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Taking the Catholic Pulse

Catholic sports not just about wins, but the common good

Father Patrick Kelly Feb 1, 2017
SPECIAL TO CRUX

South Sudan refugee track and field athlete Paulo Lokoro poses for photos as St. Peter's Basilica is visible in background, during an interview with the Associated Press, at the Vatican, Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2016. Lokoro was in Rome to attend the first international conference on sports and faith 'Sport at the service of humanity', scheduled for Wednesday at the Vatican with Pope Francis presiding over the opening ceremony. (Credit: AP Photo/Andrew Medichini.)

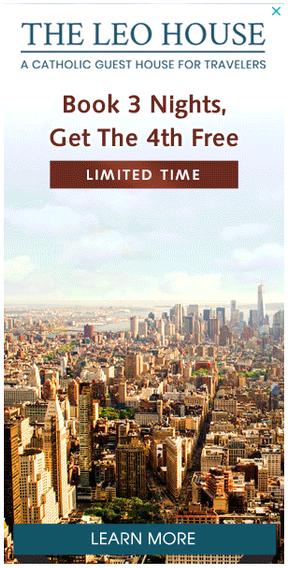
Commentary

A Vatican conference called "Sport at the Service of Humanity" in October was a heady experience. Just at the opening ceremony itself, Pope Francis, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, and International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach all spoke.

Artists from several cultures gave stirring dance and musical performances and Olympic, Paralympic and professional athletes discussed their experiences in sport. During the rest of the conference, Lang Lang played a piano concerto in the Vatican gardens, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi gave a talk in the Sistine chapel about the election of Pope Francis, and we had dinners in the Vatican museum.

The music, dance and the art in the Vatican museum reminded me of the ways the Catholic church, at its best moments, has embraced what is good and beautiful in cultural traditions and expression.

The same mentality has also led the Church to celebrate play and sport



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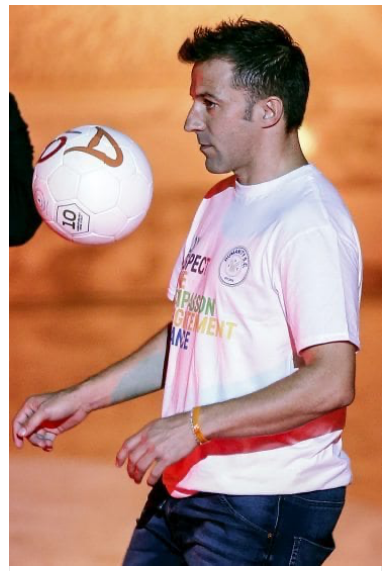
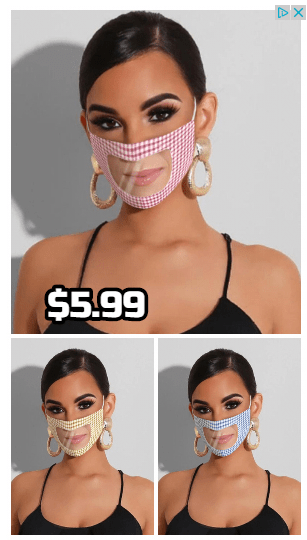
throughout history, a fact that is often overlooked by historians of sport. While some clergy have had their more Puritan moments, the mainstream tendency in the Catholic church has been to accept play and sport and provide time and space for their practice.



Former Italian football player Alessandro Del Piero plays before the arrival of Pope Francis during the opening ceremony of the 1st international conference on sports and faith "Sport at the Service of Humanity," the first global conference on faith and sport promoted by the Vatican Pontifical Council for Culture, in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican, Wednesday, Oct. 5 ,2016. (Credit: AP Photo/Fabio Frustaci.)

Practically speaking, this approach led to the development of religious cultures in medieval Europe in which games and sport were engaged in on feast days and Sundays, and to their incorporation in the schools of the humanists and early Jesuits during the Renaissance.

This heritage influenced Catholic schools in the United States, which incorporated time and space for young people to play games and sports from the start in the mid-nineteenth century.



The theological underpinning for the acceptance of play and sport had to do with the understanding of the material world as good, the person as a unity of body, mind and spirit and the notion that virtue had to do with moderation. With respect to the latter, this meant that a person should not be working or studying all the time, but also needed time for play and recreation.

But with this groundbreaking Vatican conference, we are at a new moment with respect to the Church's engagement with sport.

