

Sports, Evangelization and the Universal Church

Your Excellencies, dear sport friends,

Thank you for your presence here today. First of all, I would like to thank Paul Passafiume and Lou Judd for the invitation to participate in this first SportsLeader Director of Sports Ministry Conference. It really is an honor for me to be here today. I apologize in advance because my English is not as good as I would like it to be. I'm sure you will notice an accent.

I will try to be brief, and to explain what the functions and purpose of the Church and Sport Section are and especially what the Holy Father wants to develop in the field of sport through the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

I will begin by the end of my talk. I came to this presentation with 3 main goals. The first is to congratulate you and to convey to you that the Holy Father is aware of the many efforts undertaken in the United States for education and training in faith and values through sport. The second goal is to encourage you because although the United States is at a very advanced level in the field of sports values and sports ministry, much remains to be done. The United States along with other English-speaking countries is the "locomotive" of this apostolic mission, but we cannot stop at this point... you have to continue pushing up and open up new ways. I would like to encourage you to persevere with your work, notwithstanding the difficulties. The option of creating a position at schools and universities for a Director of Sport ministry is not necessary to form athletes in faith and virtues, but it definitely helps. I would like to encourage you to reflect about this possibility as the next step to continuing pushing up!

And, finally, I would like to say that I am at your service. Feel free to contact me. The Church and Sport section is small and often cannot help to make large projects (especially because of low financial budget), but we think you can do many things when one gives all he has got.

PRESENTATION OF THE CHURCH AND SPORT SECTION

I will explain the general structure of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Church and Sport section, how it was created, etc... so that you can better understand on what fields we are working on and how we could help you with our work. (Presentation)

I would like to go into depth regarding something that I previously mentioned. Sport, understood correctly, is always a source of growth for human beings. Sport teaches people to live in dignity, to not lose sight of that, regardless of race, gender, religion or ideology, because we are all equal.

THE CHURCH IS INTERESTED IN SPORTS

The Catholic Church considers sports as a fundamental part of Christian life. God has made us people with a human soul and a human body. One individual is a person because he or she has a human soul and a human body, and the two of them are indivisible until death. So we can say that the body is sacred because it is the instrument the Lord gives us to know Him and to love Him. Of all visible creatures only man is *homo capax Dei*, "capable of God" as Saint Augustine said.

Because of sin, human beings, have lost that perfection that God had given them. Therefore, they should strive to improve, to move closer to God in every situation of life. And the body, through work, sacrifices, pleasure... (yes, because the senses are also God's creation and gifts to us, therefore eating a good lobster or watching an NFL game...) all this brings us closer to Him. So we can say without fear that sport is one thing that pleases God, when it is exercised righteously and then offered to Him as an act of Love.

While this may seem obvious, I consider it necessary to say, because even in my house, still after three years I started my adventure in Rome, my friends and family were still wondering what was the relationship between the Church and sport... imagine what about the national or international ecclesiastical level or even the athletes and the sports world.

The Holy See, as the institution of government of the Church, has been interested in the sport practice from the beginning. It's well known by all the sports metaphors that St. Paul made to explain the Christian life to the Gentiles. Also in the Middle Ages, we find great saints who valued sport as a means to reach God. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas or Card. Nicholas of Cusa made references to the spiritual meaning contained in the game itself.

During the Renaissance and the Reform, a black legend is reported where the Catholic Church rejected the body as being sinful, but nothing is further from reality. In fact, we could quote thousands of messages, greetings and speeches by the Popes and the Church on sport (it is estimated that there are about 600 only since 1903). However it is evident that since the modern era, and more specifically from Saint Pius X, the Holy See sought to pay special attention to sport not only as a mass communication medium, but also as a means of evangelization. Who knows, maybe without the support of St. Pius X to the Baron de Coubertin we wouldn't have Olympics.

I do not want to dwell on this point, but I would like to mention two Popes in particular. The first one is Pius XII who, in his speech to an auditorium like this in 1952, explained the four main purposes of sport: *“sport and gymnastics have, as their immediate purposes, that of the education, development, and strengthening the body in its constitution and power of movement. As their more remote purpose, you have the use made, by the soul, of the body so prepared, for the development of the interior or exterior life of the person; as their still deeper purpose, that of contributing to its perfection; and lastly, there is the supreme purpose of man as man, the goal common to every form of human activity –that of bringing man closer to God.”*¹ Pius XII saw clearly this close relationship between sport and God. This message can help us to value our way of looking at sport, and to see if we have a supernatural vision of it or not.

