

DISPUTED QUESTIONS ON SPORTS

In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.

In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult contemporary issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. These essays are meant to be complementary, not contradictory. Each of the brothers is then given the opportunity to reflect upon the contribution of the other. The section closes with a final summary, bringing together the various points raised in both the essays and the responses. This summary is provided by the editors, who do not pretend to play the role of master.

THE QUESTION

Without entertainment, life would be unbearable. No man, no matter how industrious or efficient, can always be at work. Taking time for leisure and play is part and parcel of being human, and sports offer a uniquely social means of doing so. Still, ever since that first sin wounded man in his very nature, our life, our deeds, and even our leisure wend inevitably toward corruption. In past ages, sporting arenas provided the place where martyrs won their crowns. But what should the Christian see when he looks at sports today?

SPORTS IN AMERICA

Clement Dickie, O.P.

Is anything more important in America than sports? Professional athletes are showered with praise and adulation, rewarded with gross amounts of cash and status far beyond the imagination of most common folk. Of course complaints about outlandish salaries are nothing new: athletes are becoming more like mercenaries than the local heroes of the past. What is new, or at least less lectured about, is the distortion of culture that the sports industry in America presents.

Motivation in contemporary America is provided by financial incentives: taxes steer us away from smoking and toward buying a home, grants and rebates foster ecologically sound purchasing. Sports are no exception to this incentivizing, whether in the form of professional salaries and product sponsorships or collegiate and even high school scholarships.

These incentives are at least part of the reason that athletic talent is so aggressively pursued in this country. The result: bigger, faster, and more exciting players. But this takes discipline, and as competition gets fiercer so too does the discipline required. And discipline is a moral good aimed at the development of character—but what kind of character?

St. Paul uses athletic imagery in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*: “Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one” (9:25). In contemporary America, have sports become so focused on the perishable crown that their practice is detrimental to winning the imperishable one?

This raises two questions: First, how does one pursue sports morally? Secondly, is this what is happening in America today?

SPORTS AND THE VIRTUOUS LIFE

What is the goal of human life generally? In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that everyone will agree that the end is happiness. But not everyone agrees on what happiness consists in:

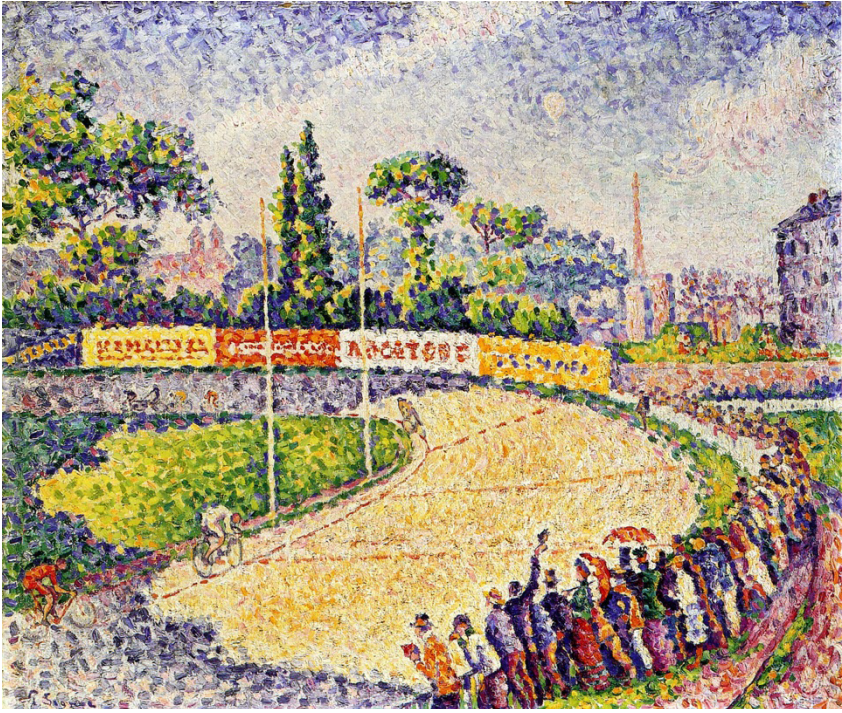
Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise (Bk. I, chap. 4).

