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**Sport in light of the Year of St. Paul
and in response to the educational emergency**

I would like to present you with three basic ideas. First, to share with you Pope Benedict’s analysis of the “educational emergency”. Then, to see how this educational crisis involves also the world of youth sports, which is affected by this, but can also be part of the solution to this crisis. And lastly, drawing upon the richness of the Year of St. Paul I wish to propose six values or virtues to recover through the practice of sports.

A) A word from Pope Benedict XVI about the educational emergency and the youth

Why the term “educational emergency”? In his well know discourse from June 11, 2007, that inaugurated the Lateran Education Convention for the diocese of Rome , the Holy Father made reference to the so-called education emergency. I would like to offer an analysis of some points from this talk which apply to the theme of our seminar.

As the Holy father pointed out: “Daily experience tells us - as we all know - that precisely in our day educating in the faith is no easy undertaking. Today, in fact, every educational task seems more and more arduous and precarious. **Consequently, there is talk of a great "educational emergency", of the increasing difficulty encountered in transmitting the basic values of life** and correct behaviour to the new generations, a difficulty that involves both schools and families and, one might say, any other body with educational aims”. Here we can think of this extending to include sport associations. But we will touch upon this later.

Plus, due to dogma of relativism, children missing solid ground to build their lives upon- more insecurity. Pope Benedict sates that: “We may add that this is an inevitable emergency: in a society, in a culture, which all too often make relativism its creed - relativism has become a sort of dogma - in such a society the light of truth is missing; indeed, it is considered dangerous and "authoritarian" to speak of truth..”

Consequently, “For this reason- states Pope Benedict XVI- **education tends to be broadly reduced to the transmission of specific abilities or capacities for doing**”. In other words, it is spitting out facts, but not formative. In fact, as the Holy Father also notes: today we “ignores the essential aim of education which is the formation of a person to enable him or her to live to the full and to make his or her own contribution to the common good.”

Furthermore, “Both parents and teachers are easily tempted to abdicate their educational duties and even no longer to understand what their role, or rather, the mission entrusted to them, is”. No one wants to take responsibility for a child’s formation! Parents blame teachers, teachers blame parents, (and the coach is the last to consider himself an “educator”...but in the end, it is the children who are to lose from this!

B) What can be done , how can we resolve the educational crisis?

The Holy Father notes that not all is “doom and gloom”, as there are some signs of people waking up and taking notice, as he says: “However, on many sides the demand for authentic education and the rediscovery of the need for educators who are truly such is increasing.” So, educators must regain their role, that they willing want to pass on to others So, what about sport? The same applications can be made. Sport, also, has to recover its “formative edge”. This is, in great part, a task that involved directly the work of many of you present who are the directors or presidents of national youth sports associations. It starts with you, you must stress this need to take responsibility in forming these young people, not simply organizing time for them to play. Thus it starts with you, and then must spread to the coaches, and the sports chaplains as well as the parents.

We must form a network of educators- all working together : parents teachers, extra-curricular activities. As the Holy Father mentioned in this same address at the Lateran: “The entire Christian community, with all its many branches and components, is challenged by the important task of leading the new generations to the encounter with Christ: on this terrain, therefore, we must express ... our willingness and readiness to work together to "build a network", to achieve with an open and sincere mind every useful form of synergy, ...”

All this requires personal attention that is proper to love, not just a task to fulfill. “Furthermore, it is an education ...that has need of that closeness which is proper to love. Especially today- states the Holy Father- , when isolation and loneliness are a widespread condition to which noise and group conformity is no real remedy, personal guidance becomes essential, giving those who are growing up the assurance that they are loved, understood and listened to”.

Here, we see very evidently the special role a coach can have ,as he or she spends more time with children than their parents, and other teachers. A coach is one of the few titles still respected and venerated. His is a complementary role to the work of parents, and the child have need of this “tertium quid”, an adult other than their parents to reinforce the same values as their parents are telling them. As the Holy Father noted, “As children gradually grow up, their inner desire for personal autonomy naturally increases. Especially in adolescence, this can easily lead to them taking a critical distance from their family. Here, the closeness which can be guaranteed by the priest, Religious, catechist or other educators [and here we think especially of the coach] capable of making the friendly Face of the Church and love of Christ concrete for the young person, becomes particularly important.

