SAINT BASIL THE GREAT: ATHLETIC AND AGONISTIC REFERENCES IN HIS TEACHING AND HIS POSITION ON PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

One of the most complex subjects in the Christian religion is the relationship between Christianity and the human body and physical exercise. According to theological anthropology, humans consist of body and soul, which have different attributes, but are indivisible. The position of the church is clear on the need to balance between the two.¹ Nevertheless, the position of the church on the human body and exercise is not clear. As far as the early Christian period is concerned, there is an impression that the church was against human avocation with their bodies and against physical exercise and sports. The church was also considered by many to be responsible for cancelling the ancient Olympic Games. This is based on the fact that the newly established Christian religion was encouraging believers to become ascetics and to defy the human body. At the same time, physical exercise was considered to be slightly useful for the spiritual life of the believers, being identified with the pagan manifestations of the past.²

The fathers of the church believed that physical exercise was not harmful and they did not disclaim physical activity without consideration. It was also believed that exercise could do service to human salvation.³ Moreover, physical activity could provide the fathers with various stimuli for teaching and mental cultivation.⁴ The impression that we have on the position of the Christian church concerning this specific issue is hazy and there is an absence of sources on the evolution and its configuration. Seeking answers, the present research examines Saint Basil's relevant teachings. The choice of the specific hierarchy was based on his importance, as he constitutes one
of the major personalities of Christianity, and who played a decisive role in the configuration of Christian theology as it is today. Therefore, he is fairly called "Basil the Great" (Basilius Magnus).5

**Saint Basil the Great**

Saint Basil is honored as one of the major fathers of Christianity and is one of the three hierarchs, protectors of Education. He is seen as a pundit in ecclesiastic and theological issues, especially those related to the upbringing of the youth. Saint Basil is one of the major pastoral, ascetic and social figures of the church. Unfortunately, the Orthodox religion rarely refers to its pedagogic hypostasis and activity6. He had a deep knowledge of the wealth of ancient Greek literature and Christian theology. At a young age he visited thriving centers of mental cultivation, like Constantinople and Athens, and dedicated himself to studying. In Athens, Saint Basil learned rhetoric, philosophy and literature and he also gained a knowledge of medicine. He maintained friendly relations with Gregory the Theologian and Julianus, and he was a student of a famous pagan professor of rhetoric, Libanius.7 In 356 AD, and after the end of his studies, he returned to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where he was baptised as a Christian and began studying Christian books. In order to make ends meet, he worked as a rhetoric teacher. In 370 AD, he was ordained bishop of Caesarea and worked for the unity of the Christian church and the rally of all the bishops, in the East and West, against heretics.

The activity of Saint Basil the Great was expanded in the improvement of worship arrangement, the organisation of the ascetic life, and the systematization of social welfare. He wrote 24 speeches with dogmatic content, non encomiastic towards martyrs, and included a pedagogic texture: *Speech devoted to youngsters on how they can benefit from the Greek literature* (Πρὸς τοὺς νέους Ὅπως ἀρχὴν τῶν παροιμιῶν). As well as the speech on the beginning of proverbs – *Homilia in principium proverbiorum* (Εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν τῶν παροιμιῶν).

His first speech holds special interest for us, as it is possibly voiced in 363 or 364, right after an ordinance was issued by Julianus, which forbade Christian teachers teaching classic literature, rhetoric and philosophy.8 This speech is characterised by many as a disquisition and touches on the important issue of the classic education's value. The benefits of studying the major literature works and Greek philosophy for youth is pointed out.

Saint Basil considers Greek literature and classical studies as an important preparative stage for youth to comprehend the Christian scripts.9 He recommends young people that whatever derives from classical studies leads to moral edification and must be collected with caution, as bees collect whatever is use-
ful for the production of honey. Therefore, Basil considers Greek studies not only to be non-harmful, but essential to the education, as it prepares the souls of young people for spiritual sapience. Moreover, the elements of Greek studies could be seen as reflectors of the truth, but they also have their value. The two types of studies are paralleled by the hierarchy with leaves and fruits. The primary virtue in the plant is to produce nutritious and sweet fruits, but the leaves on the branches also provide special ornamentation.

Judging from the above mentioned, Saint Basil the Great did not disclaim the ancient Greek civilisation. He lived between 330-378 AD, during the end of the imperial period and the beginning of the Byzantine, an era during which major athletic events continued to be held and gymnasiums still hosted many youngsters.