We all aim at happiness in our lives but we disagree about how to achieve it. Some say happiness is found in pleasure, others in wealth, still others in honor, and a few in virtue. Aristotle dismisses all of these as unable to truly account for happiness: pleasure because it is brutish, wealth because it is a means to something else, honor because one is always honored for something else, and virtue because one can be asleep and still have it. For Aristotle, happiness must be virtuous activity, and not just any activity but the activity of contemplation. Since man is a rational animal, his happiness is found in doing the thing that only he can do: contemplating truth and divine realities. All other activities are aimed toward this goal; all is directed toward this happy form of life.

St. Thomas agrees with Aristotle, and submits that the highest object of contemplation is God, and our happiness in this life is found through fragmentary moments of grace, promises of the future beatific vision of the saints in heaven.

SOCIETY'S ROLE IN FORMING PEOPLE

Of course we are not all naturally given to contemplation of divine truths; we need to be formed in good habits toward



PAUL SIGNAC - THE VELODROME

this vision. And since we are social or political animals, Aristotle reminds us that it is in society and through society that the virtuous life is promoted:

Legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 2, chap. 1).

Americans balk at this idea, and for good reason! Modern society's technological and coercive power far exceeds anything Aristotle could ever have imagined. We also, unfortunately, define virtue along utilitarian lines—the greatest pleasure for the greatest

number. Neither of these conditions makes governmental moral formation an enticing prospect.

Instead of legislation, Americans look to personal associations for virtue formation: the family, neighborhood, and community. And this is where sports come in: through sports Americans have taught their children about the virtuous life from an early age. Sports are not the end but are conducive to good character and excellent habits of discipline, determination, and cooperation. Playing sports is instructive as well as enjoyable; an exceptional formation tool for virtuous and balanced human beings.

SPORTS DISTORTION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Yet virtuous and balanced seem far from the image of most athletes in professional sports: is Dennis Rodman really the model of the virtuous man? Sports are meant to be a means to virtuous activity, but in America this end is either forgotten or ignored. Even asking the question “to what end outside sports does one pursue a professional career?” sounds ridiculous to the modern athlete. Maybe they could say money and fame, but are those worthy ends?

For example, take Joe Dombrowski, a cyclist profiled in the *Washington Post*. Mr. Dombrowski quit college to train full-time on his bike. This training includes riding thirty hours a week followed by countless hours analyzing data to gain that slightest of advantages in the next race. A strong and determined young man, his passion is admirable, but to what end? Is this practice leading to virtuous living, or even balanced living?

For most in cycling the answer is no: only three Tour de France winners over the last seventeen years have refrained from performance-enhancing drug use. This is hardly exclusive to cycling; most major sports are filled with doping controversies. None of this is surprising given the distorted ends of sports in America: money, fame, celebrity, or all three and more. Whatever

these ends are, happiness through a virtuous life is certainly not among them!

SPORTS AND THE YOUNG

The damaging effects of distortion are not only for professional athletes and the many, many who fail to achieve this status; more and more sports are playing a disastrous role in young people's lives. While criticism of soccer tends to focus on the moms and vans, kids are also suffering from unrealistic expectations. For example, in Washington, D.C. there is an under-nine *travel* soccer league. Under nine years old and traveling to play soccer! Not only does this warp perspectives of the young but it also discourages those who are not as athletically gifted: sports teams become stratified between the adepts and the jealous and discouraged admirers.

Perspective and confidence are not the only things to be injured in this process: serious physical injuries are more and more common in youth sports. In a haunting article by Michael Sokolove we meet a Janelle Pierson, now a college player:

She played soccer year-round—often for two teams at a time when the seasons of her school and club teams overlapped. Like many American children deeply involved in sports, Janelle, a high-school senior, had traveled like a professional athlete since her early teens, routinely flying to out-of-state tournaments. She had given up other sports long ago, quitting basketball and tennis by age 10. There was no time for any of that, and as she put it: “Even if you wanted to keep playing other sports, people would question you. They’d be, like, ‘Why do you want to do that?’”

