

INCARNATIONAL AND REDEMPTIVE

When done well and initiated from an appropriate Gospel perspective, the good experiences in sports spill over into the lives of players, parents and siblings, into the lives of their coaches and teachers and to the entire Catholic community.

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I bet that deep down inside, all those involved in sports instinctively feel that sports somehow reflect the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. We realize at some level that sports are connected to improving the lives of the young people involved, while teaching valuable lessons that apply not only on the athletic field but transfer into the real struggles young people face every day as they grow up. An articulation of a theology of sports may let us pause to think about the relationship of sports to the Gospel and to how that relationship may best be worked out.

The opportunity to play sports is one of the ways we adults distract young people from focusing on vices such as drugs, alcohol abuse and other excesses, and direct their attention to those things which will make their lives more useful, such as cooperation, teamwork and actualizing their full potential. Sports are important, but sometimes it is difficult to say exactly what sports do for us and how we can connect what goes on in sports with the larger world so that students, coaches and parents understand that something of value is taking place.

Sports can and do relate to our understanding of God. What is our mission in sports? How do we provide opportunities for our young people to develop all they have been given in the light of God's grace? What kind of adult people should be involved in these programs? Do these adults understand that sports are connected to our belief in God and how we relate Gospel values in our words and actions?

It is possible to conduct athletic programs for young people, guided by the Gospel of Jesus, that teach Gospel values while developing good character in student athletes. When done well and initiated from an appropriate Gospel perspective, the good experiences in sports spill over into the lives of players, parents and siblings, into the lives of their coaches and teachers and to the entire Catholic community.

Our world view of sports should be large enough to embrace our personal convictions, our relationship with and faith in God, our commitment to the church and our identity as adult human beings; there should be no dissonance among our values. Together we face God, eternity and daily life with a convincing and consistent set of principles, beliefs, attitudes and desired outcomes.

Our sports programs must demonstrate values, attitudes and behavior that reflect and are consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ at every level. The Gospel of Jesus challenges us to live and implement the ethical and moral ideal through athletics. Jesus taught consistently that the ethical ideal was his goal: All people should be treated with respect; turn the other cheek; forgive those who have wronged us. This is a great challenge in athletics. We do everything we can to bring the ethical and moral ideal into sports and to make the ideal as real as we possibly can. We never forget that we are working toward a moral ideal.

Coaches, teachers and parents approaching sports should understand that sports are not just about playing ball. They realize, from the Gospel point of view, that many other things are involved in sports beyond the competition itself. Therefore we try to be good people who are passionate about giving to all the children involved on the team the leadership and direction to form their moral lives. We seek to impart that gift of faith, which we already have received, and transmit that gift through athletics. The primary goal of sports is to teach the values of our faith and the Gospel of Jesus Christ through active participation in sports which allows us to emphasize these values and highlight their contribution to the greater good.

Through sports we seek to teach values which may be transferred into the real world of responsible adult behavior. We know that it is the substance of the values we teach that matters; it is how the child handles victory and defeat that matters more than winning or losing. In Catholic

youth sports, we should speak freely about God and the importance of God in our lives as an essential component of our program. Therefore we can use athletics as a means to promote the total moral, spiritual, mental and physical development of each child. Everything we do involved with youth sports can be based on and traced back to the Gospel. We try to put the teachings of Jesus into practice by instructing our young people and giving them values to play sports well and to live life well. We realize that we have influence on young people because they want to be in sports, and they are excited about the chance to play and have fun. When a team comes together and plays as one unit, we are building Christian community.

Involvement in Catholic youth sports allows adults, whether parents or coaches, to be servant Leaders, helping all students grow in maturity and wisdom. Adults in the program are treated with dignity and respect, provide good teaching, responsible mentoring and careful supervision. They remain secure and confident in their role as adults when dealing with children. They realize that these young people are not their peers; they are dependents. Therefore adults act always as adults in their presence, in and out of their hearing.

SPORTS AS INCARNATIONAL

We know from John 3:16, "that God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Viewing sports as incarnational, we realize that God the creator sent Jesus to us to demonstrate value and dignity of each person. He constantly assures us about our worth. Those gifts that we have been given, our full human potential, are required, in a Gospel sense, to be developed to fulfill our destiny and to serve other people. Athletic talent is one of those talents given to us by God. In sports we are saying that appropriately teaching and coaching young people and developing their athletic talent along with their spiritual and academic talent are important goals for a young life.

