

Playing by the Rule: Examining Sports Metaphors in the Rule of Saint Benedict

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Abstract: *For more than fifteen centuries, The Rule of Saint Benedict (Latin: Regulae Benedicti) has been a seminal classic within Western spirituality. Religious studies scholars have distilled from its contents a plethora of applicable practical, accessible, and transferable insights, skills, and adjuvants. To date, the ever-expanding field which examines valuable intersections between, sports, spirituality, and religion has seldom, if at all, explored this text. Surprisingly, The Rule of Saint Benedict contains several explicit references to various sporting activities including running, climbing, and training. Also present within its pages are other, yet more implicit, references to various activities which can rightly be associated with the popular cultural phenomena of sports such as manual labor, importance of a dedicated regimen, dietary habits, etc. In this paper, these apparently overlooked sporting references from The Rule of Saint Benedict are interdisciplinarily identified, analyzed, and explained for deeper consideration through lenses at the intersection of sports, spirituality, and religion in the Christian tradition.*

Keywords: Sport spirituality; Benedictine spirituality; monasticism; spirituality; ascesis

Introduction

For more than fifteen centuries, The Rule of Saint Benedict (Latin: *Regulae Benedicti*) has been a seminal classic within Western spirituality. Since then, it has remained the constant guide (along with The Gospel itself) for the oldest continuously active religious order in the Catholic Church. Religious studies scholars have distilled from its contents a plethora of applicable practical, accessible, and transferable insights, skills, and adjuvants. To date, the ever-expanding field which examines valuable intersections between, sports, spirituality, and religion has seldom, if at all, explored this text. Surprisingly, The Rule of Saint Benedict contains several explicit references to various sporting activities including running, climbing, and training. Also present within its pages are other, yet more implicit, references to various activities which can rightly be associated with the popular cultural phenomena of sports such as manual labor, the importance of a dedicated regimen, dietary habits, etc. In this paper, I will identify, analyze, and explain these apparently overlooked sporting references from The



Rule of Saint Benedict. From such a point, I propose their applicability to and relevance for further consideration within the intersections between sports, spirituality, and religion within the Catholic-Christian tradition.

Explicit Sports References in *The Rule*

It is no surprise that various spiritualities develop from out of the advice of the great founders of the orders contained in their foundational writings. Within the Benedictine tradition, this guiding text (apart from the Gospel) is none other than the 6th century Rule of St. Benedict. Throughout this work, I rely primarily, if not exclusively, on Timothy Fry's, RB 1980 (English translation). Where useful or appropriate, I will also draw from Kardong's (1996), *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* which remains to be perhaps the most thorough treatment and examination of *The Rule* (hereafter expressed thusly) in existence.

While certainly an ancient text, the wisdom of St. Benedict contained in the pages of *The Rule* possesses both eternal spiritual significance as well as a certain timeless practicality. Similarly, in terms of timelessness, sports have been a sort of culturally captivating phenomena since their inception with varying degrees throughout history and within certain societies. They existed in St. Benedict's day and he, unquestionably, found some usefulness in them – enough so even to utilize sporting references as relatable metaphors for the spiritual life. Throughout *The Rule*, there are five explicit sports references across three categories, each of which will now be treated in turn.

Running in The Rule

Chief among the three sports reference categories utilized by St. Benedict is that of running. Kardong (1996) explains, "The concept of running is dear to Benedict, who uses it four times in the Prologue alone" (pg. 12). The first instance of use (in Prologue 13) sees the founder quoting Jesus' own counsel as recorded in the Gospel of John (12:35). It reads, "Run while you have the light of life that death's darkness may not overtake you." It is worth mentioning that St. Benedict adds the underlined portions in the quotation. According to St. John's account, Jesus does not mention running in possession of the light, here signifying physical life or the absence thereof – the darkness – as death. St. Benedict likely adds in these qualifications out of his own "spiritual consistency", ever being one to advise his monks (and all subsequent readers of *The Rule*) to "Keep death daily before your eyes" (RB 4:47). Though often viewed as morbid or melancholy by many, St. Benedict's insistence on remembering the reality of death is not meant to frighten or depress, quite the opposite. Because human persons come to believe in and relate to the incarnate God in Jesus throughout their physical lives, and since physical life is limited by a fixed beginning and end, it is both simple and wise enough for St. Benedict to see life as a race – with a start and a finish-line. While he certainly does not see this race as a competitive sort (at least not in the sense we may be used to where only the first, second, and third, to cross the finish line are medal-clad), he does believe that what occurs in the running of the race itself – that is, what happens between the start and finish-lines – is of eternal significance.



