

Imagine for a moment that you live in another country, one completely foreign to this one, and you have an opportunity one fall to spend a week in Florence. You come on a Sunday morning, and you observe many people (maybe even most) slowly rising to make their way to a building they call a church. They groggily approach that building for some sort of ceremony. Clearly, whatever happens at the beginning of that ceremony isn't that important, because most of the people don't come until after it's started. You watch them file in and begin to mouth the words to songs, many of them almost expressionless, virtually emotionless, after which they sit down and passively listen to someone talk to them for a period of time.

You notice people starting to get a bit fidgety and uneasy as the time for the ceremony to end approaches, and when it's finally over, they quickly walk out. As you walk with them, you listen to them, and you hear many of them talking with one another about something that had happened the previous day. They smile and they laugh as they recount another ceremony they'd been to that was apparently a bit more interesting than this one, a ceremony that apparently happens on Saturdays. In fact, the rest of the week, that's almost all you hear people talking about—the coming Saturday ceremony. Even the people who were at the Sunday ceremony are strangely silent about what they heard and sang about there, but very enthusiastic about the Saturday that can't seem to get here soon enough. As your curiosity is piqued, you begin to eagerly anticipate the coming Saturday.

Saturday comes, and you see people wake up and leave their houses dressed in some sort of outfit that they love to wear for these types of days. Many of them drive out of the city—some an hour west, others a couple of hours north-west—where they gather together on what they call hallowed grounds for the Saturday ceremony. They get there early for this ceremony (way early) where they eat and drink and laugh and play not just with their family or with their friends, but even with complete strangers. You've never seen community like this.

When the time comes, they all, tens of thousands of them, enter a shrine together (you can't think of another word for it) where they raise their voices with passion to applaud an assembly of children they don't know playing a game on a field. As that game begins, they shout and chant and sing until they virtually lose their voices—with far more passion than the previous Sunday's ceremony, for sure. People don't look at their watches at this ceremony. They're so engulfed in what they're seeing and experiencing that they actually get excited when it goes into what they call overtime because going long like this is a sign of a really exciting game.

When the boys everyone has been cheering for win the game, the celebration has only begun, and the amazing thing is that it's not just the people who are at the ceremony who are celebrating. You come to find out that thousands and thousands of others stayed back in Florence to watch this game on a TV, though many of them are large enough to be virtual movie screens. They're actually designed that way to make the most of watching ceremonies like this, and back in Florence scores of people have circled up together around their screens to be a part of the ceremony from a distance. They, too, in their homes, are jumping up and down and high-fiving each other, celebrating the ceremony when it's over. Then when it's all over, late in the evening, almost as if there's nothing to be prepared for the next day, they go to bed.

Let me ask you a question. If you were that visitor from another country, and you came to this city during a week in the fall, I ask you to honestly answer this question: which would you identify as the religion that is most important to this people? As the religion that most excites this people? As the religion that most consumes this people?

We live in a land where sports war for our attention and our affections and our devotion, our time, and our money. It's not just college football. That is the glaring example. It's professional sports as well, and it's children's sports. It's playing sports and watching sports and running our children all over the city (and the state) for the sake of sports, whether it's golf or football, basketball or baseball, soccer or crossfit, running or biking or swimming, gymnastics or cheerleading, or any number of other athletic activities to which we devote much of our lives (and our family's lives) to.

We are not too far removed from the church at Corinth. We, in a land covered with church buildings and filled with professing Christians, are tempted every week to commune with Christ on Sunday only to dine with idols every other day (particularly Saturday), and we must consider how to flee idolatry and live every single moment in Florence, eating, drinking, and playing to the glory of God.