Living in Athens for a long time, he was most likely given the opportunity to encounter the athleticism of the time, even if it was during a decadent phase. An indication of the knowledge he had on Greek athletics is also to be seen in the reverence that the great Olympic winners of antiquity, such as Polydamas and Milon Crotonian, received, whom he was using as examples of diligence and dedication in the achievement of a goal and persistence. The use of athletic references in the teaching of Saint Basil, mainly in the form of symbolism and metaphors, is proof of the positive inclination he had of athletic activities and the games of that era.

**Saint Basil the Great and the Body**

Christianity, as is well known, does not underestimate and neglect the human body, but it does not overestimate it either. The body has its own value within the psychophysical being of the human. Subsequently, Christianity does not aim to scorning the human body, but rather its purification, so that the body can walk alongside the soul towards holiness. In addition, Christian teaching urges believers not to nullify their body, but their weaknesses. Saint Basil believed that no one should be a slave to the body, but provide to the soul the necessary by liberating it through the study of philosophy. He recommends, in particular, that one shouldn't nurse the body as much as it is advantageous for the soul: μηδέ περιέπειν το σῶμα ἢ ὡς ἀμείων ἡ ψυχή. He believes that it is a shame, especially for men, to embellish and cherish their body: Οὐχ ἦτον γάρ ἄνδρι... καλλωπιστὸν καὶ φιλοσώματον εἶναι.

The great hierarch urges not to bury oneself in the sludge of physical pleasures, nor to discard the body completely, or nurse it as much as Plato proposed, in order to use it as assistance in a life well considered. In another part of the same speech, Saint Basil informs us that the Athenian philosopher resided in a well known gymnasium of Athens where many young people trained. His aim was to reduce the priority given to athletic activities and to cut down the ex-
tended welfare of the body, as grapevines need to be trimmed from the sap-
less.19

It appears as if Saint Basil was against exaggerations and the intense avoca-
tion with athletics. He argued that by citing a famous Hippocratic saying: ἐγὼ
δὲ σφαλερὰν εἶναι τὴν ἐπ’ ἄκρον εὐεξίαν ἰατρῶν ἥκουσα.20 Obviously, his posi-
tion is not against athletic activity, but he does fight against exaggeration.

On the contrary, he urges youngsters indirectly to exercise, since he raises his con-
cern for the closure of Caesarean gymnasia: γυμνάσια κεκλεισμένα καὶ
νύκτας ἀλαμπῆς οὐκ ἐὰν ἡμᾶς λογίζομεν ἡ περὶ τοῦ ζην ἡγονία.21 This position
is slightly different to the Apostle Paul, who admitted that physical exercise is
beneficial for the man. He underlined that this benefit has certain limits: ή γάρ
σωματική γυμνασία πρὸς ἄλθρον ἐστὶ ωφέλιμος.22

References of Athletic Terminology

Saint Basil, in his overall teaching work, characterised the proper Christian
way of life in a metaphoric way as an exercise. This happened so that the diffi-
culty in maintaining a pious way of life and corporal and spiritual tolerance that
is needed by believers for this purpose could be pointed out. Indicative of this
belief is the characterisation of the ideal of godliness as an opportunity for
training and more exercise: ύπόθεσιν ἀθλήσεως καὶ πόνων περισσοτέρων.23

Referring to the peace of the soul after leading a virtuous struggle, Saint Basil
the Great used the following symbolism for those who "exercised" in this life in
a rightful way, an internal peace has been prepared: τοῖς νομίμως τὸν ἐνταῦθα
διαθήλησι βίον.24 Those who have sweated in the playing field for the sake of
virtue will win eternity.25 Moreover, the great hierarch continued by giving
guidance in relation to the "training" of Christians. He urged Christians not to
abandon the effort, but to insist on finishing until God sees their patience and
enlightens them with the grace of the Holy Spirit.26 An exercise's category that
they are being called to carry out is the exercise of virtue. The faithful, as a
fighter of godliness, have to endure the difficulties of life without sorrow.27

Saint Basil, additionally, urges Christians to reach for the major virtues and not
to be indifferent to the minor ones.28 The terminology of the game and of the
sport was also used as a means to describe the difficulties that the church deals
with, because of the heresies and the persecutions against it.29

Saint Basil the Great gave special attention to those who chose to devote
their lives to God and his teachings and became monks. He regulated the lives
of the coenobitic monks in every detail.30 Moreover, in the class of monks the
virtuous way of life was paralleled as a physical exercise.31 The hierarch called
those who tried to follow the pleasing to God preaches, symbolically as athletes
and fighters.32 He considered that whoever honours those who exercise for faith
(διὰ πίστιν ἡλικότας), he proves that he has zeal and the sole action shows an
extraordinary virtue. Especially indicative is the symbolic characterisation of the church martyrs, as “athletes” and their torture as “exercise”.

