

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE  
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE  
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

# **BOLLETTINO**

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 180601b

Friday 01.06.2018

## **“Giving the best of yourself: a Document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person, from the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life**

### **Chapter 1 Motives and purpose**

#### *Give the very best of yourselves*

Giving one's very best is a fundamental theme in sports, as athletes both individually and collectively strive to achieve their goals in the game. When a person gives his very best, he experiences satisfaction and the joy of accomplishment. The same is true in human life in general and in living out the Christian faith. We all want to be able to say one day, with St. Paul, “I have fought to the end the good fight, finished my course, I have kept the faith.” (2 Tim 4:7). This document attempts to help the reader understand the relationship between giving our very best in sports and in living the Christian faith in every aspect of our lives.

#### **1.1 Motive for this document**

The Church as the people of God has a rich and profound experience of humanity. With great humility, it wants to share and put this experience at the service of sports. The Church approaches the world of sports because it desires to contribute to the construction of an increasingly authentic, humane sport.

Indeed, “nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo”[1] in the hearts of the followers of Christ. Sport is a human universal and has taken on a new level of importance in our time and so it too finds an echo in the heart of the people of God.

The Church understands the human person as a unit of body, soul and spirit, and seek to avoid any kind of reductionism in sport that debases human dignity. “The Church is interested in sport because the person is at her heart, the whole person, and she recognizes that sports activity affects the formation, relations and spirituality of a person”[2].

This document intends to be a brief presentation of the views of the Holy See and the Catholic Church on sports. There has been a tendency recently, in part because of the way the history of sport has been written, to think that the Catholic Church has only had a negative view of and impact on sport, especially in the medieval and

early modern periods, because of negative Catholic attitudes toward the body. But this is based on a misunderstanding of Catholic attitudes toward the body during these periods and it misses the positive influence of Catholic theological, spiritual and educational traditions on sport as an aspect of culture.[3]

“The Christian attitude towards sport as towards the other expressions of the person’s natural faculties such as science, learning, work, art, love, and social and political commitment is not an attitude of rejection or flight, but one of respect, esteem, even though correcting and elevating them: in a word, an attitude of redemption.”[4] An attitude of redemption is present in sport when the primacy of the dignity of the person is respected and sport serves the human person in his or her integral development. As Pope Francis put it, “The bond between the Church and the world of sports is a beautiful reality that has strengthened over time, for the Ecclesial Community sees in sports a powerful instrument for the integral growth of the human person. Engaging in sports, in fact, rouses us to go beyond ourselves and our own self interests in a healthy way; it trains the spirit in sacrifice and, if it is organized well, it fosters loyalty in interpersonal relations, friendship, and respect for rules.”[5]

The Catholic Church addresses this document to all people of good will. In particular, the Church is interested in dialoguing with the many people and organizations who have been developing programs to defend the human values that are inherent in sport practice.

Also, the Church wants to address this document to all the Catholic faithful, starting with bishops and priests, but especially to the laity, who are those most in contact with sport as a lived reality. It aims to be a document that speaks to all those who love and value sport, be they players, teachers, coaches, parents or those for whom sport is a job as well as a vocation. We would also like to extend these thoughts to our brothers and sisters in faith who have been evangelizing and promoting Christian values in sport for more than 50 years.[6]

#### *How could the Church not be interested?*

The Church has been a sponsor of the beautiful in art, music and other areas of human activity throughout its history. This is ultimately because beauty comes from God, and therefore its appreciation is built into us as his beloved creatures. Sport can offer us a chance to take part in beautiful moments, or to see these take place. In this way, sport has the potential to remind us that beauty is one of the ways we can encounter God.

The universality of the sports experience, its communicative and symbolic strength, and its great educational and training potential are very evident today. Sport is now a phenomenon of civilization that fully resides in contemporary culture and permeates the styles and choices of many people's lives so we could question ourselves as Pius XII did: "How can the Church therefore not be interested in sport?"[7]

Pius XII and Paul VI then vigorously opened the dialogue between the Church and the world of sport in the 20th century, promoting the aspects that are common to sport and the Christian life and joining the ideals of the Olympic movement with those of Catholics: "Physical effort, moral qualities, love for peace: on these three points the dialogue that the Church maintains with the world of sport is sincere and friendly. Our desire is that it is ever wider and more fruitful."[8]

#### *The necessity for pastoral care in sport: an essentially educational task*

The dialogue between the Church and sport has produced and continues to produce a multifaceted proposal for pastoral care, especially in schools, parishes and Catholic associations. John Paul II supported this process, both in the Magisterium and in choosing to open for the first time within the Holy See a Church and Sport Office.

“The Church must be in the front ranks in this area, in order to plan a special apostolate adapted to the needs of athletes and especially to promote sports which can create the condition of a life rich in hope.”[9] The Church not only encourages sports practice but also wants to be "in" sport, considered as a modern Courtyard of the Gentiles and an areopagus where the Gospel is announced.

The Magisterium continually refers to the need to promote “a sport for the person” that is able to give meaning to life and to fully develop the person morally, socially, ethically, and spiritually. The Church’s engagement with sports takes the form of a varied and widespread pastoral presence inspired by the Church’s interest in the

human person.

## 1.2 The Church and Sport until now

The Church has been engaged in dialogue with sport from the earliest years of its existence. It is well known that St. Paul used sports metaphors to explain the Christian life to the Gentiles. In the medieval period, lay Catholics played games and sports on feast days, which accounted for a good deal of the year, as well as on Sundays. Such play found theological support in the writing of Thomas Aquinas who argued that there can be “a virtue about games” because virtue has to do with moderation. A virtuous person, by this account, should not be working all the time, but also needs time for play and recreation. The humanists of the Renaissance and the early Jesuits made use of Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of virtue when they decided that students needed time for play and recreation during the course of the school day. This was the original rationale for the inclusion of play and sports in educational institutions in the Western world.[10]

Moreover, from the beginning of the modern era, the Church has expressed an interest in this phenomenon, as she appreciates its educational potential and also shares many values with sport. The Church has actively promoted the development of sport itself through organized and structured forms.

Sport in the modern world arose in the context of the industrial revolution whose socially, politically and economically fertile ground gave sport the means to advance across the globe. Sport is a result of modernity and at the same time has been made a “bearer” of modernity. Moreover, in our time sport is profoundly changing and is undergoing severe pressure to change. Our hope is that sport experts not only “manage” change but also do so by seeking to understand and hold firm to the principles so dear to ancient and modern sport: education and human promotion.