And so what was emphasized? In continuity with the longer tradition, conference organizers started with the premise that sport is a human good. They highlighted sport's association with joy and that it can be a context for personal growth and transformation. They also emphasized that sport can help people to encounter one another across borders and boundaries.

Of course, if sport is a human good, justice requires that it is available to all who wish to participate. It is a paradox that in the midst of such seeming extravagance and luxury, one of the main themes of the conference had to do with making play and sport available to those who often do not have opportunities to engage in it — persons with disabilities, displaced youth or youth from poorer communities, and girls and young women.

I was charged with facilitating a breakout session of twenty five leaders brainstorming how we could help bring this about.

After the conference, I was wondering what more I could do in my own work in the United States with regard to issues of accessibility and inclusion in sport. Fortunately for me, I didn't return directly to the United States because I was teaching this Fall at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua, Nicaragua. It was in Managua that I was introduced to a wonderful example of how to do just what the Vatican conference was encouraging us all to do.

I was invited by some colleagues at the UCA who are also members of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Christian Life Community to attend a football game (Americans, read "soccer"). For six years, the Guadalupe CLC has run as a

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Commentary

pastoral work a football league of 28 teams for boys and young men (about 15-25 years old) from Santo Domingo, one of the poorest barrios of Managua.

The game I attended was the championship contest between Street Soccer and Bethel. It was great fun to watch, as players competed with great passion and considerable skill. In a closely contested match, Street Soccer eked out a 2-1 win over Bethel.

According to Juan Jose Sosa, the director of the sociology department at the UCA and a member of the Guadalupe CLC, the "jugadores" in the league are socially excluded. In their barrio there are few opportunities. Some of the players have attended primary school, but only a few have attended high school. Most have to work instead, selling items that they carry on their backs to the market. They don't have hope for more meaningful work in the future either.

Sosa points out that the young men struggle with self-esteem and with maintaining a sense of meaning in their lives. They are vulnerable to becoming addicted to drugs or to reacting to their circumstances with the use of violence.

The CLC members said the league is a way to engage these young men, by starting with something they enjoy. According to Talia M. Valverde, the president of CLC in Nicaragua, if you just say "read this" or "come to a workshop," the young men aren't sure what to think. "But if you say 'Let's play football'," she said, "they all come."

In addition to playing football, all of the players are required to attend workshops on topics such as leadership, emotional intelligence, masculinity, violence, and spiritual growth. Sosa said leadership is a popular topic with the players, in part because it is easy for them to understand in the context of playing on a team.

The players at first find emotional intelligence a difficult subject, but they end up liking it very much and even requesting it. In this case too, there is a direct connection with playing football in that during an intense game they have to learn how to be aware of and control their emotions. If they become angry during a game, for example, they need to learn "how to think first, then act."

There is also Mass before every game. While every player is required to attend the workshops, only representatives from each team are required to attend Mass. Since life in the barrio can be chaotic and stressful, Mass is an opportunity for the young men to get into a relaxed frame of mind before the game.

Evangelical young men play in the league along with Catholics. Sosa said the Evangelical players are very open to the themes treated in the workshops and especially appreciate the emphasis on spiritual growth. They even attend Mass regularly.

After each season the players fill out a thorough evaluation (63 questions) created by Sosa and his sociology colleagues, with questions about such topics as health, socio-economic conditions, violence in the barrio, the helpfulness of themes treated in the workshops, their experiences of playing on a team and spirituality.

According to Sosa, some themes that players commonly emphasize in the evaluations are: a) that it is important to play football because it is one day less to consume drugs or experience a violent situation; b) that it is helpful to them that, in addition to football, there is an emphasis on personal formation and growth; and c) that they value a great deal that they make very good friends in the league.

The Guadalupe CLC does not yet sponsor a league for girls and young women. When asked about this, Sosa said that there are many barriers to overcome to be able to do so. In part because the barrio is not viewed as a safe place, most parents want their daughters to stay close to home, for example. And so girls are not as likely to go out to play sports.

Sosa says that in order for girls and women to be more involved in sports many things would need to change in terms of the harsh reality of life in the barrio and people's mentalities. The CLC league is trying to take the first steps in changing the way people think by addressing issues associated with "machismo" culture and gender relations in its workshops.

There is much for Catholics in the United States to learn from the Vatican conference and the example of the CLC sponsored league in Managua.

