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# Sport: the real battle is within

A student athlete reflects on Pope Leo XIV's message on sport as a path to holiness and how one's Christian identity transforms sport into a language of love.

03/21/2026

In his February 6, 2026 letter on sport and the Christian life, Pope Leo XIV reflects on sport as a path toward “life in abundance”—a school of virtue, fraternity, and authentic human flourishing. Sport, he

explains, is not merely competition or spectacle; it is a deeply human space where discipline, sacrifice, teamwork, and perseverance shape the person from within.

I was privileged to receive a scholarship to play volleyball at Ateneo de Manila University, having been formed in its Jesuit tradition since childhood. The scholarship was more than financial assistance; it instilled in me a profound sense of responsibility. It meant carrying not only my own name, but also those of my family and my university. It became a concrete space where the formation I had received could be lived out. It called me to give back—to mentor younger teammates, to pass on what I had learned since grade school, and to care for those who would come after me.

The deeper I entered into competitive sport, the more I

discovered that the fiercest opponent was rarely across the net—it was within.

## **The Mountain Behind the Hills**

Physical training is demanding—conditioning, drills, repetition. It exhausts the body and stretches endurance. These are visible, measurable challenges, hills that can be climbed with effort and time.

Public criticism, however, is a different mountain altogether.

Social media amplifies praise, magnifies faults, and perpetuates mistakes. Casual comments can bruise; careless ones can scar the student-athlete.

External criticism can begin to echo within and to shape how one sees herself. One becomes hyperaware of performance, of image, of perception; not just for the sake of

personal integrity, but to protect the names that one carries.

There were many moments when I wanted to quit. I would dare say that most student-athletes encounter such moments. Sport pushes you to your limits in ways that no pep talk can lighten. It exposes your weaknesses, demands consistency, and tests whether your love for the game can withstand disappointment.

The loneliest moment is not after a loss. It is when you turn against yourself.

I used to believe that being hard on myself would make me better. If I criticized every mistake, downplayed every achievement, and pushed relentlessly, I would improve. Slowly, however, that “self-correction” turned into self-rejection—and that was unsafe.

When I equated my worth with statistics, applause, and public approval, I reduced myself to outcomes.

## **Divine filiation**

Growing up, I had always known God as Father, friend, and teammate. Conversational prayer was natural to me. He was my refuge, my safe space, my first confidant.

The teaching of St. Josemaría Escrivá on divine filiation solidified this in me. Divine filiation is not a metaphor; it is identity. To be a child of God means that worth precedes performance. Before stepping onto the court—before fulfilling a role, before executing a play—I am already loved. My value does not fluctuate with wins and losses, or with praise and criticism.

On the court, divine filiation changes everything. I play not to earn love,

but from love. Responsibility is no longer a burden of fear, but a gift of trust. When I serve, defend, lead, and encourage, I do so as a daughter representing her Father—not as a performer seeking public approval. The scoreboard measures points; it does not measure identity.

That realization began to free me. I was no longer fighting for my worth. I was playing from it.

## **Small Wins and Real Growth**

For years, I normalized habits that many athletes quietly accepted: skipping breakfast out of fear of gaining weight, sacrificing sleep to work on deliverables, and living in a constant state of urgency. I called it discipline. At times, it was anxiety disguising itself as excellence.

Little by little, I began to see that true discipline is not frantic control.

Growth often came through small victories: waking up without panic, eating breakfast as an act of stewardship, choosing rest in order to train well, and showing up consistently even when motivation was low. These may seem insignificant, but in a life governed by pressure, they became moments of interior alignment.

Here, the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas sheds light on the athlete's life. He defines virtue as a stable habit ordered toward the good. Proper self-love is not selfishness; it is willing one's true good according to right reason. Discipline is not harshness; it is constancy in pursuing what is good.

The athlete's body is not an enemy to conquer, but a gift to care for—carefully, responsibly, and gratefully.

**Fraternity Forged in Effort**

In a team, you do not choose your companions. Personalities can clash, competition exists even within the roster, and misunderstandings arise. Yet over time, you realize that the only people who truly understand your burdens are those teammates who share them.

The Holy Father speaks of sport as a school of fraternity. This fraternity is not sentimental; it is forged in shared fatigue, shared losses, and shared hope. It is learned when you encourage a teammate while quietly fighting your own battles. It grows when responsibility is embraced not for personal glory, but for the common good.

To fulfill my role was not merely to execute a strategy, but to serve the team. Sport became a language of love—concrete, demanding, and transformative.

**Life in Abundance**

There were times I believed that making God proud meant winning. Now I see more clearly: what pleases Him is trust—trust that He delights in sincere effort, walks with me in growth, and rejoices each time I refuse to turn against myself.

My greatest opponent was never across the net. It was the version of myself that forgot she was loved.

Sport has taught me discipline, resilience, and responsibility. Faith has taught me something deeper: identity, freedom, and trust. When identity is rooted in divine filiation, discipline becomes a joy rather than a burden. Criticism no longer defines. Comparison loses its sting.

Volleyball—training sessions, film reviews, recovery days, leadership responsibilities—can all become prayer when lived with intention. Each serve, each dive, each hidden

effort, offered for God's glory,  
becomes a way of sanctifying sport.

Yvana Avik Sulit

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