In her teens Ms. Pierson had already torn *both* of her anterior cruciate ligaments (ACLs) in this extreme lifestyle, and yet

continued to play even before safely rehabbed. This ignorance of injury is just as present in the boys. Dr. Michael Israel presented a study to the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2012 showing that significant numbers of high school varsity football players fail to report concussion symptoms because they are afraid of losing playing time. The effects of this are lasting: many live with seizures and memory loss for years to come.

Sports, like all physical activity, involve a certain amount of risk and danger, but the current distorted perspective brings about far too much physical and psychological damage—sports are hurting young people more than helping.

MOST PEOPLE JUST WATCH

Contemporary America encourages many to pursue athletics to the exclusion of all other goods, failing to acknowledge the good of proper hierarchy and perspective. The good of the body is a lesser good than that of the soul, and to make the former one's primary aim is a serious mistake. But the elitist outlook on sports affect more than athletes and those aspiring to join them; the talentless suffer too. Beneath the increasingly specialized pyramid of professional American athletes lies the largest group in society: the spectators.

Now specialization is no bad thing in society; dividing the work of daily life makes everyone better off. If I had to make my own clothes and gather my food, there would be no time to write finger-waving articles critical of American culture, and perhaps no time to read them either. Having everyone do what he is best at enriches the lives of all. Sports are no different. Players are better. Games are more exciting. Enjoyment is maximized.

But playing sports is not like the other outsourced goods of garment making and food gathering: *the good of sport is largely in the playing*. It is in the playing that we are disciplined. It is in the playing that we build our bodies. It is in the playing that we

acquire lasting camaraderie and companionship. By paying others to play for us, we have reduced to entertainment what is meant for enrichment.

CORRECTING THE DISTORTION

A disputed question is no place to correct such a wide-ranging and deeply held cultural distortion. Merely raising the question of sports from a perspective of virtuous activity might be enough to save some of the soul-destroying effects of the sporting industry. But with the humility necessary, perhaps a few guidelines or possibilities may be offered as a beginning to a necessary conversation and conversion. In our own lives when we choose to play rather than watch, or when we choose to watch amateurs rather than professionals, or when we choose to support our alma mater instead of the big school with big money, we help put sports in their rightful place as a subordinated good. Maybe the motto should be: Think local, play local.

On a larger level, one might propose a heftier income tax on professional athletes, but—given the aforesaid fear of all-powerful governments—maybe it would be better to start with ending public financing of stadiums and arenas. More encouragement of local and neighborhood leagues for youth is a helpful start, along with college trustees being more interested in academics than athletics (no matter how much money the latter brings in).

These are merely suggestions and not necessarily the right ones, but at least it gets the ball rolling. Most of all, we must remember that God is the end for which strive, the true source of our happiness in this life and the next. If we put sports in proper perspective, we can chase after a ball without losing our souls.

Clement Dickie entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.

HOW TO WATCH SPORTS

Michael Mary Weibley, O.P.

“I believe in the Church of Baseball.”

I cons pan across the screen—images of baseball saints of yore—while Susan Sarandon’s voice announces the events of the upcoming season like a litany of liturgical feasts. The classic, though uncouth, baseball film *Bill Durham* opens with a prayer-like monologue. Sarandon’s licentious character, Annie Savoy, clings to the Durham Bulls ball club each season with religious anticipation; their games give her life meaning, and she attends devoutly. Annie Savoy believes in the Church of Baseball.

The line evokes a mysticism about the game—a real and transcendent element that applies not only to baseball, but to sports in general. People worship their beloved games. They “believe” in sports because through these games they find a place in this seemingly chaotic world. Sports fill an otherwise empty gap, and their seasons give order to the life of the spectator; each cycle marks consistency and time for the committed fan, facilitating a steady enjoyment of their beloved games.

Whether it’s the college football junkie on a fall Saturday morning or the Chicago Cubs season ticket holder, sports can consume. For the diehard, sports are not just a game—regardless of how unreal their consequences may be. Though the outcome has no real import for life’s grand questions (where do we come from? Why are we here?), common practice finds America glued to the television. Super Bowl Sunday trumps the Lord’s Day.

Clearly, the Christian cannot watch sports in such a way. As to how the Christian *should* watch their games, the Fathers offer a particularly austere answer.