It is true that Catholics in the United States already have a track record of making use of sport as a way to reach out to children from poor communities. The Catholic Youth Organization was founded in the early 20th century to provide experiences in sport for poor children from immigrant Catholic communities and was associated with education in the faith, in particular.

Because the CYO is present today in most Catholic parishes and elementary schools in the United States, it continues to provide opportunities for children from poor communities to play sports in faith based contexts and to experience themselves as a part of the wider society.

On the other hand, there is another more dominant strand with regard to the way Catholicism and sport have been related in the United States. In the late 19th and early 20th century, when many Catholic immigrants were experiencing discrimination, Catholic schools started fielding varsity athletic teams to compete against other schools.

Catholics in these schools viewed success in sports as a way to show that they were as physically skilled, capable and smart as any other Americans, and in particular members of the Protestant majority.

Catholic high schools were remarkably successful at this endeavor all around the country. And competitions between Catholic and public high schools attracted much attention. Gerald Gems points out that in the early 20th century as many as 80,000 people would gather to watch the championship football games between Chicago Catholic and public high schools.

At the intercollegiate level, the women from Immaculata College won the first three women's national basketball championships in the early 1970s. Catholic universities such as Notre Dame, Georgetown and Villanova have become household names in part because of the success of their athletic programs. It is appropriate to be proud of accomplishments such as these.

In our time, however, Catholics tend to be viewed as an accepted and influential part of mainstream US society rather than as the "other."

Given this new context, we are now at a moment when we can begin to reflect in a deeper way about the relationship between our sport practices and our faith, in dialogue with our Protestant brothers and sisters and all people of good will. Catholic high schools and universities can play an important role in this regard because of the rich cultural and intellectual traditions they draw on to reflect on contemporary experience.

To take just one example, as was mentioned earlier, Catholic theologians understand the human person as a unity of body, mind and spirit. All Christians would share this understanding, and members of some other religious traditions would have a similar understanding (although perhaps with different terminology and conceptualization.) But this is very different from a Cartesian understanding of the person, which separates body and mind and discards spirit entirely.

While contemporary philosophers have moved beyond Descartes, the Cartesian understanding all too often still influences the way we educate. In our universities, for example, it is common for the athletic (body) and academic (mind) sections of campus to have little or nothing to do with each other. Apart from physical education classes, we rarely if ever ask our students to think about what they are experiencing in their bodies in terms of play and sport.

This approach makes sense if we think that our bodily experiences do not impact our consciousness, and if we have already ruled out spirit.

On the other hand, if we understand the person as a unity of body, mind and spirit, it follows that bodily activities such as sport impact young people at the level of consciousness (insight, meaning making, etc) and even at the spiritual dimension of their lives.

The important work the CLC league does in Managua is based on this presupposition. Of course, it is the quality of the experiences young people are having in sport that will determine whether sport participation has a salutary effect on them in mind and spirit.

This is why it is important to pay attention to these experiences, whether they take place in intramural sports, other recreational activities or varsity sports. The quality of experiences in university varsity level sports is especially important to pay attention to in our time, given that Division 1 intercollegiate athletics are becoming more commercialized than ever before.

We could also take inspiration from Juan Jose Sosa and the sociology department at the UCA, which has invested so much in time and resources into the league for the young men from the barrio Santo Domingo.

We live at a time when wealth inequality is a fundamental social problem in the United States and gun violence is taking the lives of many young people in poor communities and in predominantly African American neighborhoods of our cities.

Can scholars in Catholic universities partner with others who are providing young people in these contexts the opportunity to play sports, and take the time to learn from the youth about the realities of their lives and the challenges they face? Can scholars work with community leaders and policy makers toward the end goal that these young people will be meaningfully included and have increased opportunities in the wider society?

If Catholic universities were able to do so, they would be distinguishing themselves in sport not only by their wins, but also by their commitment to the common good and especially to those who are poor and marginalized.

Fr. Patrick Kelly SJ, PhD, is associate professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University. He is the author of Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times *(Paulist Press, 2012) and the editor of* Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives *(University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).*

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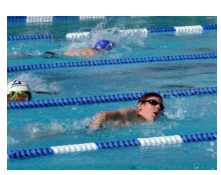

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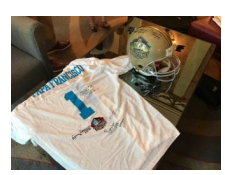

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