In 1904, Pius X opened the doors of the Vatican to sport by hosting a youth gymnastics event. The chronicles of that time do not hide their amazement toward this gesture. A story is reported that in response to the question from a puzzled priest of the curia, “Where are we going to finish?” Pius X replied, “My dear, in Paradise!”[11]

But without any doubt, Saint John Paul II put engagement and dialogue with sport at its highest level of importance with respect to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. After the Jubilee of 2000 where he preached in front of 80,000 young athletes at the Olympic Stadium in Rome, he decided to create the Church & Sport office, which since 2004 has been studying and promoting a Christian vision of sport that emphasizes its importance for the building of a more humane, peaceful and just society as well as for evangelization.

### *Not a Christian sport but a Christian vision of sport*

Even if national or international sports federations and associations were overtly declared to be of Catholic origin, the purpose was not to create a “Christian” sport that was different, separate or an alternative development but to offer a vision for sport that is grounded in a Christian understanding of the human person and of a just society.

This focus on a vision of sport has matured quickly. In one of its documents about sports, the Italian Bishops Conference said that, “if there is not a Christian sport, it is instead fully legitimate to have a Christian vision of sport that does not just give sport universally shared ethical values, but advances its own perspective, which is innovative and makes a service to sport itself and to the person and society.”[12]

“Without in any way undermining and invalidating the specific nature of sport, the heritage of Christian faith renders this activity free from ambiguity and deviations, facilitating its full realization.”[13] Christianity is therefore not an “ethical quality mark” of sport, a label juxtaposed but external to it. Christianity is proposed as an added value that is able to help give fullness to the sporting experience.

## 1.3 Purpose of the document

The Church values sport in itself, as an arena of human activity where the virtues of temperance, humility, courage, patience can be fostered and encounters with beauty, goodness, truth and joy can be witnessed. These kinds of experiences can be had by people of all nations and communities from across the world irrespective of the standard or level of sport. It is this dimension that makes sport such a truly modern global phenomenon and therefore something the Church is passionately interested in.

Therefore, she wants to raise her voice in the service of sport. The Church feels co-responsible for sport and for safeguarding it from the drifts that threaten it every day, particularly dishonesty, manipulations and commercial abuse.

“Sport is the *joy of life, a game, a celebration*, and as such it must be properly used [...] and freed from excess technical perfection and professionalism through a recovery of its free nature, its ability to strengthen bonds of friendship, to foster dialogue and openness to others, as an expression of the richness of being, much more valid and to be prized than having, and hence far above the harsh laws of production and consumption and all other purely utilitarian and hedonistic considerations in life.”[14] On this level the dialogue, the collaboration between the Church and sport, will be profitable.

As well the Church desires to be of service to all who work in sport either in paid roles or the vast majority who are involved as volunteers, as officials, coaches, teachers, administrators, parents and the athletes themselves.

Having articulated the motivations and purpose for the dialogue between the Church and sports in Chapter 1, the document will explore in Chapter 2 the reality of sport from its origins to its modern contexts. In doing so, it reflects on a definition of sport and the relevance of sport in and for the world. The document then in Chapter 3 dives deeper into an anthropological understanding of sport and its importance specifically for the human person as a unity of body, soul and spirit. Then the document treats how sport speaks to our greater search for ultimate meaning, and promotes human freedom and creativity. The experience of sport is one that involves justice, sacrifice, joy, harmony, courage, equality, respect, and solidarity on this search for meaning. Ultimate meaning from a Christian understanding is the ultimate happiness that is found in the experience of the all-encompassing love and mercy of God as realized in a relationship with Jesus Christ in the Spirit which takes place in and is lived out in the community of faith.

Next, in Chapter 4, the document explores specific challenges to the promotion of a humane and just sport, including the debasement of the body, doping, corruption, and the sometimes negative influence of spectators. The Church recognizes her shared responsibility with sports leaders to point out wrong directions taken and unethical behavior and to steer sport in a way that promotes human development. Finally, in Chapter 5, the document presents an overview of the Church's ongoing efforts to contribute to the humanization of sports in the modern world. Sport in its various contexts, such as amateur and professional arenas, can and does serve as an effective tool for education and the formation of human values.

Certainly, there are more topics related to the possibilities and challenges of sport that are not discussed in this document. This text is not meant to serve as an exhaustive summary of the theories and realities pertaining to sport but rather seeks to articulate the Church's understanding of the sport phenomenon and its relationship to faith.

## **Chapter 2: The Sport Phenomenon**

Sport is a universal phenomenon. Wherever and whenever humans live together, they take pleasure in playing games, in enjoying the motion of their bodies, in perfecting their physical abilities or in competing with each other. Presumably at all times and all places, therefore, people have practiced what we nowadays call sport. Given this backdrop, is not a total misconception if we take sport as a kind of anthropological constant. The term 'sport' itself, of course, is more recent. It stems from the Old French expression *desporter* or *se desporter* – which is a derivate of the Latin word *de(s)portare* – and means to amuse oneself. Eventually, in the early Modern Age the abbreviation 'sport' was coined, and from that time on, the term was used to describe the variety of activities that fascinate so many people as athletes or as spectators.[15]

As has already been mentioned, with this document, the Church wants to raise her voice in the service of sport. She thus wants shed some light on the anthropological significance of sport, the challenges it faces, and the pastoral opportunities it offers. Before this can be done however, it will be helpful to gain some closer acquaintance with the phenomenon itself. So, it will be good to know, for instance, how sport acquired its current shape or what its main characteristics are. Furthermore, it will be good to take notice of its various relations with the wider societies of which it is a part.

## 2.1 The Genesis of Modern Sport

Possibly all historical cultures developed ludic, physical and competitive activities which can be called sport. Sport has thus existed throughout the entirety of human history. And yet it was Pope John Paul II who designated sport as a “typical phenomena of the modern era [...] a “sign of the times” capable of interpreting humanity’s new needs and new expectations.” Sport, he continued, has “spread to every corner of the world, transcending differences between cultures and nations.”[16] What the Pope here rightly stressed was the fact that sport, in spite of its immemorial history, was subjected to a radical change during the last two centuries. In former times, sports were exclusively shaped by the particular cultures they belonged to. Modern sport, in contrast, is compatible with almost all cultural settings and has thus overcome older demarcations of culture and nation. Of course, still local forms of sport exist and they rightly enjoy a growing popularity, but next to them there exists also a kind of *global sport* which – like a global language – can be understood by almost every human being. So the question is: How did sport become such a global phenomenon?

Already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many – albeit not all[17] – sport activities in the West disengaged from the religious and cultural contexts they formerly had belonged to. Of course, this does not mean that sport in general became a disengaged phenomenon. At this time, however, we can observe the beginning of an institutionalization, professionalization and commercialization.[18] The growing sovereignty of sport along with the recollection of the pedagogical ideals of Greek antiquity initiated a development in the course of which physical activities were more and more seen as to be a crucial part of a holistic education. A long line of progressive educationalists – from John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) through the founder of the philanthropic movement, Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790) to Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) – took up this holistic idea and translated it into educational curricula which put a strong emphasis on physical training.