For St. Benedict, all his references to running in *The Rule* take place in a spiritual sort of race either away from evil and sin or towards the greatest of prizes that lies just beyond the finish-line: eternal life in the Presence of God (Kardong, 1996). This view that what one does in this physical life (or while ‘running the race’) has an eternal weight attached to it has long been (and continues to be) a point of contention between Catholic and Protestant believers as it hinges on the appraisal of whether human inheritance of eternal life in God’s company (salvation) is based on belief alone or a combination of works and/or actions born out of that belief. Though we know from which of those perspectives St. Benedict thought and wrote, this matter is significant for us to take up today, especially since Benedictine spirituality is no longer an exclusively Catholic spiritual tradition.

Christians of several denominations apart from Catholicism are drawn to the wisdom of *The Rule* including members of the Anglican, Methodist, and even some Presbyterian traditions (cf. Dunham, 2012). Though somewhat generalized, most Protestant traditions believe faith alone is enough to merit eternal salvation at the ‘end of the race’ of this life. However, St. Benedict’s insistence on the importance of what is done in this life and thus what is done (running) between the start and the finish can and does maintain its spiritual significance for even Protestant Benedictines. Consider it thusly: when one comes belief (to ‘have faith’), this itself is a work, an action in which human persons cooperate with the desire of God. Similarly, keeping, maintaining, and/or persisting in such faith is also a work and/or an action. Both can then be understood as elemental to “running” in this ‘race of life.’

St. Benedict employs the ‘running’ metaphor a second time in the twenty-second line of the Prologue. He writes: “If we wish to dwell in the tent of this Kingdom, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds.” Here once again is evidence that St. Benedict sees the limitedness of physical life in view of a race with an end goal. His continual encouragement to run, though it is metaphor, expresses the importance of making progress in the spiritual life with a sense of urgency. Writing about St. Benedict’s uses of running in *The Rule*, Tvedten (2013) notes, “If you aren’t running, you aren’t making progress” (p. 43). ‘Spiritual stagnation’ was quite the concern for St. Benedict, as well as for his desert-monastic predecessors. Having penned much of *The Rule* informed by his own lived experiences, he undoubtedly knew the risks and temptations of *acedia* – a spiritual growth obstacle wherein one becomes complacent and no longer appears concerned with the performance of certain spiritual practices nor the end goals to which their performance is directed. This spiritual impediment has elsewhere been called, “the noonday demon” by John Cassian, a desert father who influenced St. Benedict. Norris (2008) observes that *acedia* is at once parallel to but separate from depression and that it is more so a sense of being overwhelmed about the future such that one loses focus and motivation on the present. Perhaps most commonly, it is described as a sort of ‘spiritual dryness’ or ‘apathy.’

Pertinent to athletes today, I contend that we may be hard-pressed to find those who have not before experienced a sort of apathy of their own in their respective sporting endeavors. There exists the matter in sport performance known as, “robotic play,” and while we may be unable



to ascertain who first coined such a phrase, we are quite certain of its meaning. To assert that an athlete is or has become a “robotic player” is to observe a lack of human dynamism in their performance. That is, the athlete is no longer playing with “their heart in the game” and is instead simply “going through the motions” as would a robot incapable of sentience. For athletes, robotic play is almost always linked to apathy, complacency, or low motivation. These same sources often give rise to *acedia* in the spiritual life. However, St. Benedict’s encouragement to press on towards the goal holds sway as remedy to combat such vices in sports, the spiritual life, and even those areas wherein the two intersect.

“We must run, and do now what will profit us forever”, writes St. Benedict in the forty-fourth line of the Prologue. This is his third reference of four to running. Not to say that his previous uses of the running metaphor have failed to do so, but this one rather poignantly seems reminiscent of the first Christian employments of athletic metaphors to spiritual life. Perhaps still widely considered the most popular of scripturally based references to sports, St. Paul himself utilizes running as his example sport of choice in 1 Cor. 9:24-26. He writes, “Do you not know that in a race all runners run, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Everyone who competes must train themselves. They do it to get a prize that will not last, but we do it to get the prize that lasts forever.” Both results of these closely aligned athletic metaphors – that which “will profit us forever” from St. Benedict’s and “the prize that lasts forever” from St. Paul – are clear references to everlasting communion in God’s company (salvation) and a promised inheritance to the resurrection. There is no irony in the strength of similarity between these metaphors. St. Paul’s writings preceding, it is likely that the ever-elusive author of *The Rule of the Master* or St. Benedict himself relied on St. Paul’s ‘universal metaphor’ for the spiritual life.

Sports are and always have been a sort of culturally transcendent language of their own. Nearly all societies, cultures, groups of persons regardless of language differences, learning styles, or even beliefs engage in amusement, recreation, play, and/or sports and insofar as a human person has learned to walk, they have likely run as well. To compare advancement, better stated as progress or growth, in the spiritual life to running is to acknowledge inherent similarities in both the physical act as well as the spiritual. Both running (or any form of sports participation for that matter) and spiritual progress necessarily demand: (1) *self-discipline* which includes training and persistence, (2) *resiliency*, and (3) *adaptability* – each of which will be taken up in the fourth and final of St. Benedict’s references to running from his Prologue.

