

I was recently speaking with a father whose son is very focused on playing football. The teen is only in Middle School, but he plays year around on a select team (I didn't even know there were select football teams!). We talked about what high school he wanted to attend. The school's football program matters. I mentioned a little light-heartedly him playing professional football. The father said seriously, "Probably not. Those guys are the top 1% of the top1% of the top1%." But he did say his son hoped to play D1.

Now, I mention this not to poo-poo the dream. Yes, the odds of playing at a Division 1 university are quite low. I've been a priest for 29 years with five different schools. I've known a lot of kids and families who dreamt big, athletically. Most don't go beyond high school. But a handful have. Just this month a young man from a former parish got a football scholarship to a Big 12 team and last week left high school early to enroll for spring semester there.

But today I want to look at the phenomenon of athletics in our society as a model for how to focus on the spiritual life. Pastors routinely bemoan the time and energy given to athletics by our parish families, envious of that priority sports receive compared to faith. But I want to learn from, and imitate, that focus.

There is an entire sports world you must navigate if you want to excel in sports, with different levels of skills and accomplishment. Take the CYO teams. Nothing wrong with CYO at all. But I think CYO is seen as simply for fun. But if you're serious about a sport, you get on a select-travel team – otherwise, making the high school team will be tough. Then comes the high school years. Will you advance enough to interest college scouts? If so – what level of college teams are interested in you? But even that first scholarship need not be the end – transfer is a possibility. There is, throughout, always a track and plan to grow, become more excellent. There are ceilings for almost everyone, but so much energy is spent testing and stretching

for those limits! There is something admirable about that quest (there are also costs).

So, let's go back to the spiritual life. I usually preach on the Gospel. But today I want to look at our second reading from I Corinthians. It's a strange little reading – just the opening lines of the letter. Why is it important? Because it shows what Paul assumes about disciples of Jesus.

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus . . . to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy.”

“Called to be holy.” How many of us think we're called to be holy? I suspect that many Catholics think holiness is for monks, nuns, and priests. Some of them – not that many -- might be compared to the D1 athletes. And the capital “S” saints are like the professional athletes – that rare creature – the top 1% of the top 1%. The rest of the Church membership? We're just hoping to scrape

into heaven. We're playing CYO religion. Again, I'm not knocking CYO. But are we serious about our call to holiness?

The teaching of Jesus is clear. We are all called to be saints – maybe not canonized saints – but to be people who strive for all we were created to be – and achieve marvelous things. Sometimes young athletes are told they can accomplish anything if they try hard enough. That sounds good, and hard work is one of the benefits of sports. But there are limits. DNA has a lot to do with it. Sports are not a democracy where everybody is equal.

But there is a universal call to holiness. We're all called to be holy. God understands where He put us and what He's given us. And no matter what our circumstances, we can excel in being Disciples of Jesus. It really does depend on us. God will always do His part.

Just as in the formation of athletes, so in the formation of saints, there are levels to climb. Holiness has a pattern to follow. There are set stages of growth. God does choose a few persons for

unique roles in salvation history. But the ceiling for all of us is sky high. We will never reach it here on earth. The only limits in our relationship with Jesus are self-imposed by our lack of desire.

This is why I'm always begging you to spend at least 20 minutes a day in solitary prayer with Jesus. That kind of prayer is the only way to true holiness – to playing at least D1 in God's kingdom. There are stages in the spiritual life and prayer growth, just as there are in football. In the beginning it is hard – dry. Twenty minutes will seem long. And growth also depends on our actions for God outside of prayer time – worship, charity, virtue -- as much as what we do during those 20 minutes.

But eventually, if we detach from whatever draws us away from God, He will begin acting in our souls in a new way. It's called infused contemplation. St. Teresa of Avila calls it The Prayer of Quiet. God begins to pour his own life into us during our prayer time. We experience a new peace we can't produce ourselves but only

receive from Him – and we then increasingly act, speak, and think with the mind of God. It may take years – but then so does becoming an excellent athlete – and athletics will pass away. Father Time is undefeated. But whatever spiritual growth we accomplish in this life we take to heaven. We're playing for eternity.

We are called to be holy. Yes, play hard, practice hard, in earthly pursuits. But becoming saints is the only truly important goal we have in life. Let us put our first priority there.