Generally speaking, modern sport can be traced back to two sources, that is, on the one hand, the games and competitions that came up at English public schools in the first half of the nineteenth century and, on the other hand, the exercises and gymnastics which emerged from Philanthropinism (an educational reform movement) and which were later developed by Swedish educators. Referring to the first tradition, it should be mentioned that older games, competitions and leisure activities were incorporated into the educational programs of English public schools. As being a central part of public education, sport gradually spread out over all social strata and classes within British society. When Great Britain became a global power, the educational system was transferred to all parts of the British Empire. However, it also should be mentioned here, that there were local forms of resistance against this process as, for instance, with the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ireland.

Sometime earlier, Philanthropinism had emerged. Philanthropinism had, as has already been mentioned, an impact on the educational reformation of the public-school system in Britain. On the other hand, it also developed its own dynamics on the European continent and in Scandinavia. Originally, philanthropinism was also a pedagogical ideal advocating a holistic education. Such education, however, did not only include physical activities as gymnastics but also sought to promote the recognition of human equality and the forming of democratic virtues. This idea was taken up in Sweden where gymnastics became a part of the school system. Likewise, it served as a means for military, aesthetic or health education. The importance of the Swedish system can be seen in the fact that it has had a considerable influence on the development of women’s sport.[19]

By the end of the nineteenth century, Pierre de Coubertin merged the different traditions together and linked them to the Olympic Idea. What Coubertin had in mind was a global pedagogical program in order to educate the youth of the world. Its primary goals were peace, democracy, international understanding and human perfection. To propagate the Olympic Idea, Coubertin founded (or revitalized) the Olympic Games, that is, a

quadrennial event where the youth of the world would meet. The original aim of the Olympic Games, however, was not only athletic competition but also the celebration of human nobility and beauty. The Olympic motto, “*citius, altius, fortius*” (faster, higher, stronger) – which, by the way, Coubertin had taken over from the Dominican Henri Didon[20] – thus not only refers to physical excellence but also to human excellence in general. For this reason, the exhibition of arts, music and poetry were also seen as to be an essential part of the Games. Critically, it should be mentioned, that for Coubertin, Olympism was decisively a this-worldly religion, for he explicitly called it a ‘*religio athletae*’. As we can easily see from the highly-ritualized opening ceremony as well as from the award or closing ceremonies, the actual enactment of the Games perfectly underscores their pretended religious nature.

The first Olympic Games of the modern age took place in Athens in 1896, even though there had been local Olympic Games in Greece, England and Germany before. But only Coubertin’s initiative pursued international recognition and turned out to be successful. Since that time Olympic sports have made an unprecedented progress. Women were eventually allowed to take part in the Olympics in 1900. Another element to explain the success of sports, of course, is the upcoming of the mass media in the first half of the twentieth century. By means of film, radio and TV, great sport events were easily broadcasted throughout many countries and later on even worldwide. Thanks to the mass media and to the internet, sport is a global phenomenon today to which most nations and peoples of the world have basic access.

Though, in most cases, sport no longer claims to be a religion or to have an intrinsic connection with other human achievements as arts, music or poetry, it still is in danger of being commissioned for ideological purposes. This has to do with the fact that in sport the human body strives for perfection. In particular, great sport events such as the Olympic Games or World Championships present human bodies conducting top performances to a global audience. A top performing human body, however, is a multi-interpretable sign to which a wide range of different meanings can be attributed. Hence, sport – and particularly that at the elite level – is often used to communicate political, commercial or ideological messages.[21] On the one hand, this multi-interpretability accounts for the global attractiveness of sport, on the other, however, it also lays bare the perils connected to sport. For sport in general is a highly expressive but at the same time a highly-underdetermined sign which cannot serve for its own interpretation. Therefore, it is to be interpreted by others and these interpretations can be ideological or even amoral and inhuman.[22]

According to some scholars, global sport is used for ideological purposes when the playing field becomes tilted toward the West and toward wealth, and when sport simply reinforces existing power structures or promulgates cultural values of the elite. [23] Pope Francis’ reflections on globalization have something to contribute to our consideration of these kinds of issues in global sport. Referring to an innate tension that exists between globalization and localization, the Holy Father wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “We need to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality. Yet we also need to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground. [...] Here our model is not the sphere [...] where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each.”[24] With respect to global sporting events such as the Olympic Games, if more non-Western countries were represented with respect to the location of the Games as well as the origin of the sports played and representation on the IOC, they would even more successfully be living out their mandate by being truly global and also gathering in the best of each country.

## 2.2 What is Sport?

For a long time, sports philosophers and scientists have tried to provide a suitable definition of sport. Apparently, this is not an easy task since no generally accepted definition has been found hitherto. In addition, it should be noted that sports are subject to historical change. What we consider to be sport today, may not be seen as sport tomorrow, and vice versa. So, there will never be a final definition of sport. However, this is not to say that some general features cannot be mentioned which we normally attribute to sport.

In the first place, the concept of sport is associated with the *human body in motion*. Of course, there are

activities which sometimes count as sport but hardly exhibit any bodily motion. But in general, sport is identified with individuals or groups of human beings who move and exercise their bodies.

The second point to be mentioned is that sport is a *ludic activity*. This means that sport is not an activity in order to achieve an external purpose but has its purpose in itself. Such internal purposes are, for instance, to perfect a particular motion, to surpass one's former achievements or the achievements of others, or to play well together as a team to win a competition. Sure, modern sport, particularly professional sport, also serves external purposes as, for instance, to gain glory for the nation, to show the supremacy of a political system or simply to make money. If, however, the external purpose dominates or even wipes out the intrinsic purpose, we would no longer speak of play but simply would call it work or labor. Moreover, the performances of professional athletes would never reach the top level, if they conducted their job without a ludic attitude.

Thirdly, the performance of sport is normally subjected to certain *rules*. The intrinsic purpose of the sport activity may thus not be achieved with all possible means but has to comply with the rules of the game. Usually, such rules are meant to complicate the achievement of the goal. In a swimming competition, for instance, the swimmers may not cover the distance of, say, one hundred meters by using a motor boat or by running along the poolside, but they have to swim in the water without tools and perform a particular swimming style as crawl or butterfly. Of course, rules can display different levels of strictness. An individual amateur athlete who runs three times a week over a certain distance will perhaps only set herself the rule not to run slower than the previous time, whereas a professional competition on top level is regulated by a codified body of numerous rules and laws whose compliance, moreover, is monitored by specialized referees and even technical equipment. Sport without any rules is thus hardly conceivable.

