

Preaching and Popular Culture: St. Ambrose and the Swoosh

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Bob Dylan has a song in which he dreams he sees St. Augustine “alive with fiery breath,” come back to admonish the world for its collective lack of passion and vision. Well, I’ve also had a dream about a Church Father. The subject of my vision is St. Ambrose — preacher, teacher, and contender for the catholic faith, and, as it happens, Augustine’s mentor — and, oh, is he intense. In my reverie he’s flying through the air in his episcopal outfit, burning up the atmosphere with his commitment, zeroing in on a basketball hoop. He reaches the rim and, with immense power, slam-dunks a brand-new pair of sports shoes with their \$150 price tag clearly visible. They fall helplessly, impotently, to the court below — and stay there.

Before you call for the people in white coats, please let me try to explain. I’ve been thinking a lot recently about St. Ambrose as a Christian apologist, and also about Nike and their brilliant advertising campaigns, and, well, some things may have become a little confused. But, believe me, there is a connection.

Part of my dream is undoubtedly traceable to the classic Nike ad made in 1985 to promote Air Jordans. To the sound of jet engines revving furiously, Michael Jordan picks up a ball and accelerates across a mystically lit urban basketball court. As he gathers pace, the engines approach their critical scream. Then swoosh... Escape velocity. He takes off and, for what seems like an eternity, flies towards the target before hovering over the basket and slamming the ball home.

This ad helped to make the sports shoe into one of the seminal products of the late twentieth century. It also assisted Michael Jordan on his way to becoming a fabulously wealthy household name, and allegedly led to poor teenage boys in American cities shooting each other to possess such cool, pricey footwear. But there is no doubt that the ad successfully captures the essence of many of the things that make sports so important and appealing to billions of people around the world — speed, beauty, extraordinary physical achievement, glimpses of immortality and transcendence.

The social critic, Michael Novak, author of *The Joy of Sports*, argues that “Sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection.”¹ Novak is a real fan. He loves basketball, baseball, and football — “the three great American public liturgies” — and he writes beautifully and sympathetically about them. He’s convinced that sports really do fulfill a religious function today, and I think he is absolutely right: “they feed a deep human hunger, place humans in touch with dimly perceived features of human life within this cosmos, and provide at least a pagan sense of godliness.”²

The Air Jordan ad takes all of these impulses and emotions and associates them with Nike. It is an attempted appropriation on a preposterous scale — years without number of tradition, honorable competition, heroic endeavor, discipline and artistry, all claimed and channelled into a sales drive for a shoe. We have become so accustomed to such extensive plundering of the precious heritage of human culture and

spirituality that it barely concerns or even registers with us anymore. But it ought to. The very name and visual symbol of this vast, global enterprise are the product of an act of historical looting. Phil Knight, the founder of Nike, began selling sports shoes in the 1960s, but it wasn't until 1971 that his company acquired its brand identity. The idea to call it after the Greek goddess of victory came, appropriately, to an employee in a dream.

In Greek mythology, Nike was the sister of Cratos, Bia, and Zelus — the gods of strength power, and zeal. She was often portrayed as a small winged figure in the hand of Zeus or Athena, the mediator of success between the Olympians and human beings. As the goddess of victory, she hovered above the winners in a contest, bestowing trophies on those she favored.

An art student named Caroline Davidson was given the task of designing a logo, and for her troubles she was paid \$35. One hopes that she has been rewarded rather more handsomely since then, for her brilliant design, the Swoosh, has become one of the most widely recognized and disseminated in all of human history. It appears at almost every sporting event, worn on the cap or the shirt or the shoes of Tiger Woods, Andre Agassi, and Ronaldo; it symbolizes success at the highest level.

The Swoosh is closely modeled on ancient representations of one of Nike's wings. It's a dynamic curve, an evocation of turbo-charged action, a cosmic tick of approval. According to the company's blurb, it embodies the spirit of the goddess "who inspired the most courageous and chivalrous warriors at the dawn of civilization." Nike is now "the twentieth-century footwear that lifts the world's greatest athletes to new levels of mastery and achievement."

Well, perhaps. But it's not just the elite performers who wear Nike. By far the majority of the company's logo-bearing apparel — the caps, T-shirts, jogging suits, and jackets, as well as the shoes — are not used for sports purposes at all. They have become mainstream fashion. And so Joe and Jackie Public, and every other lifelong couch potato who knows nothing of sporting excellence or 'honored conquest,' can nevertheless find favor beneath Nike's wing. Courage, chivalry, and heroism have all been commodified and can be yours for only \$99.99. Far from signifying the triumph of sports in our time, the Swoosh points to their degradation and disappearance. Sports are being replaced by the signs of sport.

It is at this moment of the apparent triumph of the Swoosh in Western culture that St. Ambrose enters the story. And, bizarre though my dream may be, he doesn't enter it by accident. For sixteen centuries ago, Ambrose was already in dispute with Nike, and his powerful Christian proclamation from the midst of that conflict still resonates at the dawn of a new millennium.

