

A CATHOLIC VIEW OF COLLEGIATE SPORTS ACCORDING TO THE PRINCIPLES OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

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THE recent encyclical letter of His Holiness, Pius XI, on Christian Education of Youth has proclaimed once more to the world the supreme solicitude of the Church for the proper training of the young. Her eternal vigilance has not been confined to a grave concern over the trend of educational theories, nor exclusively to a pedagogical supervision of the studies offered by her schools, but, with the diligence of a true mother, she has at all times labored to adjust in orderly arrangement the minute details of college and school life. Such has been her careful watch that it is almost unnecessary to indicate in a general way that a serious obligation to further her policies and to execute her will rests upon every Catholic institution engaged in the work of teaching and upon every Catholic individual interested in the lofty mission of bringing the children of the Faith nearer to the Christian ideal. To advance the cause of Catholic education, to promote the growth of Catholic schools, to preserve the pure stream of Christian thought from the impieties of the world, to seek the removal from the educational system of any feature which may impede its continual progress, are the evident duties of priest and layman who propose to remain in a spirit of harmony with the designs of our holy Mother.

Conscious of this responsibility, the American Catholic cannot turn a deaf ear to the recurring charge that athletics in American colleges have long exceeded the limits placed by reasonable teaching to insure their utility and have become extremely dissonant with the even tenor of the educational way. Until recently, it is true, the mingled murmurs against extravagant athletic policies have not sounded a clear and distinguishable note. For a generation the public has, to all appearances, contentedly taken for granted that the methods employed by the colleges to secure representation on the fields of sport have been characterized neither by financial moderation nor

by strict accordance with the canons of the amateur code. The national countenance has beamed with indulgent amusement at the stories of the ignorant but powerful full back, of the poor boy whose corporeal attainments earned him the living of a carefree millionaire during a doubtful course of study, of the ridiculous laxity in scholastic standards by virtue of which prominent athletes were able to remain on their teams, but rarely has the face of public opinion displayed annoyance at the accusation that behind college walls there existed an athletic stumbling-block impeding the steady march of the student to the summit of intellectual perfection. It is but just to say that the majority of these anecdotes, exaggerated and bandied about by idle tongues, have given no more than hazy evidence of the real situation and have been so unsatisfactory in substance and detail that, of themselves, they could not necessitate a concerted movement towards repression. The Catholic, therefore, could not have been expected, in the misty light furnished by these and similar reports, to view the state of things with wild alarm, and no more could have been demanded of the Catholic educator than a prudent and firm control over the athletic eagerness of the student body in his charge.

The cumulative effect, nevertheless, of all such rumours, published widely, but entirely lacking substantial proof, has lead more than one respected educator to voice unmistakable sentiments against the dominance of athletics over the intellectual pursuits of the American college. The late Chief Justice Taft, for example, whose long connection with Yale University qualifies him to speak authoritatively, expresses his opinion in the following words: "Scholarship has been pushed aside and dwarfed by the super-importance of athletics. . . . The stadium overshadows the classroom."¹ John L. Stoddard, admitting that "As regards the sport mania, Catholic colleges and universities, while encouraging athletic sports and even intercollegiate contests, sometimes to a reprehensible extent, do not, as a rule, believe in carrying the cult of *competitive sport* to such a *fanatical degree* that hundreds of thousands of dollars can be collected for a stadium or a covered track for winter running, but nothing for the library," points out that "those who really use their muscles are very few," adding that "some twenty-five champions—many of them overtrained—in every university do the real work; but the vast majority of the collegians stand about watching them, smoking cigarettes, cheering their favourites and howling at their opponents." He continues to

¹ *America*, Oct. 26, 1929, "This and That," by Paul L. Blakely, S.J., p. 64, col. 1.