In sports we promote a realizable idealism. We explain to our young people that the purity of their effort, their focus and dedicate the application of their energy, enthusiasm and excitement in a cooperative effort to excel is a way of developing some of their human talents. We do not pretend that their talent is limited just to sports; rather we insist that sports are one of many different aspects of the human personality that should be examined closely and developed to its full potential. We explain that God is within us.

Through our baptism, confirmation and Eucharist, God is a part of our daily lives. We have become God's children. In doing so the bright sunlight of God's love shines in our faces. We approach sports incarnation-ally with an idealism that seeks to bring out the very best in each of our young people, fl respect them as individuals and to harmonize their talent in concert with other young people in the united effort to do their best. We teach them the values of community ant team work. Because we are incarnational and positive, realizing that God is within us, we consistently emphasize the effort made and the goals realized. These things are life-giving. We believe that every act that shows effort and hard work, focus and cooperation, is a way of developing talent and building the h man community.

In emphasizing the positive and the life giving, we arc building self-confidence in each child. The responsible adults in the pro gram are fleshing out the Gospel message the each child is "worth more than many sparrows," and has a divine destiny to fulfill. Everything connected with sports should be positive, uplifting and affirming. There should be positive, no disrespecting, but rather an emphasis on building a strong sense of loyalty, community, family, friendship and fun.

SPORTS AS REDEMPTIVE

As believing Christians we seek salvation n with God. We answer that deep longing we have for the eternal and transcendent. We seek that which is perfect, that which will obliterate our faults and overcome our weakness and sins. We teach our young people that they, too, are in need of redemption, that Jesus in fact died for their sins and weaknesses. We want to strengthen their character so that they have the ability to resist temptation and to avoid sin. While we speak as positively as possible, we realize that there are difficulties and struggles in life, and children must be taught to face them with moral principles and values. We work to strengthen their character and allow them to become responsible adults in a world that too often says anything goes and handles things the easy way, rather than insisting on discipline, accountability and good behavior.

Our contribution to sports as responsible adults is a way we give back to God something of what we have received and, in our own way, to help make up for where we have fallen short. We help overcome our shortcomings by our contributions in youth sports. We teach our young people that

success is only gained by self-sacrifice and discipline. The hard things in life are part of what a responsible person must do. It is these very hard and challenging things, which often seem most unpleasant, that make the difference between being successful or being unsuccessful.

Redemptively, we work together as part of the community sharing the same journey of faith. As responsible adults we understand Gospel values and remain faithful to them. We realize our own need for repentance and continual conversion. We appropriately explain redemption to the young people under our care, while working with them in both the challenging and rewarding aspects of sports.

SPIRITUALITY AND SPORTS

Adults involved in Catholic youth sports are asked to reflect on their lives, to center their values on God, family and on helping others. We ask them to realize that the effort they make in youth sports at any level, and in any capacity, is connected to Gospel values, and the promotion of these values to young people. We seek to find God, who is within us, by reaching outward; by helping our young people to look within themselves and to grow by finding God through their participation in sports in relationship with other on the team. We understand that we are part of a larger church. Ideally, adults involved in youth sports are active believers who seek to draw closer to God by and through their participation in sports, and who want to draw the players closer to God by means of their involvement.

It is hoped that the best adult role models are people who have built personal interior lives connected to the church, which includes prayer and regular attendance of the sacraments. Such people are seeking to serve others and to be involved in the greater community. They provide service through their involvement in sports. They wish to share their gifts with the larger community as an action of giving, caring and Christian witness. Adults involved in sports must realize that high standards of personal behavior, attitude, honesty, integrity and sincerity are required of them. Adults need both to question and to understand their own motives and to compare them to the values found in the Gospel. When this is done, adults involved enjoy clarity of purpose, focus of effort and an understanding of the Gospel-centered goals of sports.

By examining our relationship with sport for young people, adults can actualize both the incarnational and redemptive nature of athletic participation. They may focus and direct their own lives to a better purpose. They can reach out and truly help children who are involved in sports, especially their own children. It makes no sense to attempt to teach values and behaviors to young people when the youth see that we do not implement them in our own lives. A working theology is required to advance the mission to spread the Gospel to all people and to provide our young people with excellent opportunities for athletic participation and growth in values.

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