However, if a pope stands above the rest for his personal love for sports We immediately think of Saint John Paul II. He was a man who knew how to combine sport even in very difficult moments of his life as an encounter with God through others and nature.

In his speech to the AC Milan soccer team in 1978 he said: *“The Church, as you know, moreover, approves and encourages sport, seeing in it a form of gymnastics of the body and of the spirit, a training for social relations based on respect for others and for one's own person and an element of social cohesion, which also fosters friendly relations in the international field. The dignity of sport rises to this height, when it is inspired by healthy principles and excludes any excess of risk in the athlete and of disorderly passion in the public, which becomes excited over sporting matters!”*²

¹ PIUS XII, Address to participants of the Italian National Scientific Congress for Sport and Physical Education, November 8, 1952. English translation from R. FEENEY, A Catholic Perspective: Physical Exercise and Sport, Aquinas Press, Virginia 1995, 45.

² Address of his holiness John Paul II to the Milan soccer team. Saturday, 12 May 1979

Popes of the 21st Century, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis have understood the enormous value of sport as a means of evangelization for the world. There are many occasions when through their interventions, they invite us to go closer the social marginalized, the “peripheries”, to find people who even without knowing it, it thirst for faith, for God's love and forgiveness. This is why the Church and Sport section was created for.

In short, the papal magisterium puts at the center of the sporting activity the human being on his way to personal perfection through a simultaneous conjunction of all human abilities, and places the person as a point of reference of unbeatable value and essential to all sport activities and, thus, linking directly sport to the true identity of the human being.

SPORT AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

With these ideas I dare to affirm that in this de-Christianized society, one of the pillars of new evangelization is sport. Sport is a universal language understood everywhere, a mass media tool reaching, sometimes, an overwhelming numbers of spectators (think about the SB, the Olympics, the Soccer World Cup...). In his address to the soccer teams of Italy and Argentina on the occasion of their visit to the Vatican, Pope Francis said: *You, dear players, are very popular: people follow you very closely and not only on the field but also off it. This is a social responsibility! Let me explain: during the game, when you are out on the pitch, you display beauty, generosity and camaraderie. If a match lacks these qualities it loses force, even if the team wins. And then he added: The good you do is impressive. With your conduct, the way you play, your values, you do good [when] people watch you, take advantage of this to sow goodness. Even if you do not realize it, for many people who watch you with admiration, you are a role model for better or for worse. Be aware of this and be an example of loyalty, respect and altruism. You are also builders of concord and social peace of which are all in such great need. You are a point of reference for many young people and a living model of real values. I have faith in all the good that you can do among boys and girls³.*

Nowadays society specially in western countries is much more destructive than we think. We live in a world where:

1. The middle class is disappearing. Exacerbated capitalism and culture of radical relativism alike are producing great social divisions in major cities and countries around the world.
2. A materialistic and a consumer lifestyle is widespread. If you're not worthy, you're nobody. And if you have, you need to continue to keep consuming. It is a false happiness that doesn't satisfy; and what is more serious is that it is destructive because it reduces people to objects. (It comes to my mind the story that Pope Francis told about what he used to ask people in confession about how they lived their mercy... *When people came to me to confession (...) I liked to ask them: “Do you help people?”. “Yes, I give alms to the poor”. “I see, and tell me, when you give alms, do you touch the hand of the person you're giving alms to or do you throw the money to them?” We are speaking of attitudes here. “When you offer alms, do you look into their eyes or do you look the other way?⁴”*

³Address of Pope Francis to delegations of the national football teams of Argentina and Italy. Tuesday, 13 August 2013

⁴ Apostolic Journey Of His Holiness Pope Francis To Paraguay (5-13 July 2015) Meeting With Representatives Of Civil Society León Condou Stadium, Colegio San José Asunción (Paraguay) Saturday, 11 July 2015

3. Dehumanizing society and lack of human warmth to the extreme. It is a society which allows us to meet people who live at the antipodes, but we don't know the name of our neighbor who waits for the bus daily beside us. What about weekends where a boy prefers to do "couch surfing" or playing video games for hours than playing with others. [About this we could also talk about the harmful effects of electronic devices and sedentary life we live, but this would take us too long. (Loneliness, obesity, self-esteem issues ...)].
4. There is a culture of waste. Everything is disposable: love, friendship, leadership, feelings, food, technologies... Children and youth on one hand and elders on the other are a hindrance... often the consequences are broken families, abortion, euthanasia, abandonment of family members...
5. A relativized world where nothing is black or white, where I can choose from 56 different types of gender to define myself, as an example. We live in a world where you no longer know if man is man or woman, or man and woman at the same time (and vice versa).
6. A great crisis of education and values. Where education is undervalued, teachers have no authority over their pupils, and parents prefer that their children play videogames or watch TV, so that "they do not disturb".

