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Title: Sport as Mission: Catholic Women's Leadership and the Future of Ecclesial Ministry

Abstract

Sport is one of the most visible arenas in contemporary culture where women's bodies, leadership, and identity are constantly contested. Female athletes are judged by performance, appearance, or cultural expectation, while the deeper dimensions of human dignity, vocation, and spiritual formation are overlooked. This narrow view is reflected both in wider society and, at times, within the Church itself. Sport is rarely approached as a space for pastoral ministry, despite its immense social influence and its capacity to shape lives and communities. As a result, common models of leadership—whether secular or ecclesial—tend to be performance-driven or reductive, failing to integrate sacramentality, self-gift (the capacity to love and choose the good), and the celebration of athletic excellence as a path to holiness. This seminar addresses this gap by centring Catholic women's voices and reinterpreting leadership through the theological anthropology of St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* (TOB).

The central argument of this seminar is that Catholic women in sport leadership fulfil a distinct need in ministry by modelling a holistic vision of leadership that unites identity, faith, and vocation. St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* provides the foundation for this claim, particularly his teaching that the body is a "sacrament of the person," a visible sign of dignity and a call to authentic self-gift. By foregrounding these aspects of *TOB*, the seminar demonstrates how sport can be reimagined as a site of discipleship and mission, where athletic participation and leadership are expressions of embodied faith. Within this framework, holistic feminine leadership in sport becomes a witness that both affirms human dignity and challenges the fragmentation of body and spirit present in contemporary culture.

Holistic feminine leadership, grounded in *TOB*, offers a powerful counter-witness to the performance-driven culture of contemporary athletics and to ecclesial models that often marginalise women's gifts. Catholic women leaders in sport demonstrate that leadership can be vocational—an embodied calling that affirms the integration of body and soul, fosters communion, and cultivates a culture of encounter. Their witness reveals how sport itself can function as pastoral ministry, showing that ministry need not be confined to the parish or sanctuary, but can take place in everyday cultural spaces. In this way, Catholic women's leadership reframes sport as a field of evangelisation, formation, and sanctification.

Although sport has global prominence, Catholic theological reflection on it remains limited. The Vatican's *Magisterium on Sport* was only established in 2018, and Catholic scholarship has given little sustained attention to women's leadership in sport. Wider Christian academia, particularly evangelical scholarship, has begun to examine how sport provides opportunities to rethink gender roles and theological norms, but Catholic engagement lags. This seminar places *TOB* in dialogue with these wider traditions while drawing on qualitative research with Catholic women leaders in sport worldwide.

Case studies reveal how Catholic female athletes and coaches integrate *TOB's* principles of dignity, complementarity, and self-gift into coaching practice and team culture. Their leadership challenges both secular models that reduce athletes to performance and ecclesial models that risk neglecting women's contributions. By reframing athletic and coaching roles as vocational callings, they witness to a form of leadership that is sacramental, missionary, and embodied.

In conclusion, this seminar argues that Catholic women in sport leadership offer the Church a renewed vision of ecclesial leadership. Their witness demonstrates how leadership rooted in *TOB* can integrate body and soul, affirm human dignity, and create spaces of encounter and formation. By recognising sport as a site of pastoral ministry, the Church is invited to broaden its imagination of leadership, learning from the embodied witness of women who unite faith, athletic excellence, and authentic femininity in service of the Gospel.