

Sport and Spirituality

Fr Kevin O’Gorman SMA considers the relationship between sport and spirituality.

Another Summer season of sport is bringing out a series of great games in so many different codes, including the All-Ireland hurling and Gaelic football championships with the corresponding camogie and women’s competitions. The FIFA Women’s World Cup in Australia/New Zealand is in full swing with the Irish team participating at this level for the first time. The Autumn will bring the Rugby World Cup to worldwide television with the realistic prospect of the Irish team reaching (at least) the semi-finals for the first time. Individual and team feats in fields ranging from athletics through cricket to swimming indicate the importance of sport for both participants and supporters. Identification with and inclusion in sport are well identified in recent remarks by the retired Leinster– and Ireland – rugby player Gordon D’Arcy: ‘Ireland has a rich and diverse sporting culture that is prioritised in the national psyche, embraced wholeheartedly with a fierce passion. I see it with my own kids and the sports they play, how it breaks down barriers, helps to foster social inclusion and gently introduces life lessons about working towards the greater good of a group rather than simply focusing on your own needs.’

It is often said that sport is the ‘new religion’ with sports men and women

considered contemporary saints, stadia and courses presented as shrines and success shown as salvation and redemption. It is true that traditional terminology is often used to talk about sport in the media, but from a pastoral perspective it is the relationship between sport and spirituality that is important. As with the vast arena of sporting activities there is so wide a range of spiritual exercises that it can be difficult to negotiate the current spiritual landscape (one writer has referred to ‘the spirituality sprawl’). Ranging from disciplines to devotions, spirituality demands discernment, itself an exercise in the classic spirituality of Ignatius Loyola.

The word ‘psyche’ (used by Gordon D’Arcy above) opens the way to the world of the spirit. Spirit includes mentality but is more than mindset; it involves heart and will, integrating all three into the identity of a person. Indeed ‘person’ is probably the best word for understanding ‘psyche’ and the spiritual process it underpins. For believers this mystery of the human person means being called a child of God, the heavenly Father; for non-believers it offers an opening to transcendence, potentially taking persons beyond themselves and the created world and experiencing intimations



even of infinity.

The sight of sports men and women blessing themselves before matches and competitions shows the importance of spirituality in their lives. Through their witnessing with religious objects and tattoos, including biblical texts and references, many sports people literally wear their faith on their sleeves. The spiritual dimension reveals the dignity of the person who is not reducible to a range of functions no matter how excellent they may be. As a player and performer the person, no matter how elite in his or her field, is not a machine to be manipulated according to market forces. The prizes of sport are priceless. Also, spirituality helps people to focus positively on sport, seeing the part it plays in the process of human flourishing. Here sport is not the whole of a person's

story, and success is measured in terms of enjoyment and happiness rather than a haul of medals or titles. Finally, the discipline of sport lends itself to spiritual development. The old Latin motto *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body) underscores the interaction between a healthy lifestyle and mindfulness. The daily practice and performance involved in sport gives a rhythm for a range of exercises, including the regular recital of prayers and reading of spiritual texts. St Paul's use of the metaphors of boxing and running for the Christian life is a recommendation of both exercise and effort. As sport introduces us to a large circle of friendships in our lives, it is also a reminder that the spiritual journey stretches into heaven where the gift of eternal life is granted not gained.