St. Benedict’s uses of running in the Prologue hold a consistent tone, that is, until it comes to the fourth and final instance. The first three references have largely been encouragements against sin, almost “a flight (away) from evil and doom” (Kardong, 1996, p.25), but by line forty-nine, St. Benedict’s tone has changed. Writing, “As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run along the path of God’s commands, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (Pro. 49), it seems that the running of the spiritual life has become less an effort to avoid sin and more so a running toward God’s love. Kardong (1996) further observes that “the running of Pro. 49 is much more joyful” (p. 12) in tone. It is, in



fact, both “running in the holy spirit” (Kardong, 1996, p. 12) and “a race towards God” (Kardong, 1996, p.25). This noticeable change in tone may best be explained by understanding the Prologue as a microcosm of *The Rule* – even the entire endeavor that is monastic life – as a whole. Relying heavily on The Rule of the Master in much of the Prologue, St. Benedict is sure to speak up where he believes his own voice necessary, and one shining example of this, according to Kardong (1996), is in Pro. 49 and the running reference.

While the yet-still-unknown Rule of the Master author encourages the way of life outlined in *The Rule* for spiritual growth as does St. Benedict, there does appear to be a crucial difference between the two in terms of when those who follow such a way of life will receive the rewards or “fruits of their labor.” For whomever the ‘master’ in the Rule of the Master may be, his dictates and encouragements seem chiefly aimed at joy and happiness in the life of the world to come. St. Benedict, however, is present-minded. For St. Benedict, “the monastic life should produce its results here and now” (Kardong, 1996, p.33) as well as in the life to come. It is precisely this key attitude of St. Benedict’s as well as the elemental characteristic of Benedictine spirituality itself – namely, that our way of life is not only directed towards joy in eternal life on the other side of physical death, but also towards cultivating joy in this life via spiritual growth – which so aptly allows us to examine his final running reference from the Prologue in view of three fundamental necessities shared with the physical act of running as well as this spiritual sort of which St. Benedict so frequently speaks.

Recall the three commonalities previously mentioned and which include: *self-discipline* (that considers also both training and persistence), *resiliency*, and *adaptability* – the latter of which considers both the willingness to and actual overcoming of obstacles we may encounter. Because the sort of life, dedicated to communion and encounter with God, which St. Benedict proscribes in *The Rule* must be lived out in an imperfect world by imperfect persons, he knows well that setbacks in progress, errors, and impediments to spiritual progress will occur. Any runner or sportsperson also knows, from experience, that setbacks in progress, errors, and impediments in pursuit of a goal are also bound to occur. Knowing and admitting these pitfalls ahead of time demands that one be self-disciplined, resilient, and adaptable from the outset of the race toward the goal to its finish and everywhere in between. Whether a runner as an actual athlete or a runner as a spiritual seeker, our imperfections will inevitably “get in the way” of our progress. Fortunately, St. Benedict’s vision of progress was a Christocentric one and, as such, his way of life never fails to remember the mercy of God as well as the ‘image of God’ which we all bear. For this very reason St. Benedict himself encourages each of us – athletes and faithful alike – ever forward by reminding us that after each and every struggle, shortcoming, or ‘fall,’ we ought “never lose hope in God’s mercy” (RB 4:74). Remembering, then, that St. Benedict’s use of running in Pro. 49 is less flight from sin as it is a sprint towards communion with God, “fueled by the powerful attraction of God’s love for us” (Kardong, 1996, p. 25), let us take up the three aforementioned similarities between the physical and spiritual act of running.



Self-Discipline

Elemental to conducive progress for both sportspersons and spiritual seekers alike is the concept of self-discipline. This attribute is also explicitly present throughout *The Rule* and is most certainly implicit in St. Benedict's final reference to running in the Prologue as, once more, his tone has shifted in emphasis from "flight away from sin" to "sprint towards communion with God." Within St. Paul's most famed athletic metaphor in his first letter to the Corinthians – from which St. Benedict also draws in the employment of his own reference – he (St. Paul) uses the Greek, ἄσκησις, which when both Latinized and Anglicized gives "asceticism." This word, according to and deepening on biblical translators, means either "training" or "discipline," both of which are self-imposed. American author and linguist, Anu Garg, also notes that the word can and often does mean both "training" as well as "self-discipline" (cf. *A Word a Day*, 13 Jan 2015). Thus, we can safely make the case that self-discipline necessarily includes training and vice versa. This distinction is of such importance because positive progress towards any goal requires human participation and cooperation with Divine enabling.