The coach must give witness through their action as well as their words. “The task of education –states Pope Benedict- passes through freedom but also requires authority. Therefore, especially when it is a matter of educating in faith, the figure of the witness and the role of witnessing is central. A witness of Christ does not merely transmit information but is personally involved with the truth Christ proposes and, through the coherency of his own life, becomes a dependable reference point. However, he does not refer to himself, but to Someone who is infinitely greater than he is, in whom he has trusted and whose trustworthy goodness he has experienced. The authentic Christian educator is therefore a witness who finds his model in Jesus Christ.”

C) With the year of St Paul and this marathon

A concrete response for the Year of St. Paul: Six lessons for sport and for life; six “human virtues” that we find in the writings of St. Paul that he illustrates with images borrowed from the world of sport. In most cases, these are attitudes or virtues present in sport in the time of Paul, who was familiar with the Isthmus games at Corinth. He uses these images to illustrate their further reaching application to the spiritual life.

1) RESPECT FOR ONSELF

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? (...) Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.”
(1Cor 6, 15; 19-20)

My body is not a thing, it is a part of me and makes up who I am. It has a value that is priceless. How important this lesson is for young people today! Think of problems of youth related to sexuality...Or in the area of sport, doping... All of these problems arise and even prevail when we lose sight of a Christian anthropology, when we fall into a dualism, where the “I”, the “Ego”, the person, is separated from the person’s body.

How much we are indebted to John Paul II for his “theology of the body”, where the human’s person’s corporal dimension is integrated into the spiritual dimension. In a meeting with Italian and Argentine soccer players, John Paul II pointed out: “It is good to recall, in this regard, that already in the Christian thinkers of the first centuries firmly opposed a certain ideology, then in vogue, which was characterized by a clear depreciation of all that is corporeal, carried out in the name of an misguided exaltation of the spiritual. Based on biblical data, they strongly affirmed a unified vision of the human person. “What is man- asked an author at the end of the second century, beginning of the third- what is man if not but a rational animal composed of body and soul? Is the soul, taken by itself, a man? No, this is the soul of a person. Then is the body the man? No, but it must be said that this is the body of a man. Because of this, neither the soul, nor the body taken separately is man: he who is called by this name is what is born from the union of these” (*De Resurrectione*, VIII: Rouet de Journal, Enchiridion Patristicum, n. 147, p. 59) (John Paul II, may 25, 1979).

Sport still has much ground to make up in this sense. Recently, in a meeting with Olympic Skiers from Austria, Pope Benedict also drew attention to this: “Body, spirit and soul form a single unity and each component must be in harmony with the other. You know how necessary this interior harmony is in order to reach sporting goals at the highest levels. Consequently, even the most demanding sports must be rooted in a holistic view of the human person, recognizing his profound dignity and favoring an overall development and full maturity of the person. Otherwise, if sport is only focused on mere material performance, it will fall short of realizing its necessary social dimension” (Oct 6, 2007).

2) DISCIPLINE

“Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.” (1Cor 9:24-27)

How much young people, who live in a world that offers them all kinds of easy, yet fleeting pleasures, need to recover a sense of discipline in their lives. And this discipline can be learned, practiced exercised, and achieved through sporting activities. Discipline in sport seems like a particularly effective way to strengthen many human and Christian and human virtues. John Paul II pointed out during the Jubilee that: “Anyone who plays sports knows this very well: it is only at the cost of strenuous training that significant results are achieved (...). At the recent Olympic Games in Sydney we admired the feats of the great athletes, who sacrificed themselves for years, day after day, to achieve those results. This is the logic of sport, especially Olympic sports; it is also the logic of life: without sacrifices, important results are not obtained, or even genuine satisfaction” (JP II , Homily at the Jubilee of Sport, June 29, 2000).

American sports writer Grantland Rice, in his poem, “How to be a champion” writes:
“You wonder how they do it and you look to see the knack,
You watch the foot in action, or the shoulder or the back,
But when you sport the answer where the higher glammers lurk,
You’ll find in moving higher up the laurel covered spire,
that most of it is practice and the rest is hard work.”