A fourth feature of sport is its *competitive* character. Once again, we might object by invoking an individual amateur athlete who only trains sporadically and just for fun. Presumably, this athlete is not involved in a competition. But this is not completely true. For even this athlete can compete with herself in that she seeks to do her exercise not worse than previously, or to cover a certain distance, or to run, swim or climb within a fixed time limit and so forth. In almost all other cases, the competitive element of sport is far more developed so that we may state that competition is also an indispensable characteristic of sport.

The final component is related to the previous ones, for if sport is actually a competition regulated by particular rules of the game, then the *equality of opportunities* has to be warranted. It simply would not make sense to have two or more competitors, be they individuals or teams, whose starting conditions are largely unequal. That's the reason why in sport competitions usually a distinction is made between the sexes, performance levels, age classes, weight classes, degrees of disabilities and so forth.

Summarizing those five features, we thus might say that *sports are bodily motions of individual or collective agents who, in accordance with particular rules of the game, effect ludic performances which, on the condition of equal opportunity, are compared to similar performances of others in a competition*. As has already been noticed, this is not an exhaustive definition of sport since it exhibits lots of fuzzy edges.[25] Nonetheless, it may suffice for our purposes.

But there is more to it. As we have already seen, sport is not only an activity on its own but has also an exterior. After all, non-participating outsiders can take notice of sports, they can observe them, evaluate them, be pleased or be annoyed about them, and they can interpret them in many different ways. As indicated above, the human body in motion is a sign which is open for various interpretations. After having unfolded the ludic, rule-following and competitive features of sport, this multi-interpretability might be explained a bit further. In a sense, a sport competition can be understood as a narrative which tells the story of a contest between two or more parties who compete with each other for an artificial object without having real-life reasons for this competition. In accordance with the specific rules of the game, the parties strive for excellence. Independently of their subjective motivations, the participating parties put into effect esthetic and artistic forms which are comprehensible for others and can thus be actively interpreted by them. As with many other pieces of art, this story, too, has no distinct content which is why it is open for diverse and even contrary attributions of meaning.

To conclude these reflections on the concept of sport, we now may assert that, on the one hand, sport is a kind of a *world of its own* in that it exhibits the character of a play which, ideally speaking, pursues no external purposes. On the other hand, however, this encapsulated world has also an exterior in that it presents itself to outsiders in the form of a *highly expressive story which, however, does not have a specific content* so that various forms of meaning can be attributed to it. Once again, it is this multi-interpretability which makes sport so attractive to people from all parts of the world. At the same time, however, this multi-interpretability also makes sport prone to external functionalization and even ideologization.

## 2.3 The Contexts of Sport

But that is not all that can be said about sport, for sport never exists without a context. In the first instance, we have to think of institutional imbedding of sports. This begins with a group of children, making an appointment to meet in the afternoon in the backyard in order to play, say, football or basketball. Already here, the appointment as such as well as the particular time and place indicate a kind of initial institution. As it comes to more advanced forms of sports, training programs have to be applied, competitions have to be coordinated, playgrounds have to be supplied and to be kept in good condition, the transportation of athletes and sports equipment has to be organized, referees have to be engaged, results have to be documented and so forth. On an even greater level, a sports jurisdiction has to be established, doping monitoring programs have to be run or great sport events have to be arranged. This is the task of sports organizations as clubs or national and international associations. In general, we might call these organizational forms of sport the *sport system*.

Now it goes without saying, that the sport system cannot generate the required resources by its own means alone. To facilitate the tasks just mentioned, the sports system is thus in need of external benefactors – for instance, voluntary workers, political supporters or financial donors – and particularly of customers who are willing to purchase tickets, merchandising articles or TV programming. Only in this way is the sports system able to generate the required resources. This *structural dependence* of the sports system, as we might call it, explains why this system has to constantly make known the attractiveness of sport to external contributors. The sports system, in other words, has to care for an appearance of sport that motivates potential benefactors to make their contributions to maintain or even boost the system. This, however, entails presenting sport in a way that fits with the various interests of the potential benefactors. And so, sport becomes a kind of product which promises to satisfy the interests of various individuals, groups and institutions. That is why the sport system itself is so readily and easily available to serve the ideological, political or economic purposes of others, for otherwise it would not be able to generate the resources it needs to survive.

Since sport, as we have seen, is an expressive story with little content to which thus various meanings can be attributed, the sport system in general proves to be very successful in generating external resources because potential benefactors can use sport to communicate their particular messages. This can be demonstrated, for instance, by the partnerships that individual athletes as well greater sport organizations have entered into with commercial enterprises and the advertising industry. In this case, sport serves as a vehicle to mediate economic messages.

The structural dependence of the sport system just described needs not necessarily to be a bad thing, for sport can serve so many purposes which are ethically acceptable and even truly human. If politicians, for instance, are willing to invest public money into the sport system because this promises to improve the population's health or the holistic education of children and young people, then it is basically not wrong if the sport system presents a sport which serves just these purposes. But, on the other hand, it is also clear that the structural dependence of the sport system bears lots of dangers. If, for instance, a greater amount of resources can be generated by making the sport system dependent on the economic system or on ideological systems, then the inclination will be high to do exactly this, even if the purposes thus served are ethically dubitable or inhuman. This will be pointed out in more detail in the fourth chapter.

## Chapter 3: Significance of Sports for the human person

### 3.1 Body, soul, spirit

While it is common in historical studies of sport to characterize Catholic attitudes toward the body as thoroughly negative, in fact Catholic theological and spiritual traditions have insisted that the material world (and everything that exists) is good as it is created by God and that the person is a unity of body, soul and spirit. Indeed, early and medieval theologians spent much of their time criticizing Gnostics and Manicheans, precisely because these groups associated the material world and the human body with evil. One of the complaints of Christian authors was that Gnostics and Manicheans did not include the Jewish scriptures as a part of the Christian scriptures, and therefore did not accept the account in Genesis that describes God creating the world and human beings and calling everything “very good.” On the contrary, these groups constructed elaborate mythological accounts of the origin of the material world, which associated it with a ‘fall’ or an “evil principle.”