Auger (2013) notes that "it takes intentional training" (*Spiritual Training*) if we are to become proficient in spiritual practices, the results of which, naturally being spiritual progress. Moreover, he explains, "Like an athlete, spiritual practices are about developing good habits of living rather than bad ones" (Auger, 2013, *Spiritual Training*). Any action will not become a habit within us unless we intentionally repeat, re-engage in, or practice the action on our own. Therein lies the value of self-discipline. Quite naturally as is our human condition, there will arise times wherein we simply may not feel like engaging in our intentional practices and may be tempted to simply shirk them off. In such cases, there arises also the value – elemental of self-discipline – known as persistence. St. Benedict, in his *Rule*, prescribes nothing contrary to the Gospel and goes to great lengths to scripturally ground his wisdom. That said, we can be certain beyond doubt that St. Benedict endorses what the exemplar of all Christianity – Jesus – does Himself. Drawing on two of Jesus' teaching-stories, known as parables, in Luke's Gospel (these of a neighbor-in-need and a widow seeking a judgment; 11:58 and 18:1-8, respectively), we can safely conclude that persistence is of importance to Jesus, and as such, to successful spiritual progress. Apart from being an essential quality of prayer, persistence is necessary in self-discipline insofar as it promotes the continual cultivation of good habits as well.

Resiliency & Adaptability

St. Benedict was anything but naïve. He knew that even though he referred to it as "this little rule that we have written for beginners" (RB 73:8), there would be occasions wherein even the most seasoned among the beginners would falter. He reveals this awareness in this reference to Christ, the Good Shepherd (RB 27:8-9) and his counsel on demonstrating patience when encountering weakness of body or behavior, just to name a few. Within any processes of training or in efforts to make progress, we are apt to face adversities which may either slow our progress, hinder our progress, or in dire situations, even cause a regression of sorts.



The human capacity to “make a comeback” (to use a sports reference) or quickly recover from such adversities characterizes resiliency. Whether in pursuit of spiritual progress or an athletic goal, obstacles will exist. To the degrees that we exercise the persistence present in self-discipline when having encountered these obstacles, in efforts to overcome them, we demonstrate resiliency. This theme of continually “mounting a comeback” after facing obstacles is part of the core of the Benedictine spirituality. Legal scholar and Benedictine author, McQuiston (1996), may have best encapsulated the role of resiliency in the spiritual life when he wrote, “... and when we fail, to begin again each day” (p. 22). There is a substantial comfort in knowing that the God of mercy offers a limitless trove of opportunities to “get it right,” and while “the Rule mentions certain obstacles we can stumble over on our way through life: stubbornness, disobedience, and rebellion” (Tvedten, 2013, p. 44), it also encourages renewed efforts to continue advancing in spiritual progress. St. Benedict even reminds us of this, writing: “... He is a loving father who waits for us to improve” (RB 7:30). The will to “press on” in the sprint toward communion with God and so doing is a display of resiliency, but the improvements necessary to continue on while simultaneously striving to avoid the same obstacles requires yet another active embrace of a similarity between the physical effort of “running” that we know as progress.

Adaptability is concerned with the ways in which we adjust to new conditions or circumstances. Not only does *The Rule* leave plenty of room for adaptability, but it may also be considered an adaptation itself. Knowing as we do that St. Benedict’s *Rule* was inspired, in part, by The Rule of The Master, Tvedten (2013) observes, “[St. Benedict] bent the Master’s Rule all out of shape and allowed for making exceptions to his own rules” (p. 26). St. Benedict adapted the Master’s Rule such that the same fundamental goal could be achieved in light of differing circumstances.

Further, the very guidance St. Benedict gives to abbots is that they ought to “know from where to bring forth things new and old” (RB 64:9). This blending, perhaps better stated as “importing,” of new and/or old ways of doing things expresses the importance of adaptability even in the spiritual life of Benedictines. Somewhat frequently, whether along our “spiritual sprint” towards communing with God or when physically engaged in a sporting or recreational activity, we will encounter obstacles that cannot be moved. In such cases, there is need to adapt; that is to move either around or through whatever the obstacle is that hinders our progress as we continue to “run-on the path of Gods commandments” (Pro. 49). Perhaps our pace is slowed by mountainous elevations and thinner air; maybe we have grown to find a “dryness” to our prayer or meditation – these things would matter little for St. Benedict and thus, for Benedictines. Instead, what would matter – what does and ever shall – is that we adapt to these changed circumstances so that we can keep going; keep making progress. The vitality of such adaptability, implicit along with self-discipline and resiliency as it is in the running references in the Prologue, will resonate also in the other two sorts of sporting references which also exist further into *The Rule*. Moreover, the adaptability of St. Benedict’s *Rule* and this Benedictine spirituality which emanates from it will serve as a crucial supporting link later in this work when we begin to proffer a distinctly Benedictine spirituality of sports.



Wrestling in The Rule

Beyond the Prologue, there exist two other sports references apart from running – the next of which being wrestling. In his very first chapter, when identifying and describing the various sorts of monks, St. Benedict writes of anchorites and hermits, saying, “... they are ready with God’s help to grapple single handedly with the vices of body and mind” (RB 1:5). Whether understood as “wrestle,” “fight,” or “combat” makes little difference as all possible understandings point to the same commonality – namely, a form of hand-to-hand engagement against an opponent. Admittedly, “the high incidence of martial terminology in RB1 may be somewhat off-putting” (Kardong, 1996, p. 44), especially when juxtaposing it with the Benedictine order’s primary motto of “Pax.” However, all the semi- violent language must be understood for what it truly is – metaphor. For monks, spiritual seekers, and laity alike, St. Benedict’s references to wrestling are matters of struggling or contending – ever with the aim of emerging the victor – with sinful temptations.