3) TEAMWORK

“... May I hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the gospel, not intimidated in any way by your opponents”.
(Phil 1:27-28).

Or: *“Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not be wise in your own estimation. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. (...) Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good.”*
(Rm 12: 10; 18; 21)

We live in a society more and more egocentric. Especially when we consider how many children in our associations are only-child of a family where the parents might even be separated. Situations that are difficult for a child to learn how to operate as a member of a team. Because of this, sports can provide an opportunity to learn how to play as a team. In most team sports, players learn how little acts of selfless giving are indispensable to playing the game well. Players also must look for the open player and help their teammates get open to receive a pass and then come to realize that they are being constantly supported by their other teammates with respect to their position. Coaches can help to bring this aspect out by praising players for maintaining their position, for an assist, or for helping out on defense as well as offense.

4) ACCEPTING DEFEAT

“But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body”.

(2 Cor 4:7-10)

Everyone runs into difficult moments in life. You will only be able to overcome your difficulties if you have a strong will. The fight against adversity involves tenacity, great self-dominion, and profound conviction. Those without strong willpower are always dissatisfied in their lives because they are unable to overcome difficulties and simply give up. They live in bitterness, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness, and they blame others for everything.

If life is a path that we all have to travel, with its ups and downs, with its harder and easier moments, our will is the motor that moves us. Only those with strong wills can safely travel the difficult uphill slopes and the easy downward slopes. Those without strong wills only know how to travel downhill and stop in the face of difficulty.

To learn how to accept a loss and to learn from it, without condemning one self “a loser” should be a goal of all sports educational endeavours. Yet it is something that does not come naturally, it must be learned through experience. Everyone wants to win, but in each game, there is only side who is the Victor. Here we know how important the role of the coach is in helping his team recover after a loss. To see what really counts, beyond the numerical score, to put all in perspective.

As coaches, parents, and presidents of sport associations, we need to reinforce that “success” is not simply defined by a win. One of the most winning-est coaches, John Wooden, did not define success by victory. Rather, for him: “Success is the peace of mind which is the result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.”

5) BEING A GRACIOUS VICTOR (HUMILITY)

“I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me.” (Phil 4,13)

Or:

“It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ (Jesus). Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:12-14)

Sports can also teach people how to handle “success”. How to see their talents as gifts that come from God. Pope Benedict also points this out: “In the end, sporting activity must help one to recognize their own talents and capacities, their very efforts and their own very life as gifts that come from God. For this reason, sport should always have God our Creator as its ultimate point of reference. It is in this sense that the Apostle makes reference to sports competition in order to recall man’s highest calling: “Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one” (1Cor. 9: 24-25). Dear friends, you are not only sports competitors, but also athletes who are striving to attain the crown of the Christian life.” (Benedict XVI , Oct 6, 2007).

6) PERSERVERANCE FIGHTING TO THE VERY END STICKING TO IT

“It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ (Jesus). Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:12-14)

“I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.” (2 Tim 4:7)

For an athlete to function properly he must be focused. This is the ability to stay fixed on your goal and to stay the course in the face of distractions or temptations. An athlete must learn how to concentrate on his or her objective and to be determined to reach this goal. If you are not focused and intent on accomplishing what you are doing, you will not be able to resist the temptation to do something else that might be more fun or attractive at a particular moment.

We live in a society marked by a use it and throw it away attitude. Perseverance does not come easy. Sports can teach youth to stick it out for an entire season, to “keep at it, to look forward to the next battle or challenge with renewed vigour and determination.

Conclusion

I hope this brief survey of these virtues that are implicit in sport and so helpful in life serve as a stimulus to see the rich potential that sport- when staged in the right way, with a clear educational and formative dimension- can be of a great asset in helping the youth of today to become the mature young adults of tomorrow. Our discourse today remained somewhat on the level of the human virtues, but, as you can see, these same virtues can also be applied to the spiritual life with great results. In his address to the Austria Ski team, Pope Benedict pointed to this when he spoke about the virtues of: “perseverance, determination, spirit of sacrifice, internal and external discipline, attention to others, team work, solidarity, justice, courtesy, and the recognition of one’s own limits, and still others [...] These same virtues-said the Pope- also come into play in a significant way in daily life and need to be continually exercised and practiced”.