



# MOST PRECIOUS BLOOD CATHOLIC CHURCH

## **The Church Speaks: On the Value of Physical Exercise**

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The Catholic Church is keenly interested in physical exercise because the human body is, as St. Paul states, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church views physical exercise as serving the harmonious development of the human body, which is considered to be the masterpiece of all creation.

So often today we encounter people who emphasize the care of the body through exercise at the expense of leaving undeveloped the moral and spiritual aspect of human dignity. The Church teaches that care of the body through exercise is not an end in itself, but should be directed to the intellectual and moral perfecting of the soul.

St. Paul encourages us in his epistles to cultivate the dignity and harmony of our body, which he considers to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. Much of St. Paul's life reflects strength and vitality that enabled him to endure the trials of his missionary travels. St. Paul refers to sports activity to point out the spirit of courage demanded by the Christian life, a life much like a demanding sport, directing a person's energies toward the perfection of character. He invites us to, "...fight the good fight of faith." (1 Tim 6:12) and not to be discouraged by obstacles.

St. Paul's personality derived much from his Greek background with its emphasis on athletics. His home town of Tarsus had a stadium on the banks of the River Cydmus. St. Paul visualized the Christian life as an athletic contest and the vocabulary of athletics appears in his writings. He wrote: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize. So run that you may attain it." (1 Cor. 9:24). The Church values this New Testament passage of St. Paul's as giving athletes not only motivation to win their contest, but also win the contest of knowing the meaning of life, along with realizing that union with God in heaven is the ultimate victory, the eternal crown.

Many people will be glad to learn that the early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, in his treatise *The Instructor*, written in the early 3rd century, states that his two main concerns were keeping healthy and becoming holy. He valued exercise very much as benefiting health and aiding in the wholesome development of character. This great Father of the Church taught that one should carefully select exercises as each person has individual needs. He taught that physical exercise cultivates symmetry of bodily members and produces a good complexion. He also taught people that physical exercise is effective in maintaining a pleasing physical appearance. He clearly valued physical and spiritual fitness, but of the two, he taught that spiritual fitness is the most excellent, that by it, the soul is made beautiful with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

St. Dominic, the great preacher of the Rosary, was described by his contemporaries as the "strong athlete." Joyousness sprang out of the great physical energy and immense strength of bodily endurance that he possessed. His great physical fitness, especially acquired through walking, helped St. Dominic to be a man of indefatigable energy, a man of great character and depth. St. Thomas Aquinas, a member of the Order of Preachers that St. Dominic founded, subscribed to Aristotle's notion, "To a good bodily constitution corresponds the nobility of the soul." This notion supports the popular saying we have heard so often: "A sound mind in a sound body."

St. Thomas Aquinas, the common doctor of the Church, considered taking care of the body through exercise as virtue and wisdom. He considered physical exercise as a means of releasing tension and bringing rest to the soul. Aquinas viewed exercise as medicine for the soul and as a suitable means for refreshing and regenerating a tired mind. In Book Three of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas states that physical exercise has a proper end, namely, that after our minds have been somewhat relaxed through them, we may be better able to do serious jobs. Aquinas has helped the Church reconstruct the view of exercise as a means for perfecting the body as an instrument of the mind in its search for and communication of the truth.

St. Thomas's position on physical exercise helps us to see the potential intellectual gains from it. Contemporary studies have shown that aerobic exercise can improve a person's intellectual capacity. The theory is that exercise increases the blood supply into the brain. This increase of blood into the brain causes the brain to receive more oxygen. The increase of oxygen in the brain helps people think clearer, the duration of concentration increases as well as the depth of thinking. The research shows that these benefits for the mind definitely help us in prayer and meditation. Aquinas's teaching on psychosomatic unity helps us to see the wisdom of Holy Mother Church in her appreciation for the value of physical exercise.

During the Renaissance, Pope Pius II, a man of marked humanistic ideas, encouraged physical exercise during his papacy. He taught that habits developed through physical exercise would be helpful throughout life. St. Ignatius Loyola was a strong proponent for physical fitness. He encouraged physical exercise to be used to build strong and healthy bodies to glorify God and to obtain greater spiritual and moral goals. This great saint compared his Spiritual Exercises to bodily exercise such as walking and running; as physical exercise strengthens the body, St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises strengthen the faculties of the soul.

Popes of the 20th century have actively promoted physical exercise. Pope Pius XI, a great mountaineer, considered physical exercise as a means of exhausting the body within healthy limits in order to rest the mind and prepare it for new work. He considered exercise as a means of sharpening the senses in order to acquire greater intensity and penetration in the intellectual faculties. This great Pope thought that physical exercise was beneficial in order to exercise the muscles and to become accustomed to effort in order to temper the character and form a will "as hard as steel."

Another 20th century Pope, Pius XII, known as the "friend of sport," was a great practitioner of physical exercise. He was the first Pope to install a gymnasium in the Vatican. He viewed exercise as a way of tempering the character and forming one's will as hard as steel. Physical exercise and sports were often the topic of his papal teaching addresses. When I was studying Physical Education in college, I read the teaching of Pius XII on exercise that I found in a book, *The Human Body*, a collection of papal teachings on health related topics, physical education, and sports. I was so impressed with his teachings that I thought surely he must have a B.A. in P.E.!!

Aristotle stated what has come to be known as the Cathartic theory of physical activity: "that preoccupation and expenditure of energy in physical activities help to extirpate vice and direct toward constructive, rather than immoral ends." Another great 20th century pope, Paul VI, seemed to echo Aristotle's theory when on Feb. 28, 1978, he spoke about how, "athletic commitment provided an effective antidote to the idleness, laxity and soft living, which usually constitute the fertile ground for all sorts of vice."

Our present Pope, John Paul II, an active athlete for most of his life, has on several occasions expressed his esteem for physical exercise. He has reaffirmed the Church's teaching on physical exercise as an orderly and harmonious development of the body at the service of the spirit. John Paul likes to repeat with St. Paul: "Glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:20). In many of his papal teaching addresses on exercise and sports, John Paul II quotes St. Paul, the great Apostle who has been acquainted with the sporting world of his day. This marvelous athlete Pope has taught that physical exercise causes the body to make an effort to reach optimum physical condition, which brings marked consequences of psychological well being. He has remarked that we can develop through long hours of exercise and effort the power of concentration and the habit of discipline.

I would like to end this article by mentioning a super athlete who was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1990. Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati lived in Italy and was a man who strived for physical and spiritual fitness. He was an avid skier, swimmer, and bicycle and rowing enthusiast. He was an ardent mountain climber who valued it as a means of developing character. He was also a great spiritual athlete. He was a man of deep prayer. He loved praying the Rosary. He prayed the Rosary three times a day after he became a member of the Third Order of St. Dominic. His fondness for the epistles of St. Paul sparked his zeal for fraternal charity. At graduation from the Polytechnic University in Turin, Italy, his father gave him a choice of money or a car. He chose the money and gave it to the poor. He contracted polio at the age of 24 and died with a smile on his face and a Rosary in his hand. In 1984, John Paul II called him a "model for athletes." Blessed Pier Giorgio—pray for us!