This is why they regarded the material world and the human body itself as antagonistic to what is truly spiritual. In 1979 Saint John Paul II spoke to Italian and Argentine athletes about these controversies: “It is worth recalling that already in the first centuries Christian thinkers resolutely opposed certain ideologies, then in fashion, which were characterized by a clear devaluation of the physical, carried out in the name of a mistaken exaltation of the spirit. On the basis of biblical data, they forcefully affirmed, on the contrary, a unified view of the human being.”[26]

This unified view of the human being has been expressed in Scripture and by theologians either as a unity of body, soul and spirit or body and soul. This understanding of the unity of the human person was consequential with regard to shaping Christian attitudes toward sport. According to John Paul II, the Church regards sport with esteem because she values “everything that contributes to the harmonious and complete development of the person, body and soul. She encourages, therefore, what aims at educating, developing and strengthening the human body, in order that it may offer a better service for the attainment of personal maturity.”[27]

The understanding of the unity of the human person is also the foundation for the emphasis in Church teaching that there is a spiritual dimension to sport. Indeed, John Paul II describes sport as “a form of gymnastics of the body and of the spirit.”[28] As he put it: “Athletic activity, in fact, highlights not only man’s valuable physical abilities, but also his intellectual and spiritual capacities. It is not just physical strength and muscular efficiency, but it also has a soul and must show its complete face.”[29]

### **3.2 Freedom, rules, creativity and cooperation**

Freedom is a gift to us from God that reveals the grandeur of human nature. Created in the image and likeness of God, men and women are called to participate in divine creation. But freedom comes with responsibility, for free choices made by every human person impact one’s relationships, the community, and in some cases, all of creation.

Nowadays, many people believe that freedom is doing what one wants, without any limits. Such a view decouples freedom and responsibility and may even eliminate regard for the consequences of human acts. However, sport reminds us that to be truly free is also to be responsible.

Today, technology allows people in many parts of the world to have at their disposal many things with surprising ease. In this context, it is easy for a person to lose sight of the need for effort and sacrifice to achieve one’s goals. But in sport, whoever fails to develop these virtues also fails to persevere in the practice of sport itself and therefore will not reach any proposed goals. Here, the Christian understanding of freedom applies to sport in that freedom allows humans to make proper choices and sacrifices even when they are required to go through the “narrow gate.”[30]

Moreover, in the “throwaway culture” of which Pope Francis often reminds us, lasting commitments often scare us. Sport helps us in this regard by teaching that it is worth embracing long-term challenges. Training and sustained efforts to improve are worthwhile, as the highest goods can only be achieved when people seek such goods without shying away from uncertainties and challenges that come with various responsibilities. In addition, overcoming difficulties such as injuries and resisting temptations to cheat in a game help strengthen one’s character through perseverance and self-control.

The motto of the International Olympic Committee, *citius, altius, fortius* ("faster, higher, stronger")[31] evokes this ideal of perseverance. In a certain sense, the Christian life resembles a marathon rather than a short sprint. There are many stages, some of which are very difficult to overcome.

Yet, why do people run marathons? They must enjoy the challenge to some extent. Reaching for improvement step by step, mile by mile, evokes a sense of satisfaction that brings joy to the challenge. Gregory of Nazianzus and other Church Fathers thought of the Christian life as resembling a game. Pope Francis has talked about it in those terms as well, connecting the category of play with Christian joy.[32]

Each person makes use of the talents he has received in the daily reality in which he lives, which may include sport. Considering the rules and regulations of each sport along with the game strategies defined by coaches, each athlete develops personally as he strives in his freedom and creativity to achieve set goals within established parameters. In this way, sports bear witness to justice in that they require obedience to rules. And to ensure such justice, there are referees, judges and inspectors, and in recent years, technological aids. Without rules, the sense of the game and the competition would be lost. In football, for example, if the ball does not completely cross the goal line, it is not a goal. A small millimeter makes an immense difference. In some way, that rule helps us understand that justice is not something merely subjective but has an objective dimension, even in forms of play.

Contrary to what one might think, in sports the rules do not limit human creativity but encourage it. To achieve his objectives within the established norms, the athlete has to be very creative. He must seek to surprise the competitor with a new or unexpected trick or strategy. For this reason, creative athletes are highly valued.

Something analogous happens with freedom. The rules established, which themselves are the result of the creativity of those who founded each sport, become objective in terms of their observance. That objectivity does not nullify the subjectivity of the athlete but rather helps him to develop it freely when he practices his sport. The rules are clear and defined, but observing them makes the athlete freer and more creative.

Human beings create the rules, and then agree upon, the rules that constitute the various sports. And these rules set sports apart from other activities of daily life. Scholars have noted that one of the features of the constitutive rules of sport is that they have a gratuitous logic. As was mentioned in the last chapter, every sport has goals. In golf, for example, the goal is to put the ball in the hole with the fewest number of strokes possible over eighteen holes. The rules of golf, however, proscribe the most efficient way of doing this, such as walking up and dropping the ball in each hole. They gratuitously introduce challenges and obstacles that make reaching the goal more difficult. Each golfer must use a golf club, start a designated distance from each hole, and avoid ponds and sand traps. The participants agree to the constitutive rules of golf because they enjoy participating in the game and trying to meet the challenges that it provides. The important point of this reflection is that our sports do not have to exist; we make them up and we freely participate in them because we enjoy doing so. In this sense, sports are in the realm of the gratuitous.

Sport, then, is based on a starting point of cooperation and agreement about the constitutive rules. There are also many ways in which participants need to cooperate just to make a sporting event possible. Indeed, cooperation precedes and is the basis for competition. In this sense, the dynamic of sport is the opposite of that of war, which takes place when people believe that cooperation is no longer possible and when there is a lack of agreement on fundamental rules. In sports, the competitor is participating in a rule-governed contest, not against an enemy who must be annihilated. Indeed, it is one's opponent who draws out the best in an athlete, and thus the experience can be very enjoyable and engaging. The word *competition* alludes to this experience, as the word comes from the two Latin roots "com" –with –and "petere" –to strive or to seek –. The competitors are "striving or seeking together" for excellence. The many examples of athletes shaking hands and embracing or even socializing or sharing a meal after an intense contest have much to teach us in this regard.

Thus, we see how practicing sports helps the human being to grow because he becomes capable of generating an environment that combines freedom and responsibility, creativity and respect for rules, entertainment and seriousness. This environment comes about through cooperation and accompanying each other in the

development of individual talents and character.

### *Fair Play*

In recent decades, there has been an increasing awareness of the need for fair play in sport, i.e., that the game is clean. Athletes honor fair play when they not only obey the formal rules but also observe justice with respect to their opponents so that all competitors can freely engage in the game. It is one thing to abide by the rules of the game in order to avoid being rebuked by a referee or formally disqualified because of a rule violation. It is another thing to be attentive to and respectful of the opponent and his freedom regardless of any rule advantage. Doing so includes not using hidden strategies, such as doping, to have an illicit advantage over competitors. Sporting activity “must be an unavoidable occasion to practice human and Christian virtues of solidarity, loyalty, good behavior and respect for others, who must be seen as competitors and not as mere opponents or rivals.”[33] In this way, sports can set higher goals beyond victory, toward the development of the human person in a community of teammates and competitors.

