Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



Sr. Mary Jo Sobieck, a Dominican Sister of Springfield, Illinois,, at a White Sox game in Chicago on Aug. 18, 2018. (Mary Jo Sobieck)



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As summer winds down, I want to take a moment to reminisce on the season's beauty. The warm weather is a vibrant invitation for many to participate in summer activities and camps and wind down with the warmer southern winds. For many sisters, the summer season brings congregational gatherings and invitations to participate in various activities celebrating our relationship with God. One of my summer activities took place at the end of July and allowed me to have a lively conversation with a sassy girl, Jane.

Jane was about 12-years-old, and what she was missing in height, she compensated for with confidence. I was in awe that this young girl knew what she wanted and was not about to waste her time with superficial conversations. Behind Jane, trying to keep up, was her loving and very patient aunty. As Jane arrived at the booth I was working at during Marian Days, she skipped the hello and started drilling me regarding why I was a sister and my life as a Dominican Sister of Peace. "So, you don't wear a habit," she stated. "Yeah, not bad. And you can wear long hair," she exclaimed between questions and statements.

After five intense meetings of rapid-fire questions and comments, she proceeded to give me her approval. "You all seem pretty ok." I did not know if I should be flattered or scandalized. While I looked at aunty to find out how to take the comment, I suddenly desired to obtain the approval of the 12-year-old boss girl. Then she stopped and looked around my booth and noticed that we had photos of sisters preaching, mentoring, educating and praying. She said, "It's a shame sisters only pray and do spiritual stuff and don't play sports."

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Before I could enlighten the confident child, Jane demonstrated her athletic ability by running fast from my booth to the corner — about 600 feet — back and forth. As Jane sped through the crowd, I embraced her statement and included it in my list of myths about religious life. As she returned, I celebrated her speed and joyfully expressed, "Yes, sisters do play sports!" At this statement, I had her attention. I shared with her that our various religious communities counted on amazing sisters as physical education instructors. I then showed Jane a video of a friend, Dominican Sr. Mary Jo Sobieck, throwing a pitch at a Chicago White Sox baseball game. My conversation with Jane ended there as she had to head to her next adventure.

If Jane had stayed a bit longer, I would have told her about Dominican Sr. Gemma Doll, an avid tennis player who is an example of discipline and perseverance with a flair for competitive spirit. I would have continued to share more about Mary Jo, who finds a relationship with God as she engages in sports. I would have told her I am certain that as religious women, we can think of countless examples of sisters who, like Gemma, Mary Jo, and my friend, Dominican Sr. Nery Sori, embody their prayer through athletic activity.

In a recent statement to the Vatican's athletic organization, Athletica Vaticana, Pope Francis highlighted the importance of sports and the union with our faith.

> Sport teaches us the value of *fraternity*. We are not islands: on the pitch, it does not matter where a person comes from, what language or culture they speak. What counts is the commitment and the common goal. This unity in sport is a powerful metaphor for our lives. It reminds us that despite our differences, we are all members of the same human family. Sport has the power to unite people, regardless of their physical, economic or social abilities. It is an instrument of inclusion that breaks down barriers and celebrates diversity. Even the Second Vatican Council emphasized that can help "to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races" (*Gaudium et spes*, 61).



Dominican Sisters of Peace Tram Bui, Cathy Buchanan, Gemma Doll and Ana González. (Ana González)

For close to 40 years, the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist have celebrated the athletic achievements of Catholics during their annual Franciscan Sports Banquet. The Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist acknowledge the union of Catholic values along with their paradigm of the athletic spirit.

This year, Mary Jo was honored with the Saint Claire Award for her commitment to sports and the athletic spirit. Mary Jo shared with me that she was humbled by the award. To Mary Jo, sports are a form of prayer. From a young age, Mary Jo knew two things for certain: she loved God and all sports. She enjoyed running, catching and playing a team sport that allowed her to collaborate and work towards a common goal. She delightedly shared with me that playing sports is life-giving and she can have a spiritual connection with God through athletic activities.

Like Mary Jo, Gemma is a dynamic athlete whose love for the sport of tennis allows her to celebrate God's gift of her human body. As she enthusiastically plays tennis,

she is committed to dedicating time to the activity that keeps her healthy and gives her much joy.

In a recent conversation with Gemma, she shared that playing tennis grants her an outlet to keep her body in motion and engage in physical activity. She highlighted the importance of moving our bodies, especially as we age. Movement is an opportunity to be mindful of the wonderfully made body God grants us and to keep it healthy so that we may continue to minister to God's people.



Dominican Sr. Nery Sori worships God through liturgical dance at the Dominican Sisters of Adrian Motherhouse Chapel in Michigan. (Nery Sori)

As a liturgical dancer, Nery utilizes her body to pray and praise God. Dance requires the engagement of the body in an athletic form. It demands muscle control, coordination and awareness of movement. As she dances, Nery brings forth the physical dimension and spirituality together.

Last June, Nery led several seminars regarding the importance of movement as a form of prayer as part of the Dominican Youth Movement USA's High Schools Preaching Conference. In her seminars, high school students learned about the Dominican tradition of praying with the body and liturgical dance. Nery reminded the participants of the divine gift granted to us in our bodies. Our bodies allow us to feel, express and embrace God's love.

The examples of Srs. Gemma, Mary Jo and Nery celebrate the beautiful engagement of sisters who play sports and can find a divine connection through their physical participation in athletic activities. They also celebrate a space needed for the mindfulness of the body in relationship with spiritual practices. These are only a few examples of religious women who can embrace love, take care of and celebrate the presence of God with their bodies.

Our religious communities have countless examples of sisters who play sports, move and connect beautifully with the spiritual and physical. The conversation with Jane challenged me to move more. I am inspired to engage physically in my prayer with God and to love and take care of my body. I am challenged to embrace the example of my fellow Dominican Sisters, and hopefully, the next time I see Jane, I can join her in a race because sisters do play sports.