How applicable and relatable even for athletes, whether wrestlers, boxers, martial artists or not! Consider what necessarily occurs in any of these sporting endeavors. Each of them involves: (a) an opponent, (b) parameters that determines a victor, (c) prior training or preparation, (d) stamina, and (e) a common goal (to subdue). If the common goal in any hand-to-hand engagement is to subdue the opponent, one must prepare to sustain blows amidst the engagement itself. While this physical exchange of strength often is perceived as needlessly brutish, there remains a spiritual counterpart. For St. Benedict, the opponent standing between spiritual progress and the fullness of Communion with God is not merely the temptations of sin, but sin itself and, in a very real way, even the inducer of sin (the evil one).

That those who undertake the following of *The Rule* will sustain “spiritual blows” along their path of progress is a foregone conclusion. The consolation in this is, however, that the training of *The Rule* proves effective in building up “spiritual stamina” such that even should one sustain blows, they might remain capable of proceeding towards the goal of subduing the opponent. Wrestling, then, for all its physical exertion, demands a concerted attention, awareness, and focus. The athlete need be aware of how to evade the assaults of their opponent or how to even utilize such movements to their advantage. Being able to remain attentive and focused amidst the engagement itself strengthens one’s equanimity – a skill particularly important in the spiritual life as it is often in times of adversity that human persons recoil, even if only slightly, from spiritual cultivation (cf. Koenig, 2012).

Climbing in The Rule

Apart from both running and wrestling, St. Benedict also makes explicit reference to climbing. That he chooses the longest chapter of *The Rule* to contain the climbing reference may not have been intentional on his part, but it does give Benedictine scholars reason to muse upon its significance. The seventh chapter of *The Rule* is devoted to an explanation on the spiritual and practical importance of humility as a virtue. St. Benedict explains the



cultivation of this virtue by envisioning a ladder of a dozen steps – the ascent of which is, quite obviously, only possible by climbing. At the outset of this chapter, he writes, “... we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life” (RB 7:5). Though his goal is surely a spiritual one (as is nearly every counsel he offers), St. Benedict uses an active metaphor – that of climbing a ladder.

Kardong (1996) notes use of “pervenire” from Latin, which translates literally as the physical act of climbing as if a mountain. While some debate may exist as to how or whether climbing may rightly be called a ‘sport’ as opposed to a mere recreational activity, the understanding within this treatment is that if the activity expends, from out of the effort of its human animator / participant, any physical exertion or energy, then it is a sport – whether team or individual, competitive or not. Those who ever have attempted or engage in rock or mountain climbing would, undoubtedly, readily attest to the physical exertion required. St. Benedict was quite aware of this reality as he instructs readers of his *Rule* later in this very chapter that they, even along the spiritual climb, will encounter “difficult, unfavorable, or even unjust conditions” (RB 7:35), but that when we do, we ought to preserve “without weakening or seeking escape” (RB 7:36). Tvedten (2013), speaking of the inherent parallels between the spiritual and physical acts of climbing even advises “that we may have to accept a certain amount of suffering” (p.51) in these undertakings. This expectation of discomfort (read: suffering), but still choosing to willingly embrace it in the pursuit of a form of progress or a striving for excellence is necessarily constitutive of sports, and of spiritual endeavors.

Thus far, our examination has focused on both specific and explicit references to various sports utilized in *The Rule*. That these references are employed by St. Benedict is not coincidental, but wholly intentional. Each one of these are, naturally, forms of exercise demanding discipline and dedication of their human participants. Likewise, these specific sports references parallel and point to similarities in the spiritual life. Having now solidified and established a reference-point for the importance of reflection upon intersections of sports and spirituality within Benedictine spirituality, let us turn now to a consideration of some more general and implicit virtues applicable to and emanating from sports (as well as spirituality) which are also present in *The Rule*.

Implicit Sports References in *The Rule*

Consecrated (non-lay) Benedictines generally profess three solemn vows. These include *obedience*, *stability*, and *converio morum* (known otherwise as “fidelity to the monastic way of life”). Though Benedictine laity (oblates) do not profess vows, all the Benedictine world (and its culture as an outgrowth) is everywhere pervaded by a significant respect for these vows, and of course, *The Rule* that details them. Before proceeding in explanation as to how these vows implicitly mirror “the ways of living differently” of athletes, a few words about the vows themselves would be prudent.