I mentioned some points, maybe not all, which in my opinion are the most important. Through them I mean to affirm that there's still a lot to be done, and sport in these situations is a gift of God through which we can continue to improve our society and the position of sport pastoral ministry can help a lot to interact between athletes and the school identity for example so it won't be just a motto on the wall.

While preparing this conference it came to my mind a very graphic example of this. You probably remember that in late January in the press was published the story of a Gainesville police officer who was alerted because some kids were playing basketball in the street "noisily"...

I would say that this is an example of how sport can change the lives of people. The sergeant attitude reflects an image of authority that educates and not simply punish or fills papers "to fulfill". And, I insist, sport has the ability to change the course of things, to change lives.

SPORT PASTORAL MINISTRY. TIME FOR LAITY'S INITIATIVE

Although it will be a topic that may be repeated during these days, it is interesting that approximately 70% of students of Catholic institutions in the United States play some kind of sport at least once a month. However, only 25% regularly go to Mass on Sundays and only 10% participate in a Christian life group. We should reflect and act on this topic!

Sport can integrate into society groups at risk such as immigrants, people in need, inmates, disabled people, etc... The Pope has spoken many times about the need to go to the existential peripheries, which often are much closer than we think. I am not talking only about poor people... Broken families, bullying issues... All the above points are peripheries cases where Christians can do a lot... and I stress sport is a great instrument of evangelization in the 21st Century.

Based on this, I would like to make a specific appeal to the laity who are here today. The time we are living is the time of the laity for Christian life. We cannot continue to be wagons in this train,

but we all should be locomotives because otherwise we will make it too heavy to pull up all of us. We must grasp our responsibility in a spirit of sacrifice and hope, aware that, at all times, the Lord sustains us. The laity must become leaven that ferments the surrounding environment. Things change from home, playing with the children, brothers, nephews. Things change when a group of schools come together to educate students in values through sport thanks to institutions such as SportsLeader, Varsity Catholic and others. Things change when a group of parishes organizes among his faithful a basketball championship and then share their faith from the moments lived. These situations make it possible that a bishop realizes the need to appoint one of his priest to the pastoral care of sport or, to appoint a person dedicated to sport pastoral ministry in a diocese. Without a "real demand" it will be difficult for us to have a long-term project. And the same should happen at the Bishops' Conference level... (let's not blame others, change begins from ourselves).

In our work at the Church and Sport section, one of the goals we have is to encourage bishop conferences to appoint a head of the sports ministry at the national level, and currently very few of them have already one, although those where one is appointed, great results are obtained. Let us pray, let us ask our pastors responsibly a good formation, also for the laity, to convey the message of the Gospel through sports.

I am aware that reversing this situation is not easy, nor it can be achieved within a couple of days. The formation in dioceses, parishes, schools and universities is essential. The conference that has brought us here today aims also to train the trainers. Maybe we are used to expect the bishop to appoint a sports chaplain, the parish priest to launch or organize a sporting activity for youngsters or the school principal who pays someone to do something... and this should stop. We need to have the initiative.

The Holy See strongly believes in the urgent need for Christians to be formed in the Ministry of sport. Thus, in addition to daily activity, the Church and Sport section has already made 4 study seminars dedicated to different topics. In 2005 it was entitled *The Christian Mission in the Field of Sports Today*, and it served as an examination on how the Church, defined by Blessed Paul VI as the "expert in humanity," can enter into dialogue with athletes through the natural benefit and joy aroused by sports. In 2007, a new seminar entitled *Sport: an educational and pastoral challenge* focused on the role of chaplains in the world of sports because we realized the chaplain carries out an essential role in bearing testimony to the greater significance of sports within the wider understanding of the Christian vocation to sanctity. In 2009, we developed the seminar entitled *Sport, education, faith: towards a new season for Catholic sports associations*. It attempted to understand more clearly the identity and contribution of Catholic sports associations within the bigger mission of evangelization. Finally, last year we organized a seminar for Coaches entitled *Coaches: Educating people*. The seminar was very interesting, because although not all teams have a chaplain, all teams certainly have a coach and the coach, is at the frontlines of the educational activity.