excoriate the "commercialization of the intercollegiate games, their demoralizing publicity, the 'big' gate-money, the vociferous, vulgar crowds, the betting, the great number of the loafing 'unemployed,' the sporting pages of the newspapers—in short, the old Pagan spirit of *panem et circenses* which now prevails throughout the land." Concluding his impassioned complaint, he asserts: "If I were alone in these opinions, they might curtly be dismissed as the conservative grumblings of an octogenarian. But mine is not a voice crying in the wilderness. There is a growing consensus of opinion antagonistic to this waste of time and money."² These plain statements strike the key-note of what is undoubtedly the most powerful indictment of collegiate athletics which has yet appeared, the scholarly report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "American College Athletics," the long-awaited bulletin which has occasioned a bitter storm of criticism and comment since its publication in the Fall of 1929.³ Here we have no vague rumour nor idle story, but an orderly appraisal of the entire field of intercollegiate sports, a vast array of clear records, convincing statistical proofs, attestations of professors, students, athletes, coaches and medical attendants, presented in a manner that leaves no room for doubt, after a careful reading of its three hundred and forty-nine pages, that education in America is faced by a problem of enormous proportions, of which problem the present report is an honest, scientific and impartial survey.

The report of the Carnegie Foundation has entirely changed the complexion of the athletic question; for, though previous writers have established the existence of particular disorders here and there, the new disclosures have indicated the universal extent of the abuses. This mass of information, however, did not antecede the serious consideration of reform on the part of Catholic educators, as may be seen in the Carnegie report. The investigators found that, although Catholic colleges and universities were not above reproach,⁴ the heads of these institutions, without exception, manifesting a sincere desire to cooperate with the efforts of the foundation, gave evidence that they had already lent themselves to the work of clearing the way for a better and more reasonable adjustment of sports to the needs of

² *Twelve Years in the Catholic Church*, P. J. Kenedy and Sons, (N. Y., 1930.) pp. 82-84.

³ *American College Athletics*, by Howard J. Savage, Staff Member, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Bulletin No. 23, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, (N. Y., 1929.)

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 264.

education, a discovery which is readily admitted and heartily approved.⁵ The leaders of Catholic education have seen that, though there be institutions where athletic evils do not exist, it is of prime importance to the preservation of a spotless record in such colleges that measures be taken designed to deal with the danger of contracting the ailment through close intercourse with other colleges, apart from the fact that reform is necessary where the presence of the trouble is beyond doubt.

This article, in accord with the Catholic educational movement to adjust the athletic situation, proposes to examine the basic moral principles which should govern indulgence in games and sports. It is not the intention here to examine the particular elements of the problem in detail, nor to offer remedies for the apparent evils. Nor does this article recommend the abolition of collegiate sports; the absurdity of such a drastic step is patent, and the rightful place of athletics in educational curricula will always be conceded by right-thinking men. Likewise, it is far from the present intention to impugn this or that college, to search about for someone on whom to fasten the blame for various transgressions, or, what would be farther afield, to suggest a panacea for this collegiate sickness. The character of the malady is evidently such that individual treatment is exacted by each case, a service which can be rendered, it seems, only by those competent and efficient men, the faculties of the colleges, who are thoroughly acquainted with the individual circumstances. The exclusive aim of this short paper is to examine the moral aspects of the question, to uncover the sound tenets which, resting on the bed-rock of reason, should regulate the use of recreative activities and to draw there-from a few proximate and salutary conclusions.

It is but a proper digression to mention the propriety of turning to St. Thomas for assistance in this perplexity. For, first of all, to no better authority may one turn when confronted by a theological difficulty, as the student will attest; and that this problem falls under the scope of theology may be inferred from the words of Pius XI; “. . . education consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, *in order to attain the sublime end for which he was created.* . . .”⁶ Surely, if this be true, the theologian, before all others, should be interested in an attempt to protect education from “the exaltation of athleticism

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 79, 80, 263.

⁶ *Encyclical Letter on Christian Education of Youth*, Vatican Polyglot Press, 1929, p. 4; italics ours.

which, even in pagan times, marked the decline and downfall of genuine physical training."⁷ Secondly, it is most fitting that Patron of Schools and Scholars be consulted for the solution of a problem affecting Catholic schools and youth who are trained behind their doors. Finally, it affords great satisfaction to point out to those who think that theologians deal only with matters dull and mystical, far above the reach of ordinary people, that theology does not ignore even such trivial things as games and sports and fun. May the following excerpts from the writings of the Prince of Theologians serve to exhibit the vast compass of his mind, to prove the intimate connection of his lucent thought with the daily lives of men. May they prove that the wisdom of St. Thomas, brought forth seven centuries ago, can be used to solve the difficulties of the present with as much success as crowned that experiment in the Ages of Faith.