ANTIOCHENE IDOLATRY

The Church Fathers frequently found themselves competing on the Lord's Day against the games for the attention of the faithful. St. John Chrysostom famously decried the entertainment of Antioch, and his *contra ludos et theatra* laments the potential loss of souls caused by the chariot races:

After hearing lengthy series of speeches and so much teaching, some people have left us, and deserted us for the spectacle of horse racing. They have become so frenzied that they fill the whole city with their shouting and disorderly racket, creating huge laughter or rather lamentation. Is this the people who love Christ, who is the genuine, spiritual, spectacle? You have not even shown respect for the very day on which the sacraments of the salvation of mankind were celebrated.

Chrysostom's critique is severe. Emptying their churches and filling up their base desires, the Antiochenes set their hearts against the true spectacle, Jesus Christ, and so sports exercised an idolatrous hold on the people. Fourth-century Antioch found its inhabitants attending a church of the chariot races, and their worship of the swiftest horse led them to the swiftest sin.

St. Augustine knew the seriousness the games played for his own congregation. In his *Expositions on the Psalms* (40.9) he engages an imaginary interlocutor who responds in protest to Augustine's exhortation to desist from the games: "I shall never keep up this walking [along the narrow path], if I have no shows to watch." Augustine offers the following solution:

Let us give him other wonderful things to watch, in place of the shows he has given up . . . Our convert has turned away from the circus, from the theater, from the fights in the stadium, so let him inquire what there is to look at among

us; yes, by all means let him inquire, for we do not want to leave him no spectacle to enjoy. What shall we give him instead?

Augustine knows what the human heart desires—to be amazed, to be dazzled, to be overwhelmed by what is profound and illuminating. He even acknowledges that the grandeur of the natural world offers a most impressive object for the Christian mind (*Expositions on the Psalms*, 77.8). But this is not enough. If our minds remain in nature, they will never reach the true heights to which they are called. Nothing short of seeing God Himself suffices.

Like Chrysostom, Augustine sees the games as an obstacle to that true spectacle. It is not so much the games themselves that are sinful, but how they are watched—as a form of worship. When one worships the world, the world is all one sees. So too with sports. Thus, it is no surprise that Augustine and the Fathers detest the games and exhort the faithful to abandon them and worship the true spectacle, God Himself. The Fathers teach us to tear out our eye, set upon idolatry, lest we lose our soul to Gehenna (cf. Mt 5:29).

So how are Christians to watch sports? The Fathers provide one answer—a negative precept not to turn the spectating of sports into one's reason for living. Entering into the church of sports, one enters into an idolatry that must be condemned.

KIDS IN PARADISE

There is, however, a positive way in which we can watch sports, not as idolatry, but by seeing sports as a channel to grasp the wisdom that pervades reality. The spectating of the games can be a contemplative form of play; a kind of longing for paradise.

Christians locate paradise in a return to union with God, but our way of talking about such a paradise tends to be as something

removed, something set apart from the tumultuous reality of life. The word *paradise* derives from the Avestan word for enclosure, *paridaēza*, meaning the enclosure or park of a king. In Old Persian it meant a noble or special enclosure, as it did in ancient Hebrew (think of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8). The green space of paradise represents a place of free play, calm, and quietude.

From the college courtyard to the monastic cloister garden, such spaces evoke a sense of paradise. Sports typify this paradise. The green space of the playing field manifests for many a longing to gain what once was lost. These little enclosures of paradise provide a place for man to witness excellence, to catch a glimpse of perfection. We want to return to something we once were, to something we were made for.

But paradise belongs to the childlike (Lk 18:16-17). True paradise is found in accepting the love of God with ease—like a child accepting the love of a parent. It is not a matter of the difficult but of the free and to be free is the state of a child. Children think in black and white terms. Life begins to gray only as we age. In this sense, then, paradise is for the simple. We often long to live in simpler times, where the natural white of life was not grayed by the black of sin. Longing for paradise, we long for simplicity—uncomplicated, pure, and playful. We long to be children again.

Yet this childlike paradise is not a total free-for-all. Rules govern it, as Adam and Eve learned all too well. These rules ensure the order of paradise, and without them paradise loses its boundaries, ceasing to be the safe haven of the childlike. We can violate these rules, but we do so to our detriment. Within the enclosed order of paradise, children find the freedom to play.