Fair play allows sports to become a means of education for all of society, of the values and virtues found in sports, such as perseverance, justice and courtesy, to name a few that Pope Benedict XVI points out. “You, dear athletes, shoulder the responsibility –not less significant – of bearing witness to these attitudes and convictions and of incarnating them beyond your sporting activity into the fabric of the family, culture, and religion. In doing so, you will be of great help for others, especially the youth, who are immersed in rapidly developing society where there is a widespread loss of values and growing disorientation.”[34]

In this sense, athletes have the mission to be “educators as well, since sport can effectively inculcate many higher values, such as loyalty, friendship and team-spirit.”[35]

### **3.3 Individualism and team**

Something very typical of the world of sports is the harmonious relationship between the individual and the team. In team sports, such as football, rugby, volleyball and basketball among others, that reality is seen very clearly. But even in individual sports such as tennis or swimming, there is always some form of teamwork.

Nowadays we can see many manifestations of individualism. Individual goals sometimes seem to prevail over the common good. Sport is a school of teamwork that helps us overcome selfishness. In it the individuality of each player is related to the team that works together toward achieving a common goal.

Pope Francis, when speaking to young people at the 70th anniversary of the Italian Sports Center, said “I also hope you can taste the beauty of teamwork, which is so important in life. *No individualism!* No to playing for yourselves. In my homeland, when a player does this, we say: ‘This guy wants to devour the ball all by himself!’ No, this is individualism: don’t devour the ball, be team players. To belong to a sports club means to reject every form of selfishness and isolation, it is an opportunity to encounter and be with others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in brotherhood.”[36]

Each member is unique and contributes in a particular way to the team. Individuals are not lost in the whole, because they are valued in their particularity. They all have a unique importance that makes the team stronger. A great team is always made up of great individuals who do not play alone but together.

A football team, for example, can be made up of the best midfielders in the world, but it will not be a great team if it does not have a goalkeeper, defenders, forwards and even a good coach, trainer, physical therapist, etc. In sports, the gifts and talents of each individual in particular are placed at the service of the team.

### **3.4 Sacrifice**

People who participate in sport are very familiar with the notion of sacrifice. No matter the level of expertise or type of activity involved, team or individually focused, the athlete must subject themselves to discipline and focus

on the task at hand if they are to learn and acquire the necessary skill. To achieve this often means that the person has to follow a regular and structured program. This is best done when the sport participant accepts that they will have to take on a path that involves some level of hardship, self-denial and humility. This is because learning and performing a sport always involves an encounter with failure, frustration and challenge. The professional athlete will often experience these psychological, physical and spiritual challenges as part of their career in sport; even more impressive is that amateur and lower level sport participants are prepared to subject themselves to these demands, albeit at much less intensity, in order to become better at something they love.[37] The recreational participant training for the charity half marathon, the high handicap golfer trying to develop a better swing, or the walking football player trying to score more for the team, understand through their lived experiences that these small sacrifices make sense through being done out of love for the sport. Although addressing Olympians, Saint John Paul II has this to say on the value of sacrifice in sport for all athletes, no matter their level: "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." [38]

These encounters with sacrifice in sport can help athletes form their characters in a particular way. They can develop the virtues of courage and humility, perseverance and fortitude. The common experience of sacrifice in sport can also help believers understand more fully their vocation as children of God. Maintaining a life of prayer, a rich sacramental life, and working for the common good, are frequently accompanied by many obstacles and difficulties. We try to overcome these challenges by our steadfast persistence and self-discipline, and with the grace that flows from God. "Strict discipline and self-control, prudence, a spirit of sacrifice and dedication," [39] according to Saint John Paul II, represent the spiritual, psychological and physical qualities tested in many sports. The mental and physical demands and challenges of sport can help to strengthen one's spirit and self-awareness. A Catholic account of the anthropological value of sport and sacrifice is grounded in the everyday world of all players. They know through their lived experience that sacrifice and suffering have a potentially transformative nature.

Sacrifice is a familiar and well used term in the real world of sport, then. The Church too uses this word and often in a very direct and specific way. She knows that love of God and of our neighbor often comes at a cost to us. Our task as Christians is to accept the sacrifices and sufferings we endure, whether large and small, and buoyed by the grace of God in our lives, strive for the kingdom here on earth and in the world to come. With this in mind it becomes easier to understand what St Paul had in mind when he demanded that we prepare ourselves to 'fight the good fight' (Tim 6:12). All of the noble sacrifices we make are important in the Christian life, even when they take place in seemingly insignificant human activities such as sport.

### 3.5 Joy

Since the International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport in 1978, sport has become a right for all to participate, not just the young, healthy and able-bodied. Regardless of whether sport is practiced by children, the elderly, or people with disabilities, sport brings joy to all who freely participate in it, at all levels of play.

As beginners, athletes suffer the frustrations and even embarrassments of repeated failure in striving to master an activity. At higher levels of sport, athletes are often prepared to go through the discipline of strict training programs. Joy for all who practice sport often emerges alongside difficulties and arduous challenges. We also see across the world that many people participate in sport merely to enjoy the sensation of bodily movement, the opportunity to socialize with others, to learn a new skill, or to feel a sense of belonging. Joy in these contexts is the by-product of doing something we love or enjoy. We see that ultimately joy is a gift, and that it is always grounded in love, and that this formula applies at all standards of sport.[40] This link of joy with love in sport therefore has important truths to teach us about the relationship between God, love and joy in our spiritual lives.

That for most people sport is not done for external gain like money or fame makes it all the more powerful to behold. Nevertheless, for the committed athlete, the moments of joy in sport are usually encountered alongside

suffering or sacrifices of one sort or another and after great mental and physical effort. This teaches us that true, deep and lasting joy often emerges when we commit ourselves without reserve to something we love. This love can be directed at the sport act itself, or toward the other members of a team as relationships deepen in the pursuit of a common goal. If the joy connected with love of one's sport and one's teammates is a reality that sport psychologists associate with our best performances and something that keeps players returning again and again to participate, then this can be a way for the coach or sport leader to draw parallels between sport practice and the practice of faith.

It is important to recall in this regard the parable Jesus tells of the treasure buried in the field to illustrate what the reign of God is like. Jesus emphasizes that it is "out of joy" that the man who discovers the treasure sells everything he has and buys that field (Mt 13:44). So too, our following of Jesus and announcing that the reign of God is at hand is to arise out of the joy of having experienced God's abundant love and mercy that characterizes this reign. When we follow Jesus and work toward the building of the reign of God, we will encounter difficulty and hardship, and even be invited to take up our cross. But trials and suffering cannot extinguish this joy. Not even death can do so. After telling his disciples that as the Father has loved him he has loved them and to remain in his love, Jesus tells them that he has said these things "so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete" (John 15:11). As he was getting closer to his own suffering and death, he told them, "So you are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you" (John 16:22).