The principles which lead to the solution of this difficulty may be found in the *Summa Theologica*. St. Thomas, in the treatment of the virtue of temperance, comes to its secondary virtues and discusses the position of modesty in relation to exterior acts.⁸ He asks himself, "Whether there can be a virtue about games."⁹ He replies, quoting St. Augustine:

Augustine says (*Music. li*): *I pray thee spare thyself at times; for it becomes a wise man sometimes to relax the high pressure of his attention to work.* Now this relaxation of the mind from work consists in playful words or deeds. Therefore it becomes a wise and virtuous man to have recourse to such things at times. Moreover the Philosopher (*Ethics. iv. 8*) assigns to games the virtue of *eutrapelia*, which we call wittiness.¹⁰

Immediately follows a proof from reason, stating that the soul, even as the body needs rest, and refreshment, must be withdrawn from the

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸ 2a, 2ae, q. 168.

⁹ *ibid.*, a. 2.

¹⁰ It must be noted in connection with this word "wittiness," (translation of "jucunditatem" in the original) lest one gain the impression that we are beside the point in this place, that St. Thomas is speaking here of both playful words and deeds. As both are ordained to the same end, namely, the recreation of man, he treats them simultaneously. The athlete as well as the actor is concerned in this passage, as may be concluded from a cursory reading of the question. It may be noted also that his use of the word "ludus," which we translate as "game," must be understood clearly. In the English translation cited, "ludus," in the title of Art. 2, is translated "game," in the title of Art. 3, "play," and in that of Art. 4, "mirth." To clear up the possible confusion we give here a note appended to Art. 2, "Utrum in ludis possit esse aliqua virtus," in the Faucher Edition of the *Summa*: "Adverte quod nomine ludi in proposito, venit tam ludis qui consistit in factis, quam jocus qui consistit in verbis; eadem enim est ratio utriusque moris." This identity of term, however, does not affect the relevancy of the articles cited, as may readily be seen in the reading of them.

arduous labor of rational processes and its weariness must be remedied by an application of some pleasure. An anecdote for the life of St. John which he relates is worthy of reproduction:¹¹

Thus in the *Conferences of the Fathers* (xxiv. 21) it is related of Blessed John the Evangelist, that when some people were scandalized on finding him playing together with his disciples, he is said to have told one of them who carried a bow to shoot an arrow. And when the latter had done this several times, he asked him whether he could do it indefinitely, and the man answered that if he continued doing it, the bow would break. Whence the Blessed John drew the inference that in like manner man's mind would break if its tension were never relaxed. Now suchlike words or deeds wherein nothing further is sought than the soul's delight, are called playful or humorous. Hence it is necessary at times to make use of them, in order to give rest, as it were, to the soul.

Here we have established the subordinate function of games and sports. They are a necessary, delightful and laudable diversion by which the soul is rested and the faculties invigorated against further combats in the realm of rational activity. Not only are they virtuous, but even becoming, in a good man. St. Thomas continues, however, by cautioning against their immoderate use.¹²

" . . . We must be careful, as in all other human actions, to conform ourselves to persons, time, and place, and take due account of other circumstances, so that our fun *befit the hour and the man*, as Tully says (*De Offic. i. Tit. De Scurill.*).

Nor are all games forbidden even to those who wish to live penitently, according to the Commentary of the Books of Sentences. For, though,¹³

some games are evil of their very nature. . . .

on the other hand, others

. . . proceed from the joys of devotion: so David has said, "I shall play and become meaner—(more as a small child?)—before the Lord."¹⁴ And such games are not to be avoided, but to be praised and emulated

and thirdly, more to our point:

There are some games having no turpitude which the Philosopher calls liberal: and these are the matter of the virtue, namely, of *Eutra-*

¹¹ in the body of the article; Cf. *The Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, literally translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1921.

