



## GAMES PEOPLE PLAY:

### *On Sports & Spirituality*

October 18, 2024  
Union League at Torresdale

**NETWORKING  
BREAKFAST**  
"Sports & Spirituality"  
Friday, October 18th  
Featured Speaker: Fr. Tom Dailey, OSFS

**Get Ready for  
Red October!**  
7:37 AM - 9:00 AM  
The Union League  
Torresdale  
Philadelphia  
Register at  
[www.oblates.org](http://www.oblates.org)

Let me **Preface** this with a little story about my entry into the OSFS.

To conclude 5 hours of psychological testing in Wilmington, I was told to draw a house, a tree, and a person. I did it in about 30 seconds ... because, as I told the doc, I had a ballgame to play in Philly.

Her report included a commentary my misplaced priorities. It was harsh but not inaccurate!

But 25 years later, as an Oblate, I was in [Cooperstown](#) speaking in the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

And now, I'm here today to speak with you about ... the "Games People Play."

If you recognize that title as a book on the psychology of human relationships ([1964](#)), or as a popular song from the Spinners ([1974](#)) or the Alan Parsons Project ([1980](#)), then you're getting old, like me!

As today's topic, I'm going to treat the 3-word title in reverse ... to offer my take on what Sports and Spirituality have to do with each other.

**First ... they're connected in terms of "PLAY"** (in a philosophical sense)

Here's the logic: Play is what we do with our leisure. Leisure is the basis of culture ([JOSEPH PIEPER](#)). And, because culture reflects what we value most, "the heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God" (as JOHN PAUL II noted in a speech to the United Nations<sup>1</sup>).

The Jesuit, FR. JIM SCHALL, puts this philosophical sense in simple terms for us.<sup>2</sup>

“The real problems of mankind are those that we must face after our toil and labor are completed. These are things we *have* to do. But it is mainly the things that we do not have to do that define what we are.”

So, Schall says, “The essential question that religion asks is: *What is to be done when all the work is finished and when everything else is done?* In other words, there is a real sense in which ‘play’ is pretty closely connected with our destiny.”

I’ll let you ponder the question: If sports is what you still play – or try to, at this age! – what will be your destiny?

### **The second connection between Sports & Spirituality has to do with “PEOPLE”**

That’s actually the Church’s concern ... so much so that in 2024 the Vatican created a specific office for Sports and published a document about it called [\*Giving the Best of Yourself\*](#).

For the People who are players, sports have a formative value. It’s a way to develop virtues, like discipline and teamwork.

For other People associated with teams that play, sports instill a cooperative value ... in terms of service and providing help to others.

Think of the [\*Special Olympics\*](#) (or the [\*Miracle League\*](#)) – where the volunteers probably get as much, if not more, out of the games than the participants.

And for People who are fans, sports offers a unitive value ... as can be seen in the social cohesion of an entire city cheering on the home team.

Admit if ... if you have any sports gear (like Eagles green), you wear it with communal pride, even when they lose!

The Vatican document characterizes the impact of sports on People as:

“the joy of life, a game, a celebration, and as such it must be properly used ... and freed from excess technical perfection and professionalism through a recovery of its free nature, its ability to strengthen bonds of friendship, to foster dialogue and openness to others, as an expression of the richness of being, much more valid and to be prized than having, and hence far above the harsh laws of production and consumption and all other purely utilitarian and hedonistic considerations in life” (p. 13).

**Finally, and most specifically, let’s consider the GAMES themselves** (in a “religious” dimension)

Sociologists consider sports to be a *quasi*-religion. HARRY EDWARDS notes how:

Superstar athletes correspond to religions’ gods and deceased players serve as saints; the coaches and executives who sit on boards and commissions and make and interpret the rules are like religious patriarchs and high councils; the reporters and broadcasters who chronicle sports events and tabulate their statistics are like the scribes of religious traditions; sports trophies and memorabilia are like religious icons; the formally stated beliefs that are commonly accepted about a sport are like religious dogma; sports stadiums and arenas are like houses of worship; and halls of fame ... are religious shrines. Finally, ... the faithful or devoted fan of sports (are identified) with the true believers of a religious tradition.<sup>3</sup>

That may be so in terms of imagery. But the real challenge with this topic is to connect the sports themselves with the stuff of spirituality. To do that, as JOSEPH PRICE claims, we need “to identify within sports a source of ultimate powers for evoking and inspiring radical transformation among participants and spectators.”<sup>4</sup>

As our hunt for Red October continues (Despite being knocked out of Red October) ... I would suggest we can make that identification and see that transformation in one sport in particular: **Baseball**.

If we think of any **religion**, we find in it four basic elements – transcendence, immanence, finitude, and beatitude – each of which is uniquely evident in the particular features of baseball.

As for the transcendent to which religion refers ... in baseball, eternity is built into the contours of the game:

- the foul (actually fair) lines and poles technically extend forever; and
- there's no clock to limit the time of the games (despite the new [ghost runner rule](#)).

Religion is also immanent, giving us a way to try to live well in this world ... which baseball demonstrates in the players continual quest for perfection.

