

## **BE A SPIRITUAL ATHLETE!**

by

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Across the world and especially in America, there is an undying respect for, and love of, physical athletes and Hollyweird bedroom ones. Anyone able to dribble a basketball, slamdunk it, throw a 50 yard pass, score a try in rugby or goal in futbol/soccer, ace a tennis opponent, birdie a hole in golf, knock out another fighter in the ring, or cross the finish line first in a chaotic NASCAR race is secularly ‘deified’. Hollyweird, MTV, American Idol, R &B and Hip-Hop mediocrity (giving all the benefit of a great big doubt) are similarly held in narcissistic esteem.

All kinds of societal exceptions are many times available for these ‘superheroes’. Some, like Hollyweird actors are charged for lesser crimes and/or receive lighter sentences than ordinary citizens. Others are ushered to the front of lengthy lines at public events – a somewhat minor, yet telling example. Many repeat athlete/star offenders are dealt with more leniently than regular folk; they seem to have more second chances than the rest of us.

If a professional athlete or Hollyweird star is occasionally penalised more than nonathletes/nonactors, this, too, demonstrates a *different* manner of treating them from the social norm.

Add to these examples, the reality show craze, which catapults no talents onto television, who then attain instant national notoriety and the dirty-armpit participants in low life talk shows – these showcasing the worst behaviour toward our neighbours; then, we are entitled to ask “What on earth is going on?” “Why do we feature the cruds of society?” “What has happened to our standards?” Obviously, they have plummeted so far as to render the word and meaning of “standards” nonsensical.

We admire the wrong principles. We have chosen ‘self’ as our god, self and pleasure, the twin pagans.

**REMEDY: BE A SPIRITUAL ATHLETE!**

Let’s raise our moral sights! There should be no better way than to extol, feature and practise the spiritual asceticism required of us by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Spiritual athletes are what we need. They have faced down more real villains than the totality of Hollyweird action stars.

Throughout Christianity, true believers have struggled and sacrificed for our Lord, including multiples of millions who paid with their very lives. 50 to 65 million or so Orthodox Christians have met their Maker in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the mayhem against Christians continues today. See Archimandrite Nektarios Serfes’ compilation of material also written by Fr. Raphael Moore

about 50,000,000 Orthodox Christians' slaughters in <http://www.serfes.org/orthodox/memoryof.htm>". Please note the Editor's comments at the article's end that its figures are probably low since Alexander Solzhenitsyn stated that 66.5 million perished from 1917 onward during the persecution by the Soviet authorities. Also, consider that the Turks massacred over 3.5 million during the First Holocaust of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These spiritual athletes stood tall and refused to deny Christ even when a simple lukewarm denial of the Lord would have saved their lives. They knew that even if their physical lives were spared, their souls would be lost. They stood through to the end. They have been speared, crucified, burnt, quartered, pulled apart, devoured by lions, thrown off structures, drowned, heads chopped off, hands cut off, tongues cut out, starved to death, shot, etc.

Still, they spiritually stood tall. A sterling example is St. James the Just of Jerusalem. His persecutors hurled him from the parapet and stoned him just before he was clubbed into martyrdom for proclaiming Christ. He prayed for their forgiveness:

I beseech Thee, Lord God and Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.

[See the detailed recording by Hegesippus (first generation succeeding the Apostles) in Eusebius, *THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH*, Penguin Books, p. 60.]

## The Initial Move

We are to emulate Christ because He made us in His image. Fashioning ourselves after Him and His great Spiritual Warriors will save us from our sinful inclination. Our war is against our own spiritual weaknesses and the secular world of the Evil One. Our first step is to come to Christ by enlisting in His Spiritual Army, i.e., through baptism. Then we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit by chrismation.

## Training

We train for His Spiritual Army by reading and absorbing the Holy Scriptures and their interpretation by the Holy Fathers of the Undivided Church. Unanimity among these Fathers is absolute proof of the Truth. Concentrate on the Septuagint and the Authorised King James Version of 1611.

Frequently take the Eucharist after prayer and repentance. Turn inward to your heart and warm your soul. Adopt the Jesus Prayer for your spiritual journey. Search for a Spiritual Elder/Staretz from whom you can be guided along the path of the Fathers. Do not go to an 'elder' who believes he is one, a sure sign of prelest/spiritual deception. If you cannot find a true Elder, then redouble your efforts in reading the Gospel and the Fathers. Do not become discouraged if your prayers appear to be fruitless at first. They are not. Keep praying through time and with increasing intensity, and the Lord will answer you. Fast, not just in food but behaviour toward your neighbour, your neighbour being everybody.

## Our Struggle

We fight against ourselves and the Evil One. Struggle against the darkness of this world in order to gain what is not of this world. Remember, you are not a humanist, you're a Christian! Prepare yourself for possible sacrifice for the Lord. As a Christian, it is inevitable that you will suffer persecution. The world has always persecuted the Gentle One, but the Lord has defeated Satan. The Evil One has no chance. But we must keep up our spiritual guard. We must keep our faith resolutely and live in this world in His way as to gain victory, our salvation. Seeing Christ in our neighbour and acting accordingly will see us through!

## Forgiveness

As difficult as it is, we must forgive others if we expect the Lord to forgive us. Heinous crimes are particularly a problem. But the Evil One is responsible for such chaos. Prayer for the perpetrators of such crimes is needed. This does not mean that they should go unpunished by the civil authorities. The latter protect society from such terrible events. Paul through the grace of God transformed his life. It would have been spiritually possible for even Adolf Hitler to repent had he sincerely done so.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.