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Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval To Modern Times, by Patrick Kelly, S.J.

New York: Paulist Press, 212 pages

Reviewed by Diana Owen

Faculty and staff at Catholic colleges are divided in their views about sports on campus. Some believe that athletics, especially high-profile, competitive sports, divert resources and attention from academic pursuits. Others, like myself, consider sports to be integral to a well-rounded college experience, fostering an active lifestyle and community building. Countless hours are spent debating the proper role of sports in meetings and around the water cooler.

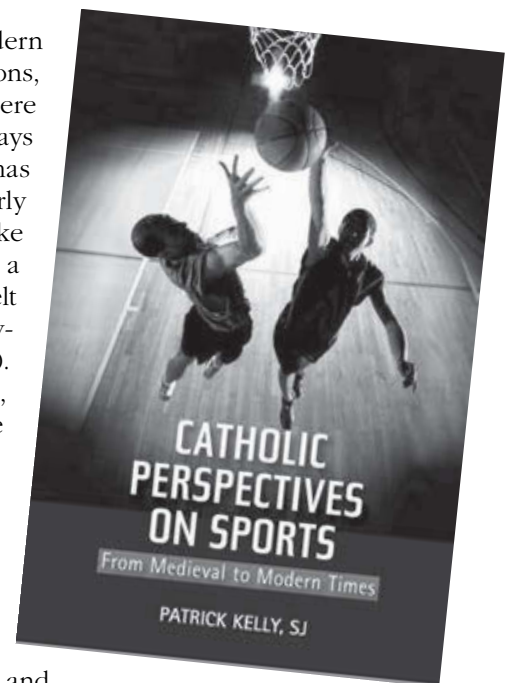
Patrick Kelly, S.J., brings an important perspective to this debate by illuminating the centrality of sports in Catholic theology and spiritual practices throughout history. He argues, contrary to prevailing accounts, that sports have been integral to the spiritual life of Catholics from the medieval period to the present. His study employs a combination of theological argument and historical analysis that establishes a foundation for his observations about Catholicism and sports in America. His work highlights the fact that debates over the intersection of sports and faith far predate the establishment of Catholic academic institutions.

Father Kelly demonstrates that sports were readily accommodated

in medieval and early modern Catholic culture and institutions, including schools. Games were played on Sundays and holy days around faith practices. Thomas Aquinas, humanists, and early Jesuits believed that diversions like sports were necessary to achieve a virtuous life. Indeed, Aquinas felt that “it was possible to sin by having too little play in one’s life” (5). In keeping with these sentiments, early Jesuit schools in Europe and in the North American missions made sports central to a student’s experience.

Puritan notions associating work with godliness and play with sin shaped early Americans’ beliefs about sports. American Catholic clergy and laypersons embraced play and readily integrated sports into their daily lives, reinforcing their status as outsiders. Jesuit schools, in keeping with their European counterparts, established elaborate facilities and made sports integral to campus life.

Small yet compelling portions of the book address women’s participation in sports, an area that usually receives scant scholarly treatment. Fr. Kelly challenges conventional assumptions that females did not engage in athletic play in medieval and early modern times. Women workers, like their male counter-



parts, played team sports, including football, cricket, and a precursor to baseball, and ran foot races, while aristocratic women hunted and played tennis. Young American women attending Catholic schools as early as the 1930s played competitive sports, offering a contrast to the male-dominated institutional church hierarchy and signaling possibilities for a more feminine view of the faith. The Immaculata College “Mighty Macs” women’s basketball team revolutionized the game and won the first women’s national championship in 1972, repeating the



Regis University.

feat in 1973 and 1974. The Catholic faith/sports nexus was seamless for Immaculata students whose community, under the tutelage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters, was united in prayer, a “love of work,” and “a love of play.”

In the final chapter, Father Kelly address sports in the contemporary context in light of the considerable challenges that have emerged as athletics have become synonymous with business and entertainment. Athletes are pressured from an early age to perform and win prestigious scholarships or professional contracts. Such pressure takes the joy out of sports for many athletes and makes them vulnerable to chronic injury. Jesuit institutions face the conundrum of how to be competitive in this environment while

remaining true to their mission. Father Kelly draws upon the insights of theologians from earlier periods to provide guidance. Pope John Paul II believed that the goal of sports should be to foster spiritual growth by emphasizing the dignity of the human person. Sports should be part of a balanced life, and Father Kelly asks us to consider Aquinas’s emphasis on moderation and enjoyment. He concludes, “An important task of Catholic theologians in the contemporary context is to safeguard the play element in sport, and particularly in youth sport. After all, if play is similar to contemplation, then the experiences of a person at play must themselves be of considerable significance” (154).

Father Kelly’s well-researched, neatly articulated volume fills a major void left by Catholic theologians’ reluctance

to address the connection between religion and sports. The book appeals directly to sports scholars and enthusiasts, theologians, and Catholic historians. It is a must-read for university faculty and administrators who deal with athletics. The book also is suitable for a general audience, including those who are not interested in sports. Father Kelly makes sophisticated theological arguments accessible and relevant while taking readers on a lively journey through Catholic and Jesuit history in brief. ■

Diana Owen is an associate professor of political science and the director of American Studies at Georgetown University. She is a member of the Conversations seminar.