

Should Churches Take Moral Stand Against Football?

The Jumbotron at Soldier Field, visible from our condo window, offers a colorful set of images on Sundays when the Chicago Bears are at home.

It displays more liturgical colors than can the devotees of other religions still trying to attract worshippers on what Christians used to call “the Lord’s Day.”

In this scandal-filled football season, with stories of dementia and deaths increasingly common, it should be easy to raise questions about the morality of the national sport. It isn’t.

For one thing, to be prophetic about a cultural phenomenon, one must be able to stand apart from and above it.

That is hard to do, given football’s ubiquity, successful calls for devotion and, let’s face it, the excitement of the game as it is viewed on television between commercials or, in person, for the Christian Sabbath-breakers among us.

(To be fair; possibly 0.0004 percent or 0.0005 percent of the viewers in the stadium have been to matins services, so...).

The Sightings “to-do” file for relevant news coverage of the candidate-sighting, “football,” bulges with moral, moralistic, ethical and theological questionings. In this “to-do” file, I noticed that I wrote about football three years ago (Sept. 3, 2012).

It is time to revisit and update an ever more urgent topic. Headlines like these leap out: [“The Moral Case Against Football,”](#) [“Why You Should Stop Watching Football”](#) and [“Our Shaken Faith in Football.”](#)

Some express or report on ambivalence. Thus, Diane Roberts revisits the long-standing symbiosis between Christian faith and football, reputedly fostered most ardently by evangelicals.

Give them credit; their leaders often do try to bring perspective, moderation and a search for positive features in this national pastime. Her headline in the Los

Angeles Times headed an op-ed: "[What a team-football and Jesus.](#)"

Religiously based media are growing more expressive in their criticisms, as they take on many dimensions of football culture: violence, felonies and so on.

We were drawn to take up this topic - it has often come our way, but we punted - by an article, "[Ethical Fumbles](#)" in U.S. Catholic. Subtitle: "NFL football has become better known for scandal than spectacle."

Is it time for Catholic fans to rethink their love of the game? In a poll of U.S. Catholic readers - who are not representative of Catholicism at large - 70 percent "agree" that "Supporting the NFL is an ethical conflict of interest for Catholics."

Owen Strachan, the author of "[Our Shaken Faith in Football](#)," asked questions about head injuries, dementia, brain damage and death as downsides on the ethical balance sheet.

This was in Christianity Today, which, years ago, published a pro-NFL article that some of today's editors evidently regret.

They and other ethics-issue writers concentrate on what the collisions of head-to-head play do to the ever-fragile instrument called the brain.

We read how Mike Ditka, our local Bears hero down the block - Ditka's restaurant is also visible from our place - joins the many sports veterans who would not permit their sons to play football, even in childhood (two more young players died this week alone).

What can be personally disturbing in the debates over the ethics of supporting pro football as it is now promoted, is how upsetting it is for us, the great company of ambivalent folk, to think through and resolve ethical questions.

We can turn relativist and even things up by pointing out what is true: There are more violent sports with more scandalous side effects than pro football. But the issue nags.

Suppose one becomes nervous about the ethics of it all and even comes to agree that it is wrong to support it: Does one stop watching? It is easier for us double-minded folk to pray with some of the great saints.

As I did three years ago, I sign off with a slightly adapted quote from St. Augustine: “Oh, Lord, I want to repent and reform - but not yet!” It’s game time!

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