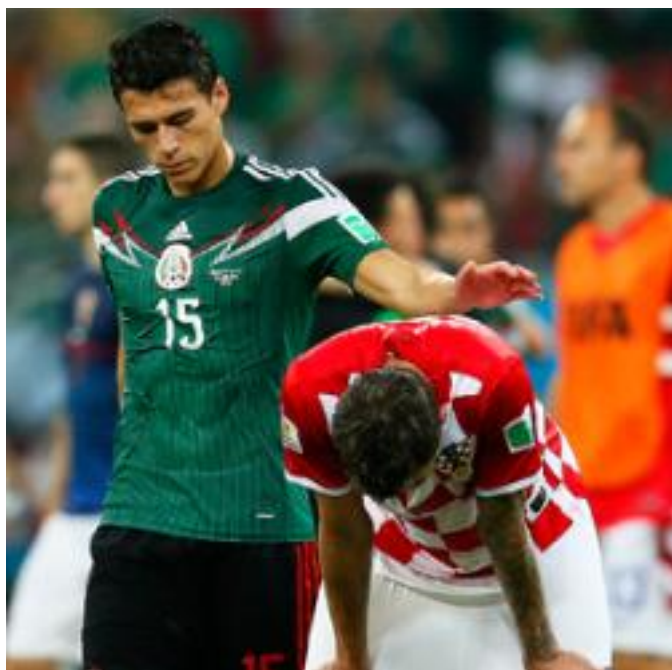


World Cup Theology



The World Cup is now well under way. We've had some brilliant games and some wonderful goals. It is shaping up to be a great tournament. But is there a way for us to use the World Cup in our evangelism? The short answer is yes. But we should be very careful. No one likes a spoilsport.

Despite football's popularity, many people can't work out what the fuss is about. The World Cup seems like a colossal waste of time. There's no crop being harvested, no product being made. It is unnecessary, useless, simply pointless, in fact.

Of course, football does have a point. To state the obvious, it has a goal. But the goal makes no sense outside the game. The ball doesn't fly into the net because it lowers cholesterol, nor because it helps build the economy. If things worked like that, we'd simply make them bigger, score more goals, gaining more benefits. But football can't be rationalised like that. It is, instead, radically self-contained.

To put this in technical terms, football is autotelic. Its goal is intrinsic. That's why the fans don't like it when it's made to serve an outside interest. We don't want it harnessed to a political agenda, nor polluted by finance, a profit margin. Football is not an instrument. That's why the Church should be careful. Sport should never be used, no matter how high the motive. Outside interests spoil the sport.

So if it's wrong to use sport, what can we do? Well, we can start by helping its fans understand why they love it, though that will involve some theology. The Church teaches that the one true God created the world. This means there wasn't any rival god around, twisting his arm, and neither, for that matter, was there an inner compulsion forcing his hand. God was neither lonely nor bored, with no deficiency in him, no deficit to address. Instead, the one God is perfectly sufficient, the eternal fullness of Father, Son and Spirit. God's decision to create was therefore completely unnecessary. But it was not capricious, no random act. He instead made us for a purpose, and that purpose is love. Love is the meaning of the unnecessary creature.

Somewhat surprisingly, this simple insight helps explain why football is so popular. Football – like all other sports – is an unnecessary but meaningful activity. This activity simply echoes our deepest identity as unnecessary but meaningful creatures. So when we play, we are chiming with our own being. Sport is a celebration of who we are.

Of course, there's much more that needs to be said about this. But even as it stands, it will help us explain the popularity of sport. And who knows? If people discover that the Church can explain the World Cup, maybe they will ask us to make sense of some other things too: joys, sorrows, hopes and fears, their life, death and beyond. Now that would be the time for evangelism.

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