Understood usually only as a requirement for Benedictines to assent to the directives of their superiors, the vow of obedience is much deeper than this superficial perception. Obedience,



for Benedictines, is a spiritual and a lived imitation – even an outward expression of devotion – to Christ. Just as Jesus was unhesitatingly obedient to the Will of His Father, obedience calls a Benedictine to “listen intently to the voice of God as manifested in the Sacred Scriptures and teachings of superiors” (Conception Abbey, 2020). This vow, then, is so much more than merely doing as one is told. Instead, it is an invitation to contemplate how God speaks to each individual in their personal deference to both scripture and abbot/abbess. By obedience, we may reasonably infer that the Benedictine must also discipline their own wills, speech, and even thoughts to a significant degree. Insofar as one’s own self-interested will, way of speaking, or thought clashes with that of God’s own, expressed via self-revelation in the scriptures or through the teachings of monastic superiors, the vow of obedience controls. It so challenges the faithful Benedictine to embrace humility in this way also.

Stability “binds one in both body and spirit to the community of profession for life where one serves under both *The Rule* and an abbot/abbess” (Conception Abbey, 2020). This vow, like its counterparts, is usually viewed as restrictive and limiting by outsiders or those unfamiliar with monastic spirituality. To be sure, the popular view as restrictive or limiting is not perception, but reality. However, the negative connotation associated with this restriction and limitedness is no more than skewed perception. In reality, especially for Benedictines, stability is an expression of trust and the abandonment of self-reliance. Moreover, because all monastic vows are lifelong, both trust and the abandonment of self-reliance are evidenced most strongly in the fulfillment of this vow in that the individual Benedictine is expected and so – willingly agrees – to leave behind, for life, the only world or way of living s/he has known to live and die united to a particular community. In so making this decision, s/he also chooses to embrace the others that comprise said community regardless of faults, strengths, or personal annoyances unknown before profession. To assert that the assent to this vow demands both discipline of body (e.g., participation in the Monastic Horarium including manual labor, regulation of sleep, appetite, etc.) as well as personality (e.g., obedience to superiors, forbearance of others’ annoyances, care of guests and others in community, etc.) would be an understatement.

Literally translated from Latin as “conversation on behavior,” the monastic vow, “*conversatio morum*” is often explained in a plethora of ways because of the broadness of its meaning. Though, for all the efforts in attempting to most accurately encompass the authentic intent of this vow, the best is perhaps the most obvious. Because the vow itself is often explained in so many ways to make sense of what is meant by having a “conversation on behavior,” it has simply taken on an explanation that is inclusive of merely all attempts to make sense of it. Referred to also as “fidelity to the monastic way of life,” this vow “encompasses all aspects of the total self-offering of the Benedictine to God” (Conception Abbey, 2020) which necessarily includes renunciation of personal possessions (poverty) and the embrace of celibacy (chastity). Again, this vow is undertaken by those that do, freely and of their own accord, after a required period of thoughtful consideration (discernment). The expectations in the fulfillment of this vow, like both others, also make demands of both bodily and personality discipline on the person who professes it. Each one of these vows, meant for ultimately interior spiritual growth of monastics, also facilitate a collective growth in that all



community members assent to the same vows and, as such, possess an awareness of the goals, victories, and short comings associated with the living-out of these vows. This awareness of a common bond also aids in fostering a cohesive community that is centered around commonalities in interest, behavior, being “set apart,” and experiences. Having now considered these three vows and how they guide Benedictines in living a life fundamentally different from the remainder of society / the world, is it not also possible that athletes, whose involvement in sports often demand of them ways of living differently than others, share more in common with Benedictine life than meets the eye?

Before exploring these areas of common ground, I wish first to consider one vital area between both sportspersons and monastics wherein monastics can teach on the improvement of the status quo. Likely, precious few would argue against the reality that sportspersons, particularly student-sportspersons, tend to be “busy” individuals. The entire lifestyle of a sportsperson is an ever-ongoing effort to balance a myriad of responsibilities including academics or career, family responsibilities and social life, spirituality and/or faith life (hopefully), and physical/sporting performance. While the argument could be (and often is made) that sportspersons are no different than the general population in terms of the rigor of their own schedules, expectations, and responsibilities, studies show that as a result of improper prioritization, a majority of sportspersons disproportionality focus their attention on aspects of their responsibilities and/or expectations which can prove detrimental to holistic growth and wellness (Cosh and Tully, 2014; Holmes, 2005). Faced with so alarming a reality, and in consideration of a similar sort of rigor-in-responsibilities demonstrated by Benedictine life in obedience to the Monastic Horarium, I notice a fundamental difference between our two groups (sportspersons and monastics). Furthermore, I contend that the wisdom of monastic life can both impart and be imported unto the life of sportspersons for their betterment, especially as it pertains to improved prioritization of responsibilities for the sportsperson.

