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Come Ye Yourselves Apart and Rest for a While: Integrating Sports into Church Activities of Clergy and Laity

Dapo F. Asaju

PREAMBLE

Christianity and Sports have close relationship in many ways. Christianity inherited sporting terminologies, principles, ethics, and competitive models from Greek and Roman religions. We do not have evidences of active sports in Old Testament Judaism, nor in the New Testament. There are allusions, however, to physical exercises, discipline, healthy lifestyles and wrestling. It is from its Hellenistic backgrounds of Christianity that we have more practical influence of sports. When Christianity emerged, it interacted actively with culture of the Roman empire. When the faith was brought to Europe and eventually to Africa through missionaries, sporting activities were introduced through schools and institutions. They introduced to Nigeria, western sporting activities. Churches organise sports competitions by youths, inter-church and inter-Diocese, etc. During clergy retreats and trainings, sports feature as relaxation. Even in Seminaries where priests are trained, sporting competitions are encouraged. Clergy are encouraged to exercise their bodies regularly by jogging, using mechanical physical exercise devises, etc. Some clergymen who were active sportsmen in their school days, remain lovers and competitors of sports in various clubs and organisations in society. Many belong as fans to teams at home and abroad.

In general terms, Africans are “In all Things Religious”. They take their religion to sports. This is the reason why teams and their supporters often pray before, and during sports matches. Some prophets even predict future matches; who will win or lose—although this should be discouraged. Fans sing Christian songs even when matches are ongoing to spiritually motivate the competitors. Teams often bond together and pray before beginning matches. The National Anthems rendered by teams before the start of matches contain prayer in the name of God. The Nigerian Anthem is a case in point: “O God of Creation, Direct our Noble Cause...”. These show that underlying sports is religious faith and motivations.

Sports include physical exercises, competition of physical skills of different types/games and even health education, such as rest for the body. This is the crux of this study on the wisdom of physical rest for church ministers, whose works demand a lot of physical exertion. It is commonly realised by church ministers that rest is so vital for effective and sustained ministry. A parable is told of a Preacher whom God gave a horse to, in order to enable him evangelise to the whole world. The preacher, out of too much misguided zeal, overused the horse to the point of its exertion and eventual death! When chastised about his foolish acts, he realised that the horse represents the human body. God gave us the healthy body to enable us move about in carrying out his assignments of evangelism. However, if we misuse or overuse the body, it may result in untimely death—in which case the clergy who terminates his life, by not resting enough would not accomplish God’s given task to him; just because he overuses his body (the horse). There have been reported cases of sudden deaths of Clergy due to exhaustion and stress. Man is comprised of Body, Spirit and Soul. All three components should be well nurtured for the total man to be in good health. “I wish above all things that you prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers” (3 John 1:2). Jesus Christ’s admonition to his disciples to come apart and rest is significant for healthy lifestyles to ministers in contemporary churches especially in the Nigerian context.

RELIGIOUS ROOTS AND INFLUENCE ON SPORTS

The earliest form of sporting events began in the Greek world, shrouded in Greek and later Greco-Ro-

man mythologies and religions. The Greek pantheon was housed on Mt Olympus, and in the departmentalised portfolios of the Pantheon, under Zeus (Roman Jupiter), the god in charge of sports was Hermes (Roman Mercury). He was “the Greek god of trade, thieves, sports, travelers, athletes. He was also the messenger of the gods and the guide to the underworld, according to Greek mythology. He was the son of Zeus and Pleiad Maia. He was the second youngest, after Dionysus, of the gods of Olympus, who lived at Mount Olympus” (<https://www.softschools.com>, cf en.m.wikipedia.org). In fact, many of the English language terminologies commonly in use today derive from the gods of Greece and Rome. The Olympic games derive from this pagan origin of sports. Sporting competitions were in honour of the gods. Today, the global Olympic games derive from this pagan culture; hence Trappings of pagan cultural practices are embedded in the rites of the opening ceremonies of Olympic games. These include the Torch, usually lit from the pagan deity in Athens. The Greeks and Romans operated Amphitheatres for various sporting competitions, exhibiting the best of human kinetics, athletics and violent wrestling, armed fights, boxing, etc. The competitiveness of sports sometimes involved absurd games such as throwing Christians to the Lions in amphitheatres while populace watched as they were rent and eaten by lions as part of Roman persecution of Christians. Sports fell into the category of Epicureanism, which is a philosophical lifestyle that regards entertainment and pleasure as ultimate goal of man. This fundamental placement of sports over spiritual devotion pervades secular societies today where sports is rated above religious devotion and general academic or professional duties and contributions. Today, a footballer playing in sports clubs in Europe and America earn many times more wages than any professor in any university. Same applies to music and film stars. Whereas the western people seldom cherish Christian worship nor church attendance, the stadia are filled to capacity. Whereas Christians who attend church are sober in nature, the masses who watch football games are ecstatic, charismatic and committed to their games, clubs and personalities who are regarded as stars. This suggests the fear that sports had become a religion and a god for modern society. This infects all societies globally. It is not a surprise that due to exposure of global sports by modern Information Technology, people in Nigerian villages know the foreign clubs, watch their matches and become fans of such clubs, for example, Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal, Liverpool, etc.