In the last quarter of the fourth century, Ambrose, bishop of Milan, took part in a great struggle between the age-old pagan religion of Rome and the upstart Christian faith for the soul of the empire. At the heart of this conflict was the Altar of Victory in the Senate House, an altar on which Roman senators had dutifully made offerings for centuries. Victory, or more accurately, Victoria, was the name by which the goddess Nike was known to the Romans.

On the one side were pagan traditionalists, led by the aristocratic senator, Symmachus, who were proud of their city and their religious heritage, and attempted to stem the advance of Christianity by a number of political and cultural measures. Symmachus petitioned the emperor Valentinian II to restore to the Senate building the

Altar of Victory/Nike, which had been removed by one of his Christian predecessors, and to allow the ancient rituals connected with it to be re-established.

On the other side were Christian apologists led by Ambrose, who were pushing for the complete dismantling of the ancient political-religious order. The ecclesiastical historian W. H. C. Frend, in *The Rise of Christianity*, describes the debate between Symmachus and Ambrose as “one of the great moments in the conflict between Christianity and paganism in the fourth century.”³

The pagan statesman thought that the removal of this Altar and the abandonment of offerings to Victoria/Nike struck at the very heart of Roman piety, tradition, and culture. “This worship subdued the world” to Rome’s laws, Symmachus claimed; “these sacred rites repelled Hannibal from the walls,” and the barbarians from its gates. He could see no future for his city if the link with the goddess who was responsible for its triumph was broken.

Ambrose came from the same aristocratic background as Symmachus, and the two were on friendly terms. But his response to the pagans was uncompromising. Throughout the debate Ambrose contrasted the desperate rituals of Rome with the claims of the Christian faith. He reminded the politicians, the princes, and the Emperor himself that, it is to the true God alone, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, that they owe allegiance. All other gods are idols. True, eternal victory over evil and death are not to be found at the Altar of Victoria/Nike, but at the Altar of Christ.

It is clear that, for Ambrose, the cross of Christ was central for understanding the true meaning of glory, power, and victory. It was deeply subversive of established human patterns of conquest and defeat. He pointed to the example of Christian martyrs who had been willing to follow their master on account of their faith. “We consider these things in the place of victories,” Ambrose claimed, while the pagans “think them loss.” Christianity “made a reward of that which unbelief thought to be a punishment.” Yet, what greatness of soul was exhibited by Christians in this, for “we have increased through loss, through punishment.” In this, Ambrose was simply echoing the words of St. Paul who was willing to “count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil.3:8).

For whatever reasons, the Roman Emperor paid heed to Ambrose rather than Symmachus, and pagan rituals were not restored to the Senate. The idolatrous Altar to Victoria/Nike was permanently removed, banished by people who believed that true exaltation came not through violence and military conquest, but by way of humility and a cross. And banished it remained...until now.

Victoria/Nike has returned in the form of a brilliant advertising symbol — the Swoosh! — herself appropriated by a company intent on grabbing the lion’s share of the global market for sportsgear. Her return is hardly accompanied by the same respect and honor paid to her by principled pagans like Symmachus.

Nevertheless, Nike is back, and she is ubiquitous, present, seemingly, at every major sporting event and photo-opportunity, every T-shirted gathering, every display of teenage cool, every minor stroll around the neighborhood.

There is something rather terrifying and apposite about this god’s second coming in contemporary culture. The Swoosh is a celebration of speed, might, and victory, the very values that today we cherish above all others. They are preeminent in our affections because we have no collective purpose or ‘end.’ We are a people without hope or meaning. In our times, suffering is beyond comprehension and entirely

without significance. This is a world in which, as one football coach famously put it, “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.” All we are left with is the assertion of power for its own sake, the exaltation of means, the cult of success.

The Swoosh is the postmodern cousin of the swastika and the lightning bolt. It is a handsome, grinning icon of an ugly and demonic reality — a Nietzschean era in which weakness and failure, sickness and genetic imperfection, poverty and powerlessness, are increasingly viewed as moral evils. A leading British medic has recently announced that in the near future, as a result of advances in prenatal scanning and gene science, parents who allow handicapped children to be born into this world will be guilty of sin.

Come back, St. Ambrose. At this moment in history we need your iconoclasm, your lack of respect for the gods of this world, your fearlessness in contradicting the princes, the emperors and the earthly powers. We need your love for God and your fellow human beings, your clarity of faith in the crucified and risen Lord, your grasp of the biblical promise that real life and victory are to be found under the shadow of a cross. We need you to remind us of the cost of discipleship, the call to obedience. You had the courage and wisdom to proclaim Christ in the public place, in the midst of political institutions and popular cultural expectations. We need those things, too, now more than ever.

Come back Ambrose, with your flapping cassock and fierce faith, and teach us what it means to worship at the Altar of Christ.

Notes

¹ Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*, rev. ed. (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1994), 19.

² Novak, 20.

³ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 702.