Think of the skills needed for

- pitching, and trying to make a ball swerve with pinpoint precision; or,
- hitting that pitch, which professionals have less than half a second to do (Billy Martin vs. golf).

In our human quest, religion responds to finitude, recognizing that we mortals have a propensity to fail (we call it “sin”). Baseball acknowledges that, too, reflecting what we might call a “spirituality of imperfection.”<sup>5</sup>

- On the one hand, baseball includes “error” as a personal statistic.
- On the other hand, as former commission FAY VINCENT says: “We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often – those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players.”

Even with our human imperfection, religion holds out for us the possibility of beatitude; we have hope because we long for joy ... aspirations that baseball also excites in true believers:

- CHARLES SPRINGWOOD opines that “Of all the major American sports, only the baseball season unfolds much as life does, emerging from sleepy winters to a springtime of new dreams and optimism. It persists through

the summer months, offering a reliable companionship, before it leaves all too soon.”<sup>6</sup>

- And former commission BART GIAMATTI eloquently captures what humans most deeply desire when he writes: “(baseball is) the story of going home after having left home, the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply needs to find. It is the literary mode called Romance. ... Romance is about putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder. It is about restoration of the right relations among things – and going home is where that restoration occurs because that is where it matters most.”<sup>7</sup> (*Substitute Religion for Romance and it works the same, for heaven is our real home.*)

### My Contribution<sup>8</sup>

Baseball does have a religious character. It witnesses to the transcendent dimensions fundamental to a religious understanding of the world. In its shapes and by its actions, it points to eternal realities. Through the exploits of its players, especially their own and their teams’ failures, it discloses profound truths about life that constitute ultimate meaning.

But, you might say, even those connections are tenuous. After all, one could still ask: where, specifically, is God in this, or any, sport? What is the ultimate power at work in this game that can, if believed, bring about the transformation of our lives?

The answer – I propose to you – lies in the paradoxical notion of **SACRIFICE**.

Usually overt (by means of a bunt), often supposed (in a fly ball that scores a runner from third base), or occasionally undetected (in the ground out that moves a runner from second to third) – the sacrifice as a specifically designated play is unique to baseball. Other athletes may engage in a similar process (e.g., football linemen who block); other games may include comparable moves (e.g., “sacrificing a pawn” in chess). But only baseball formally acknowledges the value of the sacrificial act by conferring statistical recognition upon its successful completion.

As a staple of baseball strategy, the sacrifice likewise pertains to the spiritual truth of the sport. The sacrifice reveals the importance in baseball of action over personality, of executing the play and getting the job done over heroic feats and superstar status. Batters aspire to hit, but teams only win by scoring runs! Baseball's sacrifice is intended solely to benefit the common good. In baseball, as in life, humility is a true virtue.

The power of sacrifice remains paramount to a Christian understanding of life in this world. The redemptive act of God becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus, and his subsequent death on the cross at Calvary, exemplifies the value of sacrifice from a divine viewpoint. On the human side, sacrifice constitutes a noble use of freedom; to choose freely to place one's own concern secondary to the good of another is not a loss of freedom but its ultimate exercise. As such, the sacrificial act represents an embrace of that finitude that characterizes our lives.

To believe in sacrifice is to affirm our liberty – freely choosing to place ourselves “out” so as to advance the “runner” that is our neighbor. To believe in sacrifice is to move forward with responsibility – recognizing that our human dignity as “players” accords each and every one of us a role to fulfill in society's wellbeing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant that role may appear to be. To believe in sacrifice is to act on behalf of solidarity – doing our part to contribute to the winning score rather than seeking personal aggrandizement, with the awareness that it is in and through our right relations with one another on the “team” of humanity that we find glory for ourselves.

If, as JOSEPH PRICE claims, “(t)he ultimacy or holiness of the religious experience derives from its location, not in a remote realm of transcendence, but in a sense of alterity generated by the freedom and beauty of the sports activity itself,” then the act of sacrifice discloses a truly religious power that is to be found not only in the game of baseball but in the sport of life.

With that, I say “amen” and “Go Phillies.” THANK YOU.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, “Discours à l’Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies,” 5 October 1995, n. 9; *Documentation Catholique* XCII (1995) 920. Cf. Pontifical Council for Culture, “Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture” (1999), n. 1

<sup>2</sup> James V. Schall. *Far Too Easily Pleased: A Theology of Play, Contemplation, and Festivity* (Catholic Education Press, 2020), chapter one.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1973), 261-22, as summarized by Joseph Price in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph L. Price (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 218-219.

<sup>4</sup> Price, *From Season to Season*, 228.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Bantam, rev. 1993); Wil Hernandez, *Henri Nouwen: A Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Charles F. Springwood, “The Mythopoetics of Place and Memory,” in *Baseball as America: Seeing Ourselves through Our National Game* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002), 293-295.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 34.

<sup>8</sup> What follows is drawn from the version of my talk in Cooperstown published as “Believing in Baseball! The Religious Character of Our National Pastime.” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 6/2 (2003): 63-83.