These seminars are very useful to learn about different initiatives worldwide, and to focus on ideas and long-term projects. However, I recognize that they may be too theoretical. This is partly because the Pontifical Council for the Laity cannot go to the merits of every case. It's the mission of local churches and Bishop Conferences to establish pastoral methods that are best suited to each culture ... (is not the same talking about pastoral sports in Cincinnati than in Kinshasa, Africa).

When we organized this International Seminar last year about coaches one person told me: "You know this seminar has been very interesting, but sometimes we need more practical information (like *Sportsleader*, *Play like a Champion today* and others that talked the last day of the conference) on how to implement Catholic faith on sports". I tell you: Don't loose the opportunity here. I am

convinced that our conference today is a great opportunity to form at local and national level: to share experiences, learn new methods of evangelization, etc.

7 IDEAS FOR EVANGELIZATION IN SPORT

I finish by offering some common suggestions for all sports and situations that can be useful for the growth of faith in the sport.

- Teach athletes to seek God.

A phrase attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry says: *“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea”*. It is less important to teach how to pray than to teach how to find God in the fights and joys of each day.

- Involve different pastoral agents

Make sport with kids, with people with disabilities .. Involve parishes! Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken of the aggregative value of sport, and the importance of not neglecting parishes and Catholic institutions. In his speech to participants of the 70th anniversary of the Centro Sportivo Italiano, a large Catholic sport institution in Italy, the Pope said: *“It's beautiful when a parish has a sports club; something is missing without one. If there is no sports club, something is missing. Yet a sports club like this needs to be well executed, in a way that's consistent with the Christian community. If it isn't consistent, better not to have one! Sports in a community can be an optimal missionary tool, where the Church comes close to each person and helps him or her to excel and to encounter Jesus Christ.”*⁵

- Make sport a great instrument of apostolate

I remember a priest in my diocese, who, other than the parish commitments every week, was coaching a basketball team and every Friday organized a soccer game among the boys of the parish. He was, in fact, he is a good priest on and off the field. The remarkable thing is that Sunday Mass was filled with guys who played with him. Why? Because the manner he behaved in sport was attractive. He attracts because he gives a testimony of coherence and truth in his own life. He has devoted his life to the parish, he has given himself entirely to the apostolate.

⁵ Address of Pope Francis to members of the sports associations for the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center), Saturday, 7 June 2014.

- Not abandon the Christian formation

One of the dangers of Christians today is to forget about spiritual life and concentrate on doing, doing, doing ... We cannot turn our mission into social voluntarism. Without neglecting other initiatives, the Christian gives himself /herself because of a person, Jesus Christ. The Holy Father addressing coaches said: *you can be a valid formator of young people, beside the parents, the teachers, the priests and the catechists. However, every good formator must receive a solid formation. It is necessary to form the formators. Therefore, it is opportune (...) to appeal to all the organizations that operate in the field of sport, the international and national federations, the lay and ecclesial sports associations to give due attention and to invest the necessary resources for the professional, human and spiritual formation of coaches. How good it would be if in all sports, and at all levels, from the great international competitions to the tournaments of the parish oratories, young people found in their coaches authentic witnesses of life and of lived faith!*⁶ Now, I would like you to ask yourselves: How do you hire coaches? How do you care about their formation in values, in virtues, in faith?

- Make sport a form of openness to others

In contrast to the existing individualism, sport can generate large interactions with other Catholics, Christians and other faiths institutions who share a virtuous approach to sports. Saint John Paul II often recalled that *ideas are not imposed, but proposed*. Divine filiation leads us to see in the other a brother. It is important not to be self-centered.

- Don't forget the most important thing is to win.

Yes, to win eternal life. So what matters is not who won or lost, but rather how he or she played the game. A coach, should sanctify himself/herself doing the best, but not with an attitude of "winning at all costs".

Through the sport pastoral ministry you could teach the athletes that what should be understood about the practice of sport is that its ethical basis is no less universal than its distinctive concepts and skills. When a person enters the practice of sport he or she becomes obliged to its inherent moral demands no less than he or she becomes committed to an understanding and practice of its characteristic concepts and physical skills.

CONCLUSION

I hope these moments we have lived together will be useful to learn to love more sports, to respect, and to ensure respect and above all, to offer it to God, as a desire to do everything for Him. With Saint Paul we say *whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.*⁷ And I would paraphrase: "Whether you run a race or score a goal, do everything for the glory of God".

⁶ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the occasion of the International Seminar "Coaches: Educating People", 14th May 2015

⁷ Saint Paul, 1Corinthians 10:31.