¹² *ibid.*, body of the article.

¹³ 4, d. 16, Q. 4, art. 2, q. 1, c.

¹⁴ 2 Kings vi 22. In the Douay version; "I will both play and make myself meaner than I have done, and I will be little in my own eyes."

*pelia*¹⁵; and therefore, with due respect to circumstances, they can be becoming to proper rest and to conviviality delightful to others.¹⁶

This exposition of the positive value of sport in human life, so open-minded, so lucid, so sympathetic, by which the Angelical places recreation properly in the scheme of things, speaks for itself. The mind of the Holy Doctor may be summed up by two more quotations from the *Summa Theologica*.¹⁷ He has cited the objection¹⁸ that there can be no virtue about games, to the proof of which the authority of St. John Chrysostom is adduced as follows: "It is not God, but the devil, that is the author of fun." St. Thomas replies:

This statement of Chrysostom refers to the inordinate use of fun, especially by those who make the pleasure of games their end; of whom it is written (Wis. xv. 12): *They have accounted our life a pastime.*

The net difficulty¹⁹ proposes that, as there is no purpose in games, there can be no virtue in them. But again the clear and mild reply:

Playful actions themselves considered in their species are not directed to an end: but the pleasure derived from such actions is directed to the recreation and rest of the soul, and accordingly if this be done with moderation, it is lawful to make use of fun.

But are all games in all circumstances praiseworthy and lawful? St. Thomas replies to the contrary.²⁰

There may happen to be a sin in these (games) from the fact that circumstances are not duly respected; hence in such games a thing may be suitable to one which may not be suitable to another.

This is a prudent observation. In the report of the Carnegie Foundation cited above, there is a chapter dealing with the hygiene of athletic training which bears the necessity of the adjustment of physical exercise to the condition of the subject. To the same report is appended a table of statistics²¹ in which are enumerated thirty-seven sports of major and minor popularity. It would be wise for the sincere educator to examine these in order to enable the youth under his care to choose not only an absorbing and useful, but a fitting pastime.

¹⁵ Eutrapelia is best translated literally as "good diversion."

¹⁶ *Commentum. in Lib. IV. Sententiarum*, loc. cit.

¹⁷ 2a, 2ae, q. 168, art. 2.

¹⁸ loc. cit. obj. 2.

¹⁹ loc. cit., obj. 3.

²⁰ *Commentum in Lib. IV Sententiarum*, loc. cit.

²¹ *American College Athletics*, p. 349.

The sins committed in athletics are of two kinds, as we may infer from the Summa Theologica. One may sin by excess for²²

In all things dirigible according to reason, the excessive is that which goes beyond, and the deficient is that which falls short of the rule of reason. Now it has been stated (art. 2) that playful or jesting words or deeds are dirigible according to reason. Wherefore excessive play is that which goes beyond the rule of reason: and this happens in two ways. First on account of the very species of the acts employed for the purpose of fun. . . . Secondly, there may be excess in play, through lack of due circumstances: for instance when people make use of fun at undue times or places, or out of keeping with the matter in hand, or persons. This may be sometimes a mortal sin, on account of the strong attachment to play, when a man prefers the pleasure he derives therefrom to the love of God, so as to be willing to disobey a commandment of God or of the Church rather than forego suchlike amusements. Sometimes, however, it is a venial sin, for instance where a man is not so attached to amusement as to be willing for its sake to do anything in disobedience to God.

Therefore, it may be concluded that the collegiate athletic system which presses the participant to such an extent that the primary duty of study is neglected, is a disorderly and sinful system; that the college which permits athletic glory and ambition and the so-called "pageantry of college life" to dim the lustre of academic achievement, is disorderly and sinful; and that the athlete who becomes so occupied in sport that the proper fulfillment of his scholastic obligations is impossible, is likewise guilty, more or less, of sin.