The Christians’ exercise and training have as a goal the final salvation of their soul. In order to describe those Christians and present their value, Saint Basil borrowed the images of athletes in games, often referring to the award of garlands and prizes for the winners of the Christian training: καταστεφανωθήναι τοῦ ἀντιδίκου.

He taught the believers to have a goal in life, which they will have to act upon and choose accordingly. As an example, he used the nude games, where training was performed for those games to which wreaths were given as a reward. The persecutions that Christians dealt with because of the heresies resulted in a martyr’s death for those who remained strong to their faith. An important category of wreaths is the one of being nominated to the church as a reward for their exercise: μαρτύρων στέφανοι. Saint Basil used the term of exercise symbolically. The meaning of exercise was used by the hierarch to explain the persistence and training that is needed by Christians, so that they can reach their final goal. The faithful should not be disappointed by being inconsistent, but should use the right exercises, in order to reform themselves: ἄγειν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὰ προσήκοντα γυμνάσια.

References to Athletic Events

In Saint Basil’s work many athletic images have been used. Through these images we gain valuable information as far as the athletic activities are concerned, their organisation and the effect they had on people of that time. The games were nude and the athletes were praised for their bodies: πολλοί μὲν ἐνδοξάζονται σώματι, οἱ περὶ τοὺς γυμνικοὺς ἐσχολακότες ἀγῶνας.

Wrestling: The event with the most references in Saint Basil’s work was wrestling. The reason for its extended references is its comparison with the Christian struggle and the difficulties that emerge with “wrestling”. In this way, the difficulties of the Christian effort are expressed along with the cruelty in carrying it out against unfavourable circumstances and the necessary vigilance in order to be efficient. Christians do not wrestle with their own flesh and blood, but with the wicked spirits, as the devil’s nature is unsubstantial. The hierarch called the believers to fight against the invisible forces, in the fight between good and evil, giving instructions to be alert and determined. Through the references of the great hierarch information is provided that concerns the technique of the game and the preparation of the athletes. The wrestlers avoided the opponent’s grips by being cautious and the velocity of their body. The athletes conditioned to the exertion of the field, did not recede under the pressure of the painful hits, but faced their opponents, despising the pain of the moment, because of their passion to be the winners.
Moreover, they were taking care of their physical modulation and power.\textsuperscript{44} The place where the wrestlers exercised was the palaestra,\textsuperscript{45} in which the nursing staff were strictly applying the abstinence: \textit{ὁ τῆς σωφροσύνης γέγραπται νόμος}.\textsuperscript{46} Finally, Saint Basil the Great also referred to the pit, in which all the wrestling games were held.\textsuperscript{47}

**Boxing:** In Saint Basil's teaching work we come across pugilistic references. This painful and demanding sport is capable of describing the endurance and persistence that is needed by believers to overcome the temptations and reach redemption. Characteristic in the comparison of the beatings that Christians and the church receive, and the beatings of the pugilistic competition. Believers are called to accept these beatings with bravery. In this way, they revealed their strength not only through their beatings against the opponent.\textsuperscript{48} Based on the references of the hierarch in the sport of boxing, we find information about the technique that boxers used at that time. The talented boxers had a strong soul and a steady eye, focused on the competitor. The sensitive organs of the body were protected with the use of the hands.\textsuperscript{49}

**Foot race:** Another event referenced in Saint Basil's work is running. It has been used metaphorically as an example of the participation and devotion of the Christians for the upcoming difficulties of life. Characteristic is the remark that no one has gained a reward without "running": \textit{οὐδεὶς μὴ ἱππάω οὖν καταλαμβάνει τὸ βραβεῖον}.\textsuperscript{50} The instruction given by the hierarch to the believers was to run with confidence\textsuperscript{51}, and act with courage.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, Christians were urged to run in order to prevail.\textsuperscript{53} Nothing should remain incomplete. An indicative example constitutes the runners in stadiums, who many times were losing their prizes, even if sometimes they were only a step away from the finishing line: \textit{οἱ τρέχοντες ἐν τοῖς σταδίοις, ἕνι πολλάκις βήματι μόνῳ ἔλατοῦθεν τῶν βραβείων ἐξέπεσον.}\textsuperscript{54} The fighters of God, when they cover the ground of the life race, are blessed to return to the stage of rest.\textsuperscript{55} A type of a running sport that is presented is the "diaulos". A detail found in the writings is that in the turn of the stadium, between two different moves, there is a stop and slowing down: \textit{Ὡς γὰρ ἐπὶ τῶν τινῶν διαμορφώσων, στάσις τῶν ἐπηρείμοσις τῶν ἐν αὐτῶν κινήματος διαλαμβάνει.}\textsuperscript{56}

