

## The Catholic Athlete #5: Where is Your Strength?

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This series of short reflections addresses athletes who profess the Christian faith, in an attempt to bring together sports and Christianity. I write as a Catholic, hence the title of the series. I trust, however, that athletes from other denominations may also find spiritual profit in these texts.

Elite athletes are characterized by their self-discipline and will power. They know they can master their own bodies. They know they are physically superior, and their will is stronger than most other people's. But where is a Christian's real strength? (Aragón-Vargas, 1991). Not in his or her youth, for "even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall" (Isaiah 40:30), nor in his might and strength, because "no king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength." (Psalms 33:16). A Christian's strength is not in his or her greatness or popularity; the psalmist warns us that "it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes." (Psalms 118:8-9).

Of course, it is true that there is a physiological kind of strength that has to do with physical fitness, and another one with will power, but both are limited by how much of them a person possesses at any particular time. The kind of strength and might which come from God have nothing to do with muscles or resolve or political or economic power. They depend on the fear of God and trusting and hoping in Him:

"No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine."

(Psalms 33-16-19).

As a Christian athlete, you must avoid the temptation of thinking that victory depends only on strictly following your training routine, of thinking that you are in control of your life, of thinking that you, by your own means only, can jump even one centimeter higher (cf. Matthew 6:27). Athletes must certainly give everything they've got to win, but the less they rely on their own strength and the more they abandon themselves in God's hands, the greater their might and the greater their victories:

"Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.



He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.  
He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.  
Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.”  
(Isaiah 40:28-31)

That was one of my favorite Bible passages when I was 21 years old, a P.E. student in college, and it remains one of my favorites over forty years later.

There are other well-known Bible passages where strength and victory are the Lord's. For example, the story of Gideon who defeated a large army with only 300 men (Judges, chapter 7), or young shepherd David defeating the giant soldier Goliath (1 Samuel chapter 17). A favorite verse is “I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13). But not many Christians are familiar with the following passage from the Maccabees:

“However, when they observed the army that was gathered to do battle with them, his soldiers said to Judas, ‘How can we, as few as we are, fight against so great a multitude? Besides, we are faint with hunger, for we have eaten nothing all day.’ But Judas replied, ‘It is easy for many to be defeated by a few. In the sight of Heaven, there is no distinction between deliverance by many and deliverance by a few. Victory in war does not depend upon the size of the fighting force, but rather upon the strength that comes from Heaven. Our enemies have come against us in a display of insolence and lawlessness to destroy us and our wives and our children, and to plunder us. However, we are fighting in defense of our lives and our laws. He himself will crush them before our eyes; therefore, do not be afraid of them.’ When he had finished speaking, he rushed suddenly against Seron and his army, and they were crushed before him.”

(1 Maccabees 3:17-23. NCB).

Considering another perspective, where does the power for the proclamation of God's Word reside? A good Christian has a commitment to evangelize, to communicate the Gospel (the “good news”) to those around him or her. How many times have we heard athletes or singers say that their success is important in order to glorify God and have a greater impact when they preach? (Aragón Vargas 1991). “I had promised that it would be for God's honor and glory, whether we won or lost. Of course the glory was better for God and me since we won, because the victory gave me a better platform from which to speak” (Roger Staubach, in



Hoffman, S.J.: “The Sanctification of Sport”, *Christianity Today*, April 4, 1986). But I ask you again: Where is your strength?

Roberto Cipriani quotes an Italian version of Clement’s letters to the virgins to insist on the right perspective for the Christian athlete:

“Pseudo-Clement (probably Clement I, pope and bishop of Rome from the years 88 to 97 AD) said: ‘Are you then such a strong and trained athlete as to show that you are competing righteously in the stadium, and to enter this gymnasium, with the help of the Holy Spirit, so as to achieve the prize of victory, that is, the blessed fate in the celestial Jerusalem? So if you wish to travel the way and reach the finish line of this vocation, conquer your body; tame the appetites of the flesh, subjugate the world with the Spirit of God, despise the passing, ephemeral, perverse and unstable vanities of this world. Defeat the dragon, defeat the lion, defeat the serpent, defeat Satan and remain in Christ Jesus, made strong by his doctrine and the divine Eucharist.’ (*Letter to the virgins*, 5-6).” (Cipriani 2021, p. 478. Free translation).

Where is your strength? It is in the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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