As previously discussed, Benedictine monastic life is one of many elements that is daily divided among collective prayer, personal prayer, work, study, and essentials (e.g.: nourishment, sleep, exercise, etc.). Though this set of responsibilities is, like sportspersons, a busy one, monastics seem to manage it quite well precisely because of their greatest priority. In a sorely underrated papal encyclical known as, *Fulgens Radiatur* (literally, “brilliant light”), promulgated by Pope Pius XII, the Pontiff rightly identifies love for and service to God as both the highest aim and chief priority of all Benedictines. He writes, “it is essential in the Benedictine way of life that while engaged in manual or intellectual pursuits, all should strive continually to lift their hearts to Christ having that as their chief concern...” (para. 19). Even St. Benedict himself mandated that his monks place prayer (what he calls “*labora Dei*”, or “the works of God”) above and ahead of all other responsibilities and expectations (cf. RB 43:3). Thusly, the questions emerge: *What improvements could occur for the overburdened athlete / sportsperson should s/he find the spiritual life deserving of the highest place of priority amidst his / her list of responsibilities? How might all other tasks coalesce around the spiritual center?* This is, in my view, the wisdom which the sporting realm can and should import from Benedictine spirituality.



Both sportspersons and monastics fundamentally live a life that is generally different from much of the general population. Though seemingly paradoxical on its face, there is commonality and unity in these ways of living differently. For both athletes / sportspersons and monastics alike, discipline of the body is an outward expression of the value and importance of one's role and commitment. Moderation of diet, sleep, sex, and forms of physical exertion are common for both the sportsperson and the monastic. Sportspersons wishing to remain at or to engage at peak performance willingly submit to a dietary regimen, believing that properly "fueling" their bodies will give them the necessary strength and energy to workout, build muscle and stamina, and thus "condition" themselves for the necessary requirements of play.

It is no small wonder then that St. Paul uses the term *ascesis* when referring to the spiritual life. *Ascesis* literally translates to "training" in the sense that a sportsperson trains for competition. Like sportspersons, monastics also follow certain dietary regimens. *The Rule* itself proscribes that monks should avoid overindulgence of food (RB 39:7), but that, ever at the abbot's discretion, of course, more food may be both provided and consumed in accord with the strenuousness of the daily manual labor (RB 39:6). While the goal and/or intention of any bodily discipline is paramount in importance, the similarities in both regulation and moderation between both sportspersons and monastics illustrates opportunities wherein training of sorts can be utilized as tangible and outward expressions of spirituality. Imagine how easy it would be for the faithful Christian athlete to intentionally "offer up" his dietary restrictions and/or practices also as spiritual practice. Likewise, as illustrated in RB 39:6 concerning diet and RB 22 concerning sleep, the prescriptions of *The Rule* are firstly in pursuit of spiritual goals, but they also serve practical purposes. Spiritually and practicality, especially for Benedictines, need not be mutually exclusive, they can and often do work best in tandem.

Insofar as both sportspersons and monastics both must exercise bodily disciplines, they also are encouraging and expected to demonstrate discipline in personality as well. Whether bodily or personality disciplines, both sorts can rightly be viewed as forms of sacrifice. In terms of disciplining one's personality, such examples would include moderating our individual wills, our speech, and even our thoughts, and/or especially how our thoughts impact our treatment of those with whom we interact and who, like us, bear "the image and likeness of God." For sportspersons, moderating one's will might look like the basketball "stand-out" who instead of attempting '3-pointers' each time her hands touch the ball – though she may both be skilled enough to do this well and wish to do so – elects to pass / share the ball with her teammates. Such moderation of will demonstrates selflessness over selfishness and respects the human dignity of those who also desire to contribute. Similar elements of respect for human dignity are present in the sportspersons' moderation of speech and thought. Undoubtedly, if honest, many sportspersons would likely admit to either having the desire to "smart-off" or snidely comment towards a coach, teammate, opponent, or spectator in a moment of competitive frustration or aggravation or having done so. This is likely especially true if the action which arouses the desire to flippantly speak, think, or act is



contested as in a poor call by a referee or the “benching” of a player who seldom sees much “playing time.” As nearly all sportspersons likely know, acting on the desire to speak as freely as we may like or in the ways we think can and often does carry consequences. Certainly, it is no great feat or admirable quality to exercise restraint in speech and/or thought simply to avoid consequences, although when one does so as an intentional effort in self-improvement or preference for harmony / maintaining and promoting peace, then this is certainly something of a genuine sacrifice. Speaking on the importance of such sacrifices, a 2018 document issued by the Pontifical Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life’s “Church and Sport Section” entitled, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, notes: “These encounters with sacrifices in sports help athletes form their characters...” and also that “the common experiences of sacrifice in sports also helps believers understand their vocation as children as children of God” (pg. 27).

St. Benedict knew long ago the value present in the sacrifices that come with moderating our personalities, especially for purposes of spiritual growth. Sportspersons clearly find further common ground with Benedictines in the necessary discipline of personality for such expectations are codified in *The Rule*. “In the monastery no one is to follow his own heart’s desire,” writes St. Benedict (RB 3:8). This is an obvious caution to discipline one’s givenness to individual and self-interested will in deference to conforming such will towards alignment with God’s own. St. Benedict also specifically gives guidance on the need to moderate speech and thoughts, writing, “The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately” (RB 3:4). While these common expectations of both bodily and personality disciplines have, at their center, practical and spiritual aims directed towards individual growth, much still can be said of how both sportspersons and Benedictine monastics most fruitfully thrive as parts of and because of the respective communities of which each are comprised.