**Equestrian events and chariot races:** This sport was exceptionally popular in the time that Saint Basil was teaching. The great hippodrome was the third most important socio-cultural centre of Constantinople, capital of the thriving Byzantine Empire, after the palace and Agia Sofia church. Most of the foreign potentates and diplomats, after having been showed around the treasures of the Palace and the sacred Agia Sofia, visited the crowded Hippodrome.\textsuperscript{57} These races held in the Hippodrome had been a prominent part of Byzantine life, since the establishment of the empire. The entire social casts of citizens, including the great emperor, regardless of their religious beliefs, had a great interest and passion for these races. They were divided into teams according to their preferences and their municipalities. These teams were the Greens (Πράσινοι),
the Venicians or Blues (Βένετοι), the Reds (Κόκκινοι) and the Whites (Λευκοί). Saint Basil's work includes information that the municipalities had chiefs and along with them everybody was shouting and yelling their preferences. Many had an obsession with the hippodrome, so intense that they were dreaming of fighting for their horses, changing their harness and moving the riders. Basic elements of these races were the speed of the horses and the skills of the riders.

Pankration and Swimming: Saint Basil the Great referred symbolically to the sport of pankration, teaching young people the contemplation towards a goal that they had set in life. He used the pakratiasts as an example, who were devoted to their sport and did not putter with unnecessary activities. The hierarch also referred to the sponsors of this sport, who donated money to the athletes.

Another athletic activity that is being revealed through Saint Basil's work is swimming. Writing to Julianus, he apologised that his activities allowed him to see Julianus as much as one can see the swimmers who compete in the sea.

**References Relative to the Organization of Athletic and Agonistic Activities**

Saint Basil came into direct contact with the athletic games which were taking place towards the end of the Imperial era and the beginning of the Byzantine era. An exquisite detail found in Saint Basil's work is the registration of the athletes before the games: ὁ ἄθλητας ἐναπογραψάμενος ἀγωνίζεται. During the entrance to the stadium, their names were called and they entered the playing field. Another important institution was made up of the those who anointed the athletes in order to raise their eagerness, and their strength. The athletes were not competing without prior training: ὁ ἄθλων προγυμνάζεται. Moreover, the Winner's wreath could not be one without effort: εκείνων οἱ καρποὶ ὡς καὶ οἱ πόνοι.

To prepare the athletes, men rubbed oils and ointments on them. These men pressed the athletes during their training to perform the exercises, thereby forcing them to follow strict diets, preparing them for the games. These men were also making sure that their trainees would be the winners, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, their disciplined training would be an example for them.

Additionally, Saint Basil the Great often referred to the men responsible for setting the prizes. These references are metaphorical and imply that God will reward the believers with the salvation of their souls. Jesus Christ is the one who "sets the games" and the games of the martyrs, since these lead to the victory of the stable faith.

Another institution of the athletic games that was presented is that of the sponsors. The sponsors spent money on the games, aiming for the momentary
honour and the cheering and applauding by the people. An important detail of the athletic activities was to be seen in the participation by the spectators, which was dynamic, since the spectators were expecting the opportunity to express their preferences to the competitors. The spectators were divided into municipalities according to the preferences and participated by cheering along with the leaders of these municipalities. They should have their head uncovered. The hierarch believed that this happened so that they could be in athletic alertness and just passive spectators of the athletes, but be themselves contestants accordingly: ἵνα μὴ θεατὴς μόνον ἀγωνιστῶν ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀγωνιστὴς ἐκαστὸς αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ μέρει τηγάνη. The venue in which these games were carried out was the stadium. To compete in the stadium was very important for the athletes. The venue was the stadium. Additionally, the term "stadium of training" was also characterised as the common place of residence for the monks. Another piece of information that derives from Saint Basil's teaching as far as the organisation of the agonistic activities at that time were concerned, was the existence of gymnasiuums, where the athletes trained. The preparation of the athletes in gymnasiuums demanded their devotion and took place in the dust: «καταλιπόντες τὴν κόνιν». The importance of the gymnasiuums in Saint Basil's time is realised from the practice that those who built grand and impressive gymnasiuums gained great honour among their citizens. Additionally, the builders of gymnasiuums wrote their names on the buildings in order to remain well-known. The expression of bitterness expressed by Saint Basil, when after many years, he returned to his homeland and faced the deserted gymnasiuum, was also characteristic. Saint Basil the Great seems to recommend the exercise and training, since he considered the body to be a gift from God, which must be cared for, mainly for practical reasons.