Even adults long for such freedom. Many of us are simply big kids, who still love to run around or watch others run around. Unlike much of life, sports are fair—with clear rules, an intelligible framework, and an obvious winner and loser. For the big kids of the world, watching sports is a haven of simplicity and a return to childhood.



VINCENT VAN GOGH - SPECTATORS IN THE ARENA AT ARLES

To watch a game unfold in detail and precision—but seemingly without effort and strife—is a matter of simplicity: a quality that calls us back to our youth, a time when life was much simpler. Watching someone smoothly hit a baseball in the gap or thread the needle of a perfect pass amazes the fan because it looks so easy and simple. For a brief moment, the fan enters into something other than the complexity of life. He steps into the playground of the mind to play in something a little more perfect—a little more like paradise—than the rest of his life.

But how is this not escapism? Doesn't such an adult numb himself to reality and so fall victim to addiction and idolatry?

Not if childlike simplicity (and so paradise) is exactly what man is made for. What could be “simpler” than the union that comes from seeing God “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12), in a direct vision of him “as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2)? If desiring simplicity constitutes escapism, so does desiring God.

Watching sports need not become idolatrous. When it serves as an outlet for the childlike play of the mind, it images the direction of the human being—heart and head—to the one true spectacle: the God who calls us to be children in his kingdom.

CONTEMPLATIVE PLAY

More than only mirroring our longing for paradise, watching sports can also imitate its activity: contemplation. For St. Thomas, the perfect form of knowledge is not strenuous discursive reasoning, but rather, a simple kind of seeing, an intuition (*STh* I, q. 59, a. 1, ad 1). True knowledge beholds what reality reveals; in contemplation, we begin to see reality unveiled.

For the mind, the object of contemplation is like a landscape arresting our gaze. We focus on an object for no other reason than its own goodness, and this knowledge produces a type of amazement (*STh* II-II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 3). What we contemplate exceeds our comprehension. It urges us on to know the wisdom, order, and grandeur of all reality—and even its creator. This contemplative gaze proceeds smoothly; it acts simply, without trouble, even playfully.

The spectator of sport, like the contemplative, does not possess a pragmatic or practical sort of knowledge. He simply sees—even penetrates—what lies before him. Knowing the rules and method of the game, the avid fan easily grasps a true good that amazes him, whether it be the steady flow of a ballgame in the afternoon or the intense rapidity of March Madness. Such an amazement has the power to point beyond itself, giving a glimpse of God's wisdom working throughout the world.

In his final address as professor at Georgetown, Father James V. Schall, S.J. mentioned that “the closest that the average young man ever comes to contemplation is watching a good game” because he is “watching it for its own sake.” The truth of this statement is

profound. Not only is the watching of a game a desire for childlike simplicity, it is a mature desire for wisdom.

Whether it's the strategy, the chance-within-design, or the suspenseful expectation of what is to come, watching sports alerts us to an over-arching order worth knowing for its own sake. This contemplative way of watching sports points us toward what continues to exist beyond the particular game, and hence, to things that do not merely pass away.

Like the momentary absorption of an audience at a dramatic play or an uplifting concert, the hush that descends over spectators at a sporting event is not so much idolatrous adoration as contemplative play. In the calm before the final put on the 18th hole, man is totally captive to what proceeds before him. His mind is engaged in a contemplative yet playful activity. This spectacle holds the fan captive every season. Whether it's opening day, the playoffs, or pick-up in the backyard, the games we watch for their own sake can point beyond themselves—for divine wisdom itself is “always at play, playing through the whole world” (Prov. 8:30).

It may be true that many modern fans, like Annie Savoy, mirror the Antiochenes of old rather than contemplative Christians; but the call to lift up our minds while watching sports remains nonetheless. In the end we are called to abandon the Church of Baseball; it cannot be our object of worship. We are called, rather, to become children once again at play in the garden: to witness to the wisdom that runs through the world; to see within the created good God's marks of design and order; to let ourselves be amazed in the moment. We take a fitting pleasure in sports—never idolizing them—because they can unveil the perfections of paradise in an imperfect world.

Michael Mary Weibley entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.