To this point, much attention has been paid to implicit similarities between sporting life and monastic spiritual life – as described in *The Rule*. However, both elements and their derivatives, namely, (a) discipline of the body including the moderation of diet, sleep, and labor, and (b) discipline of the personality including moderation of will, speech, and thought as highlighted through primarily personal and/or individual ascetic practices of both groups. Individuality, while certainly vital and precious within spirituality, may only carry believers so far. The eternal relationship of the Blessed Trinity itself expresses a continual reminder that all of humanity is made in the image of the One God who is also ever Triune. Reflective of this Triune image, human persons are also wholly relational beings; that is, we crave and need interaction and existence that partakes in the lives of others. Both sporting teams and Benedictine monastics express this relationship-based aspect of our creation most fully and profoundly in that both live out their vocations and identities, yes, as individuals, but as individuals within and thus, part of specific communities.

Treat (2015) argues that “in many ways, sports are a microcosm of life” (p. 392). One such way in which they are is that they are seldom animated or ‘brought to life’ alone. Even sportspersons who engage in non-team (individual) sports (e.g., golf, swimming, running,



wrestling, etc.) encounter and experience others that make up a community of their own (i.e., opponents, fellow athletes of the same sport, coaches, etc.). Certainly, much ink has been spilt that cautions us as to the pitfalls of community life, but within both teams and ‘cloisters,’ there seems – for the most part – to exist a distinct harmony between those that comprise them. Various positive outgrowths of community life include the development of friendships and/or camaraderie, growth in one’s abilities to forbear the sometimes inevitably ‘annoying’ actions of others, and a deepening appreciation of the extent to which we are limited on our own, but are stronger when our efforts are joined to those in pursuit of a common goal. Of this pursuit of the common goal, Stewart (1998), writes of monastics in a way which I believe can and should also be applied to sportspersons. He explains that monastic communities are “not an accidental agglomeration of passers-by, but an intentional community of those who have, in their various ways, responded to an inner urging” (p. 71). *Do sportspersons not also assemble, intentionally, in response to inner urgings?* In this way, I suggest that sporting teams may resemble their own sort of collective seeking to fulfill a vocation. But I digress.

Insofar as Benedictine monastics are encouraged to cultivate an attitude whereby they come “to cherish all as brethren and help them in every way” (Pius XII, §20), so also do sportspersons strive as parts of a team, to minimize pursuits of individuality – choosing instead to focus on the unified body of the team (Aghazadeh, Seyed and Kwasi-Kyei, 2009). This view outside the ‘exclusive self’ and instead towards the ‘inclusive other’ (or the whole community) is constitutive of a ‘built in’ sort of support system wherein members of each community – whether sporting or monastic – are able to share the ‘joy of victory’ as well as the ‘agony of defeat.’ Such supportiveness and sharing (what monastics may call ‘fraternal love;’ sportspersons, ‘team chemistry’) is certainly an ‘intangible bond’ of sorts, but is outwardly and tangibly demonstrated through expressions of hospitality shown to each other (e.g., helping another up after a foul, nudging one awake if drowsy during early prayer, etc.). St. Benedict offers further advice to tangibly express the integral bonds that emanate from community life or to strengthen bonds in weaker communities. Though he provides these wise counsels in *The Rule*, they remain relevant for application outside the monastery and even amidst athletic teams. Some ‘highlights’ of this applicable wisdom include: not nursing grudges (RB 4:23), being genuine when wishing someone well (RB 4:25), not speaking uncharitably about others (RB 4:40), solving disagreements sooner rather than letting them grow more intense (RB 4:73), encouraging each other (RB 22:8), and seeking the good of each other over one’s self (RB 72:7). It is precisely these types of practical expressions on which Benedictine life is based that reveal a remarkably adaptable spirituality, and one certainly worthy of deeper consideration, examination, and research within the valuable academic intersections between sport, spirituality, and religion.

Conclusion

A thorough examination of both explicit and implicit uses of sports metaphors in *The Rule* evidences the ‘universal applicability’ of sports references as popular means of explaining spiritual ideas, goals, and/or pursuits. The use of such in *The Rule* also establishes both a



tradition and text-based 'place' within Benedictine spirituality wherefrom further musings upon sports and spirituality may begin to emanate. Moreover, as both an academic discipline and a deeply personal means of encounter with the Divine, spiritual theology must remain ever-poised towards adaptability. Though *The Rule* is an ancient text, the spiritual wisdom and principles contained therein are 'reinvigorated;' that is, 'given new life' and relevance when interdisciplinarily applied to the popular cultural phenomena of sports.

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