"The joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who encounter Jesus."<sup>[41]</sup> Pope Francis highlighted the centrality of joy in the life of the believer, which is a gift to share with everyone. In the same way, sport only makes sense as long as it promotes a space of common joy. It is not a question of denying the sacrifices and pains that result from training and sporting practice, but ultimately sport is called to bring joy to those who practice it and even to all the passionate followers of a sport throughout the world.

### 3.6 Harmony

The harmonious development of the person must always be at the forefront of all who have responsibility for sport, be they coaches, instructors or administrators. This word, harmony, refers to balance and well-being and is essential for true happiness to be experienced. There are many forces in the world today however that tempt human beings to abandon this important virtue in favor of a one sided and imbalanced perspective. One has only to think of the over commercialization of some sports, and the excessive reliance on scientific solutions detached from ethical concerns, as worrying examples. When sport is pursued in ways in which the human body is seen as a mere material object or the person as a commodity, we run the risk that great harm will be done to persons and communities.

On the other hand, the harmonious development of the person in their physical, social, spiritual and dimensions has long been recognized as contributing to psychological health and human flourishing. We are beginning to witness positive developments in many places where, "people feel the need to find appropriate forms of physical exercise that will help restore a healthy balance of mind and body."<sup>[42]</sup> In relation to this, in recent years many new forms of sport and differing conceptions of competition have begun to appear in response to the existential need for greater harmony between mind and body. Also, the Second Vatican Council noted that in relation to the building up of harmonious communities, sport can, "foster friendly relations between people of all classes, countries and races."<sup>[43]</sup>

Often overlooked in environments where people are no longer seen as God's beloved creatures, is the importance of the spiritual formation of persons. Harmony implies balance, and this in turn relates to the whole human being-their moral, physical, social and psychological lives. Sport is one of the most effective contexts within which people can develop holistically.

Paradoxically it is through engaging in what at a surface level look like purely physical activities like sport, that we can grow in our knowledge of the spiritual, and see how neglecting this one aspect of our being undermines our growth, health and happiness. The tendency to ignore the spiritual, or reduce it to the merely psychological

(which is such a prevalent feature in some parts of the world today), is common today and can be harmful, especially to the young and those lacking religious and spiritual instruction. The Church in her wisdom offers us a much needed and compelling vision in this regard. We are asked to live our sport in and with the Spirit, since as Saint John Paul II has said, “You are *true athletes* when you prepare yourselves not only by training your bodies but also by constantly engaging the spiritual dimensions of your person for a *harmonious development of all your human talents*.”[44]

### 3.7 Courage

The Church, following St. Thomas Aquinas, has taught that courage represents a mean point between cowardice on the one hand and recklessness on the other. And the Church has insisted that the courageous act is always related to morality. This is because, to be courageous requires that we do the right thing, the good, rather than what is most expedient, or easy.

The concept of courage can also be understood as something that is always personally chosen. We cannot make someone courageous, although coaches, educators and others can develop the capacity for this in those with whom they work. Indeed, we could argue that courage is seen more often before, during and after defeats and losses. To keep going when the odds are stacked against you or your team, to try to do the right thing, morally and physically when you are losing badly, to hold the group together as a team when being seen as underdogs-these occasions can all offer convincing evidence that sport is replete with moments of great courage.

### 3.8 Equality and respect

Each human being is created in God’s image and likeness and has the right to lead their life with dignity and to be treated with respect. Everyone has the same right to experience and be fulfilled in the multiple dimensions of culture and sport. Everyone has the same right to promote their individual capabilities as well as respect for their individual limitations.

This equality of rights for every individual does not mean, however, uniformity or similarity. On the contrary, because it also means respect for the multiplicity and diversity of human life with respect to sex, age, cultural backgrounds or traditions. This applies equally to the sports sector. It is understandable that there are specific differences of age in sports performance categories or that in most sports disciplines men and women do not compete against each other. People whose basic physical abilities deviate notably from the average expected ability, for example due to impairment, may be judged and evaluated differently.

With all the attention on the multiplicity of conditions, talents and abilities, different categories of performance must not lead to hidden ranks or hierarchy of classifications or even to the airtight delimitation between different human groups. This destroys the feeling of the primary unity of the human family. What the Apostle Paul asks for the Christian community as a reflection of the body of Jesus Christ should be experienced in sport: “The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you”, or the head to the feet, “I don’t need you”. On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are in fact indispensable [...] If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is praised, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”.[45]

Sport is an activity that can and should promote the equality of human beings. “The Church considers sports as an instrument of education when they foster high human and spiritual ideals and when they form young people in an integral way to develop in such values as loyalty, perseverance, friendship, solidarity and peace.”[46] Sport is an area of our society that promotes the meeting of all humanity, and it can overcome socio-economic, racial, cultural and religious barriers.

All people are equal because of their dignity as created in the image and likeness of God. We are all brothers and sisters who come from the same Creator. But our world still faces deeply rooted inequalities, and it is the task of Christians to address this reality. Sport is a space where Christians can seek to promote equality,

because "without equal opportunities the different forms of aggression and conflict will find a fertile terrain for growth and eventually explode." [47]

There are many examples of how sport produces unity in society and equality between people. Many popular sports have campaigned against racism and have promoted peace, solidarity and inclusion. "Sports can bring us together in the spirit of fellowship between peoples and cultures. Sports are indeed a sign that peace is possible" [48].

### 3.9 Solidarity

The message of the Church about solidarity shows us that there exists an intimate bond between solidarity and the common good, between solidarity and the universal destination of goods, between solidarity and equality among peoples, between solidarity and peace in the world. [49]

Solidarity within a sports team refers to the unity that can develop among teammates as they strive together for the same goal. Such an experience provides all the participants with the feeling of personal attention and esteem. Solidarity in the Christian sense, however, goes beyond the members of one's own team. It may even include an opponent when they are on the ground and are no longer able to get back up without help. Here support and solidarity is required that no longer asks if the defeat of the other is their own fault or the result of an unfortunate sequence of events.

Athletes, especially those who are most renowned, have an unavoidable social responsibility. It is important that they have more and more awareness of their role with respect to solidarity and that this be noticed in society: "You, the players, are exponents of a sports activity, which every weekend brings together so many people in the stadiums and to which social media devotes large spaces. For that reason, you have a special responsibility." [50]

Pope Francis clearly invites athletes to "get involved with others and with God, giving the best of yourselves, spending your life for what really is worthwhile and lasts forever. Put your talents at the service of the encounter between persons, of friendship, of inclusion." [51]

Saint John Paul II exhorts people linked to sport to "promote the building of a more fraternal and united world, thus helping to overcome situations of reciprocal misunderstanding between individuals and peoples." [52]

Sport must always go hand in hand with solidarity, because sporting activity is called upon to radiate the most sublime values throughout society, especially the promotion of the unity of peoples, races, religions and cultures, thus helping to overcome many divisions that our world still experiences today [53].