There may be sin in games by defect also:²³

In human affairs whatever is against reason is a sin. Now it is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, for example by offering no pleasure to others and also by hindering their enjoyment. Wherefore Seneca says (*De Quat. Virt.*, cap. *De Continentia*); *Let your conduct be guided by wisdom so that no one will think you rude, or despise you as a cad.*

Wherefore, it may be further concluded that the college or school which does not afford convenient and efficient means for all to partake in sports to a moderate and reasonable extent, sins by defect; that the college or school which, by a highly-developed system of athletic organizations in which none but the expert are deemed worthy to participate, excludes the awkward and unproficient from a rightful share in the joys and advantages of the games, sins also by defect; and that the individual who is so abnormally bent upon intellectual pursuits that his physical welfare is neglected or whose company is distasteful to others, is at fault according to the canons of moderate and wise living.

²² 2a, 2ae. q. 168, art. 3, body of the article.

²³ *ibid.* art. 4, body of the article

Of these two classes of sins, however, one is the greater:²⁴

Since, however, play is useful for the sake of the rest and pleasure it affords; and since, in human life, pleasure and rest are not in quest for their own sake, but for the sake of operation, as stated in *Ethic.* x. 6, it follows that *the lack of mirth is less sinful than the excess thereof.*

No one, certainly, well interested in the subject, may afford to overlook this final consideration.

The problem which confronts the American educator has been seen. The sturdy principles which govern the use of games and sports have been indicated. There remains only to say that a grave responsibility rests upon the shoulders of the fathers of educational families, the earnest men who administrate the colleges and schools, to prevent the evil where it does not exist and to correct it where it has been shown to reside.

It is almost a natural thing for immature youth to gain an unbalanced impression of the values and duties of life. But it is the vocation of the teacher to present to the young a proper sense of right and wrong. To draw a boy away from play has been a distasteful task from the beginnings of history; for boys have always preferred play to work. If, however, this preferment were encouraged by the elders, schools would never have come into existence. Surely, no one would minimize the value of play; but everyone must work in this life. No one would scoff at the thing called "college spirit," for if "college spirit" be an empty idea, then one can have no love for family honor or patriotism; but occasionally in the course of human events family honor and patriotism have been employed to cover a multitude of sins. No one would deprive the healthy, happy boy of his football or his tennis racket; nor would anyone seek to tear down the handsome gymnasium, destroy the equipment, cancel the schedules, discharge the coaches and disband the teams which characterize the student life in the American college; but as the boy must put his football in cupboard and take up his primer at the proper time, so the young men in college must be taught to restrict themselves to the moderate use of the athletic blessings which efficiency and wise pedagogy have made possible.

Some men would condone the situation reported by the bulletin of the Carnegie Foundation, saying that the great spectacles of college sports are but a natural expression of the peculiar energy and enthusiasm of American youth. But can it not be reasonably expected

²⁴ *ibid.*

that the youth of any nation would foster the same policy, did the teachers of that country permit the like to occur? There are some who point to gorgeous scenes occasioned by football games between great universities and attempt to discern in them "the American ecstasy," to hear in the titanic roar of the happy crowd the voice of Columbia calling her sons to do or die, to see in the colorful, mighty demonstration "so much vitality, so much beauty, so much joy of life. . . ." ²⁵

But are such things joys forever? The heritage of pagan Rome was not a testament of amphitheatres, of pugilism and of cheering multitudes, but rather was it colored by art, measured by the sound skill of ancient scientists and preserved for our admiring age by the graceful thought of immortal literateurs.

Let American efficiency and enthusiasm continue to place before the public great manifestations of beauty, of entertainment and of that thoroughly red-blooded sportsmanship which thrills the heart of every honest man. But let that enthusiasm first inspire the college boy to greater efforts on the high field of intellectual action. Let that efficiency effect in the young men of America a sound mind in a sound body, making each one worthy of the definition once applied to their Angelic Patron, St. Thomas, "an orderly exposition of what a man should be," delightful to God and to men.

²⁵ Cf., e. g., "But This Isn't England," by Paul Gallico, *Liberty*, Feb. 15, 1930.