REPLIES

A REPLY TO *SPORTS IN AMERICA*

I want to thank Br. Clement for his thoughtful and sharp critique of the professional sports culture and its impact on society. It is difficult to argue against the economic incentives that drive the professional sports world—incentives that often warp apparent or instrumental goods into ultimate or final goods. What is clear is that the professional sports world is one player in the multifaceted cultural landscape that, more or less, has inverted a true order of the good. In this we are in agreement.

I would, however, caution against such a singular look at the sports world. Although professional sports, at least as businesses, are driven by money, it does a disservice to many professional athletes to reduce their playing to mere work and to lump them into the economic machine. After all, it is still a game and they primarily play the game because, deep down, they love it.

Like anything else, the pleasure they take in the game may be inordinate, but to limit their play totally to economic incentives would be a reduction of them as persons. There is something more than money at play. It is totally human to love—and within the love of the game many professional athletes display a love that goes beyond the game. Google the names Roberto Clemente, Philip Rivers, Tony Dungy, or Kurt Warner if you need proof. For these guys, the games they play are fun and out of that fun they glorify God in tremendous ways.

With respect to watching sports, Br. Clement does not see much good in it. Yet, people all over the world have watched games throughout history and continue to do so. I think it is incumbent for Christians to “baptize” what is truly human in the world,

insofar as they can; to elucidate what is actually good in human phenomena in light of the truth. We can do that in watching sports if we take an optimistic, dare I say, incarnational approach.

— *Michael Mary Weibley, O.P.*

A REPLY TO *HOW TO WATCH SPORTS*

Br. Michael Mary proposes that spectating can be a contemplative activity. I suppose that in the most general sense he has a point. Watching sport is an activity that can take us past ourselves. As Br. Michael Mary puts it: “The spectating of the games can be a contemplative form of play; a kind of longing for paradise.”

But I am left with two concerns: 1) this sort of meditation remains a counterfeit of the real thing, and 2) with the way that sports are watched in America, I don’t think this even possible.

Attending a professional, and increasingly college, sporting event is an experience of sensory overload. Exciting music, images flashing on the Jumbotron®, sideshow event, scantily clad cheerleaders, and ridiculous food and alcohol all ensure that the experience excites the passions. There is no space left for peaceful thoughts. Watching at home is not much better. Announcers spew a constant stream of inane banter, unmeaningful statistics, and obvious descriptions of strategy. Sure you could mute your TV, but then you then lose your connection to the game in other ways.

“More than only mirroring our longing for paradise, watching sports can also imitate its activity: contemplation.” ‘Imitate’ is a key word. There is a special pleasure in watching a good game, but it is an amusement, a relaxing distraction.

Amusement has a role in a virtuous life, but it cannot be the thing we pursue. Br. Michael Mary quotes Fr. James Schall, S.J. as saying, “the closest that the average young man ever comes to contemplation is watching a good game’ because he is ‘watching

it for its own sake.” If that’s true, if the only thing that the young men are pursuing for its own sake is watching sports, it is a tragedy. As Aristotle says in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “to exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish. But to amuse oneself in order that one may exert oneself, as Anacharsis puts it, seems right . . .”

— *Clement Dickie, O.P.*

RECAPITULATION

When it comes to sports, how do we avoid both the danger of demonization and the idol of idealization? The first point to make is that individuals are not the issue. The question at hand is *societal*, not psychological. Culturally, do we approach sports in a way conducive to true happiness?

What would it look like if we did? Br. Michael Mary gives an arresting answer to this question: it would look like paradise—a physical imitation of the spiritual contemplation we can enjoy (partially and sporadically) here on earth, which itself points forward to that transcendent contemplation to which we are called (completely and eternally) in the life to come. *Pace* Plato, Christians can and should affirm the goodness of the imitation’s imitation.

But is this what we see in our society today? Br. Clement gives a sobering response: incentivizing elitism and absolutizing amusement pull sports (and us) in a very different direction. America’s sports culture obstructs the real benefits sporting offers.

Realism demands a sober assessment of these obstacles, but Christian Realism demands hope in their midst. Christians are called to change the culture in concrete ways—whether on the field or in the stands—and to live the sporting life in a truly incarnational way.

— *The Editors*