Sports has competed with Christianity in the hearts of many people to a worrisome extent. If a popular football match holds on a day and at times which conflict with church services, many young people would prefer to stay at home and watch the games rather than forfeit it and go to church. A story is told of a young boy of about fifteen years of age, to whom a Christian evangelist attempted to preach Jesus Christ as savior. The young man in his dialogue with the preacher asked, ‘Who is Jesus Christ? Is he a star?’ The evangelist answered, ‘Yes, He is a star of the whole world’. Then the young boy retorted ‘Which football team does Jesus play for?’ Apparently, to the young people of the present generation, only sports produce stars of note. He, apparently, had been so affected by the negative effects of secularism in western societies that he probably had never heard anything about Jesus Christ nor Christianity. Sports is another god to contemporary generation! It is feared in evangelical circles that Satanism underlies some devotions and overemphasis of sports as domineering influence on human psychology. This is on account of the open identification of some sports bodies identifying with terms that are clearly not godly. For example, the logo of Manchester United contains an image of Lucifer; while the alias of the club is ‘Red Devils’. That of Chelsea is a dragon and that of Arsenal is Gun (instrument of violence and death)! But there are clubs in European league who have Christian cross as part of their symbols; these include FC Barcelona, Real Oviedo, etc.

JESUS’ TEACHING ON PHYSICAL REST FOR CLERGY

A clergyman is an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation of sinners. The term was not in use at the time of Jesus Christ’s ministry in Ancient Israel. He addressed his disciples during His itinerant ministry. Upon his baptism and commissioning after his temptation on the Mount, Jesus called twelve disciples who grew to become His Apostles. But numerous disciples (followers) accompanied His teaching and healing ministries. Jesus was very busy in his daily schedules. So busy and eager to accomplish His messianic assignment was He that He had no permanent residence but travelled most times, to far flanged places, crossing cultural barriers such as among the Samaritans, during His short three years of active ministry. He declared that “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Luke 9: 58-62). During one of his itinerant ministries, multitudes (literally thousands of people- in this instance, about five thousand people whom He later fed miraculously with bread and fish) followed Him on account of His teachings and especially diverse miracles. Jesus “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed of the devil...” (Acts of the

Apostles 10:38). There was no wonder then, that meeting the spiritual and physical needs of such large number of people assisted by His Twelve disciples was exerting indeed. Although He was both God and Man (Son of God and Son of Man), Jesus knew the wisdom of balancing His physical activities for reasons of maintaining good health. He often withdrew Himself even from his disciples in order to take time to rest. "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). "It was very early in the morning and still dark. Jesus got up and left the house. He went to a place where He could be alone. There He prayed. Simon and his friends went to look for Jesus. When they found Him, they called out, 'Everyone is looking for you!' (Mark 1: 35-39). In the text of our main study, Jesus instructed His disciples to withdraw from their busy schedules to rest.

And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while", For there were many coming and going and they (Jesus and His disciples) did not even have time to eat. So, they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves (Mark 6: 31-44).

This passage shows the following facts: Jesus knew the limits of human exertion; He cared not only for His own health but for that of His disciples (who will carry on the missions work after He must have left them; Jesus instruction to withdraw was for the deliberate purpose of resting for a while before resuming the busy work schedules; the Team was so busy that they hadn't time to eat. This brings in the factor of food and diet as part of essential health. The rest recommended by Jesus was to a secluded, deserted, serene place, suitable for meditation and physical rest, close to nature and devoid of the crowd. God advised Joshua to meditate on the words of God as a step to achieving good success in his ministry (Joshua 1:8). One major lesson to be drawn from this story is the reality that clergy will be demanded to serve all the time by needy congregants and could be tempted to over use their bodies to the extent of braking down or getting sick or even die; whereas those who overuse them would continue with their own lives in spite of the suffering or loss of the clergy. Church ministers are often likened to an orange which people suck and squeeze until the juices is fully extracted, after which the orange is discarded. Ministers can be used and discarded in like manner if they are not wise enough to 'come apart to rest for a while'.

