain about an occasional game of sports?