Epilogue

Based on the analysis and elaboration of the sources, it is evident that Saint Basil wasn't against the human body or against athletic activities. He recommended Christians to be careful not to allow their body to be a reason for de-
struction from their mental quests, because this situation would lead to the loss of salvation of the soul. He acknowledged indirectly the value of the physical activity, urging the avoidance of the excessive training of the body. Wishing to strengthen his position on the issue, he used the Hippocratic aspect that supported hyperbolic euphoria as damaging.

He accepted the reality of the agonistic activities of that time, presenting in his teaching the athletic scenes and images that were familiar to Christians. He frequently used athletic terminology and borrowed athletic – agonistic scenes in order to enhance the substance of his teaching. It is true that the Church Fathers since the fourth century had used the training of athletes as one of their metaphors in order to describe the disciplined Christian life, and especially the life of the ascetic. The works of John Chrysostom, Isidore Pelusiotes, John Climacus, Eustathios of Thessalonike and others, in addition to Saint Basil, are full of metaphors drawn from athletics.90

The issue of athletics did not preoccupy Saint Basil immensely, since his teaching focused on the explanation of the difficult theological truths of the faith and the support of the church during the demanding period of the persecutions and schism. The use of athletic terminology reveals that he was positive towards athletics and the body avocation, in the context of spiritual duties and soul caring.

He showed respect to the elements of diligence, devotion and persistence of the athletes, important qualifications that they had to present. In this context, he characterised believers as athletes and their life as athletic, while he compared the mental salvation with the awarding of the garland in the games. The faithfuls' salvation constitutes the central topic of his teachings, but also of his paradigmatic life. The comparison of the final spiritual redemption with the victory in athletic games is indicative of his positive position towards athletes and sports. The same conclusions can be drawn from his frequent references to the athletic activities of the time period. The great hierarch in many cases proceeds to the description of the athletes and compares their efforts with the battle of the martyrs who pursue salvation.91

The conclusions that derive from Saint Basil's teaching can easily be generalised, attributing the position of the newly established church its first few years, towards sport and the handling of the human body.

Notes

1 Ierotheos Metropolitan of Nafpaktos/Saint Vlassios, Εκκλησιαστικοί αναβαθμοί, Athens 2003, pp. 134-140.
2 Ierotheos Metropolitan of Nafpaktos/Saint Vlassios, Το σώμα του ανθρώπου, η άσκηση και η άθλησή του, 2nd ed., Athens 2004, pp. 65-69; Eirenaios


4 In 4th century AD, Christians had vivid icons from sports and athletic life. For that reason the Christian fathers used athletic phrases metaphorically in their teaching. N. Vasileiadis, Από τους αθλητές της Άλτεως στους αθλοφόρους μάρτυρες, Athens 1996, p. 47.


11 Ibid., col. 568, B, lines 24-29.

12 Ibid., col. 577, D, lines 45-50.

13 Ierotheos, Το σώμα του ανθρώπου, p. 51.

14 "Αποφθέγματα Γερόντων", in: Φιλοκαλία των Νηπιακών και Ασκητικών, Πατερικαί εκδόσεις Γρηγόριος Παλαμάς, Thessalonica 1978, p. 608.
18 PLATO, Republic 411a; Ibid., col. 584, B, lines 18-21.
20 Saint Basil the Great alludes to the Hippocratic dictum: "In the athletae, embonpoint if carried to its utmost limit is dangerous" HIPPOCRATES, Aphorismi, 1.3.1; BASILIUS MAGNUS, "Ad Adolescentes", in: PG, vol. 31, col. 583, C, lines 44-45: Ego autem corporis habitudinem summe bonam etiam periculosam esse a medicis audivi. Similar thoughts were expressed by JOHN CHRYSTOS, in: PG, vol. 62, col. 561: Some physical training is a good thing.


83 Ibid., col. 505, D, line 48 & col. 507, A line 1.
89 GIATSIS, "The Byzantine views", p. 166.
91 This is a common practice in the teaching of the Christian fathers. See for a big number of examples: N. VASILEIADIS, Από τους αθλητές, pp. 55-89.