Physical health requires constant exercises. This is good for keeping fit and for avoiding diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. These diseases are common among some clergymen. Rev. Uma Ukpai in one of his sermons told stories of some ministers whom he advised to take time to rest from their busy schedules but who ignored his warning but died of exhaustion and cardiac arrest shortly after they were warned. He likened the work of a hardworking Pastor to be seven times more exerting than the work of a government worker who works eight hours each working day. He advised ministers to deliberately rest. In the Anglican Church of Nigeria, there have been cases of clergy slumping on pulpit, in the Chancel or at home due to exhaustion and lack of exercise. Many are obese and pot-bellied because they do not engage in regular physical exercises and many develop high blood pressure and diabetes as well as prostate cancer without their early knowledge. It has therefore become a common policy in various dioceses as well as during the annual Synods and Bishops Meetings, that medical facilities are provided for Bishops, clergymen and their wives to undergo free medical tests. Part of the medical orientation is to bring in experts to teach the ministers on health and sports-related exercises and their advantages.

SPORTS SYMBOLISMS AS CONVEYORS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

There are some references and inferences about sports in the Bible. The wrestling which Jacob engaged in with a man at Bethel (Genesis 32:24) is often cited as sports; yes, it was a wrestling exercise engaged in as a fight, not for sporting competition with expectation to determine and reward the winner. It was not premeditated and should not be a perfect example of sporting competition. Apostle Paul, while encouraging Christians to be focused and determined in the race of Christian spirituality, used sporting imageries as follows:

"Thus, I do not run (Athletics) aimlessly (out of track), I do not fight as if I am shadowboxing (Boxing). No, I drive my body (exercise) and train (training) for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (disqualification of Athletes who break the rules of a race). Paul also taught that "An Athlete is not crowned unless he competes (competition) according to the rules (sports rules) (2 Timothy 2:5). "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable." (1 Corinthians 9:25). Furthermore, Paul admonishes Christians, "Do you not know that in a race, all runners run, but only one receives the prize? So, run that you may obtain it" (I Corinthians 9: 24). Concerning persistence in Christian living, the author of Book of Hebrews advised as follows:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (Stadia spectators), let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Christian writers often use sports imageries and terminologies to convey different types of spiritual lessons and principles. W. Olabode Aiyepeku’s book on spiritual exercises has on its cover page, illustration of an Athlete running a race. The title itself- *Becoming Fitter, Healthier, Stronger: Spiritual Exercises for Godliness* (Aiyepeku, et.al., 2016) conveys the message that Christians are involved in a race of life, destiny and battle against forces of Satan, failure, sin, etc. The Christian must keep fit (physical exercise), healthy and strong. Life is a race, we all are competitors running on our individual tracks in the world, our destination is the finishing line (at death). There will be reward for each competitor (heaven or hell). Not all competitors finish the race, hence, not all Christians will finish the race of salvation. This is the truth of the Christian message which clergymen are called and commissioned to carry out such as assisting people, run the race on the right track and heading in the right direction in order to get to the right destination. The manual of the race is the Holy Bible, the Baton is the Gospel which we pass from one generation to another; There will be prizes for successful Christians who run the race of faith against all odds of physical and spiritual challenges. Paul boasted “I have fought a good fight (I have run a good race), I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Now, there is laid for me, a crown of righteousness...” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

SPORTS AS SYMBOL FOR HOMILIES

Sports are very good symbols for imparting knowledge and admonitions in Church. Because of people’s love for and understanding of sports, they can understand better, illustrations of spiritual truths, if couched in sports language. A typical example which I have often used especially when people celebrate sixtieth birthday is as follows:

- Life is a match between two teams, God versus Satan, good versus evil, and sin versus righteousness.
- Both teams play on the same pitch, which is this world, in our societies or communities. There must be struggle between good and bad people.
- Every competition will have a reward, good or bad, just like prizes given to winners of sporting events.
- The referee in the match of life is God. He blows whistle to start and end our lives and activities.
- Duration of a football match or any sporting event is fixed. That of man’s lifespan is also fixed by God at 120 years.
- Game of life continues till half-time, which is sixty years.
- At half-time, both sides of a game must withdraw to the dressing room.
- Time in the dressing room is for both rest and further reviews of match/life by the Coach and strategising for the next half of the match.
- When game resumes after half-time, teams must change sides. The man now becomes an elder living out the remaining part of his life before the referee ends the game, at man’s death.
- Games are engaged in order to score goals. Man must score goals, i.e., be achieving his mission on earth and ending well in the game of life.

In conclusion, we can see that sports have benefits to Christianity as a religion in the propagation of the faith, in enhancing physical fitness, encouraging spirit of sportsmanship, forging unity and patriotism in country and communities and making clergy and the people at large to be happy, fit and healthy. The symbiotic relationship between sports and Christianity should be enhanced amongst the people of Africa. The Clergy will live better, stronger and healthier, and will find their gospel messages better understood if they adopt sports approach to ministry.