

# SoulSpace

SERIES: THE SPORTING CONNECTION

Season colour: **GREEN**

In this series, Fr Gerard Moloney CSSR looks at what sport can teach us about celebrating our faith.

**B**efore the Eucharist began, I had shown my membership of the tribe by revealing the jersey I wore under my vestments. It was the red number 8 shirt of Liverpool captain, Steven Gerrard, with his very own autograph on the back.

We had gathered that evening to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster in Hillsborough on 15 April 1989 in which 96 Liverpool supporters died. Though on the surface that disparate group of people had very little in common, with scarcely a Scouse accent among us, there was one extraordinary bond that united us, a passion that formed us as one – our love for Liverpool Football Club, a love that remained true through triumph and disappointment and heartbreak.

Most sports loyalties are based on where we come from. If you're from Tipperary and love sport, then you'll support Tipperary GAA and Munster rugby and the Ireland national teams in various codes. If you're from Longford, you'll support Longford GAA and perhaps Longford Town soccer club and Leinster rugby as well as the Irish national teams. But sports loyalties can transcend geography and be based on a childhood interest or the club that a parent supported or a particular sporting idol played for. I can't remember when or why, growing up in rural County Limerick, I became a Liverpool supporter, just that I have supported them for as long as I can remember, and I cannot think of not supporting them.

## BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

**S**port has the tremendous capacity to forge unity and bring people together. Think of how Nelson Mandela wore the Springbok jersey during the

1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa. That jersey had been associated with apartheid, but Mandela used that wonderful sporting occasion to bring the peoples of his divided country together. Think of how the Irish soccer team united the country during Italia '90. Some claim it laid the foundation for the economic success of the years that followed.

Sport strengthens our sense of identity and fosters deep loyalty. There is something tribal, visceral, deeply emotional, about it. It's why my pulse beats faster when teams from my parish of Doon, or Limerick, or Munster, or Ireland or Liverpool take to the pitch.

Sporting allegiances share many similarities with membership of the church. Most of us are Catholic because our parents were Catholic. Most of us identify with a particular parish because of where we were born. We come from many different backgrounds, with many different life experiences, yet we share a common religious identity. As Catholics, we celebrate the same rituals, sing the same songs (anthems), worship the same God, share the same beliefs, have the same loyalty. Our common baptism makes us one family, a communion of sisters and brothers who gather around the one table to celebrate what we share and to support each other on our way.

Our commitment to the jersey we wear as Christians must be as passionate and true as the jerseys that demonstrate our sporting affiliations. Just as I am proud to wear my Liverpool shirt on the street, so also must I be happy to wear my Catholic faith on my sleeve wherever I find myself. ■

series ends



## Today's readings

**Numbers 11:25-29**

**James 5:1-6**

**Mark 9:38-43.45.47-48**

Today's Gospel reading first presents us with two examples of Jesus' attitude towards people who do not belong to the circle of his disciples.

We might describe Jesus as being positively tolerant of the exorcist who was using his name to cast out devils without being authorised beforehand. The disciples, however, take a different view: the person has no business using the name of Jesus.

The second case, that of strangers who are kind to the disciples, echoes the earlier teaching about welcoming Christ in the little child who represents the social 'nobodies'.

The final section is concerned with discipleship. Anyone who puts a block in front of a simple believer and causes them to fall away or into sin is condemned in the strongest terms. The "little ones" are those genuine but vulnerable members of the community.

The sayings about cutting off parts of the body which lead disciples into sin are examples of the exaggeration customarily used at the time to emphasise the gravity of a situation and are not to be taken literally. However, we find the image of the body used elsewhere to represent the Christian (and civil) community, so cutting off the offending members of the physical body may also mean dealing severely with people who harm the body of believers by excommunicating them – as a last resort, of course.

## GOD'S WORD TODAY



# WHAT UNITES US

## Sporting allegiances share many similarities with membership of the church.

**T**hey were young and old, male and female, athletic and pot-bellied, tattoo-covered and clear-skinned, college-educated and working-class, familiar with the rituals of the church and not familiar at all – but they all gathered that evening in the same building with a common purpose, a loyalty that made them all as one. The colours they wore signified their unity, as did the banners they displayed. The anthem they sang and the collective memories they shared also demonstrated their togetherness. Though they came from a wide area around south Dublin, they considered themselves to be one family, and used the words 'we' and 'us' to describe themselves. And even though I did not know them personally, I saw them as my family too, and could use the word 'we' when speaking to them during the Eucharist that evening.