### 3.10 Sport Reveals the Quest for Ultimate Meaning

Sport exposes the tension between strength and weakness, experiences which both belong indispensably to human existence. Sport is a realm within which humans can authentically live out their talents and their creativity but at the same time experience their limitations and finitude, as success is by no means guaranteed.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, sport is likewise a domain that can reveal the truth of human freedom. "Freedom –says Pope Francis –is something magnificent, yet it can also be dissipated and lost." [54] Sport respects human freedom in that within the confines of a specific set of rules, it does not prevent creativity but rather fosters it. Thus the experience of being freely oneself is not lost.

The intrinsic relation between individual freedom and the acceptance of rules also shows that the person is directed toward a community with others. In fact, the person is never an isolated entity but "a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential." [55] Team sports and the presence of spectators reveal the relation between individuals and the community. Moreover, even individual

sports cannot be exercised without the contributions of many others. Thus sport can serve as a paradigm that illustrates how the person may become himself through the experience of community.

Finally, in the context of the modern world, sport is perhaps the most striking example of the unity of body and soul. It must be stressed that a one-sided interpretation of the experiences just mentioned leads to a false notion of the human being. Only focusing on strength, for instance, might suggest that humans are self-sufficient beings. A one-sided concept of freedom entails the idea of an irresponsible self who may only follow his or her own rules. Likewise, too strong of an emphasis on the community leads to an underestimation of the dignity of the individual person. And lastly, neglecting the unity of body and soul results in an attitude that either entirely disregards the body or fosters a worldly materialism. Hence, all the dimensions have to be taken into account in order to understand what actually constitutes the human being.

To summarize, we thus can say that in sport human beings experience in a particular way the tension between strength and weakness, the freedom to submit to general rules which constitute a common practice, individuality as directed toward community, and the unity of body and soul. In addition, through sport human beings can experience beauty. As Hans Urs von Balthasar rightly pointed out, the aesthetic faculty of the human being is also a decisive characteristic which stimulates the quest for ultimate meaning.[56] If such an integral anthropological view is applied, then sport can indeed be seen as an extraordinary field where the human being experiences some significant truths about him- or herself on his or her quest for ultimate meaning.

#### *Ultimate Meaning from a Christian Point of View*

Human beings find our deepest truth of who we are in God's image and likeness, as this is how He created us (Gen. 1:27). Although it is true that sport embodies the pursuit of a certain kind of happiness, which the Second Vatican Council characterized as "a full and free life worthy of humanity; one in which [persons and societies] can subject to their own welfare all that the modern world can offer them so abundantly,"[57] it is also true that we were created for a happiness that is greater still. This happiness is made possible by the free gift of God's grace. It is important to emphasize that God's grace does not destroy what is human, but rather "perfects nature"[58] or lifts us up into communion with God who is Father, Son and Spirit and into communion with one another.

One of the important ways we experience God's grace is in His mercy. As Pope Francis has emphasized throughout his papacy, and especially in the Year of Mercy, God never tires of forgiving us. God loves us unconditionally. Even when we make mistakes or commit sins, God is patient with us and always offers us forgiveness and a second chance. God's forgiveness – as well as our forgiveness of one another – brings about healing and recovery of the image and likeness of God in us. As St. Paul put it in his letter to the Colossians: "Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, *which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator.*" (Col 3:10). And again to the Corinthians: "All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed into the same image* from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). If the process of redemption means we are being renewed and changed into the image and likeness of God who is Father, Son and Spirit this means realizing that we are fundamentally relational and are made for communion with God and one another.

## **Chapter 4: Challenges in the light of the Gospel**

### **4.1 A humane and just sport**

We have already spoken about the meaning dimensions of sport as well as its place in the search for goodness and truth. Like any other human reality, however, sport can be turned against human dignity and against the rights of people. The Church therefore raises its voice when it sees human dignity and true happiness threatened.

#### *Promotion of human values in sport*

Current developments in sport must be judged according to whether they proceed from a recognition of the dignity of the person and show adequate respect for others, for all creatures and for the environment. Furthermore, the Church recognizes the importance of the joy of one's participation in sport and the loyal coexistence of human beings. When the rules of sport are agreed upon at an international level, athletes from different cultures, nations and religions are allowed to have a shared experience of fair competition and joy, which can help foster the unity of the human family.

By participating in sports, people can experience their embodied existence in a simple and positive way. By playing on a team, athletes recognize that the most satisfying experiences occur when the players have a strong bond with one another and play well together.

#### *Criticism for wrong directions*

From this perspective, a series of phenomena and developments must be judged critically. This applies to sport no less than other areas of life in society. The Church's social doctrine always reminds us that persons involved in politics, economics, or science must ask themselves whether or not their actions serve the human person and a just order. Persons involved in sport must also face this question.

The intense quality of experiences in sport is the basis of the force of its attraction. However, because of this intensity sport is also subject to drifting towards policies and practices that do not serve the human person. This applies to participants as well as to spectators and supporters. The great importance of sport for many people can degrade it into becoming a vehicle for other interests, for political purposes and demonstrating power, for the blind pursuit of financial profit or nationalist self-assertion. In this way the autonomy of sport and its internal goods are threatened. Interests that are no longer sporting interests, but rather political, economic or media-related then begin to dictate the dynamics of sport and even the experiences of athletes themselves. Sport is always part of a complex society with many sectors and takes part in its life, and yet on the other hand it must be careful not to put its autonomy on the line. Speaking to a delegation of professional Italian football teams, Pope Francis remembered joyful trips in his youth to the football stadium with his family and an air of celebration about these days. He told the players and managers: "I would hope that football and all other popular sports can take back that element of celebration. Today football also operates within the world of business, marketing, television, etc. But the economic aspect must not prevail over that of the sport; [when it does so] it risks contaminating everything on the international, national, and even local level."<sup>[59]</sup>

When sport is practiced with the attitude of "winning at all costs," sport itself is seriously threatened. Focusing solely on sporting success, whether for personal, political or economic reasons, reduces the rights and the well-being of participants to being marginal. With regard to one's own body, a desire to rise higher at any cost determines behavior and has serious consequences. The criterion to which everything else submits is no longer the dignity of the person, but rather their efficiency, and this could entail risking their health and that of their companions. The dignity and the rights of the person can never be arbitrarily subjected to other interests. Nor can athletes be turned into a type of merchandise. As Pope Francis said to members of the European Olympic Committee: "When sports are considered only within economic parameters or for the sake of victory at any cost, one runs the risk of reducing athletes to mere merchandise for the increasing of profit. These same athletes enter into a system that sweeps them away, they lose the true meaning of their activity, the joy of playing that attracted them as children and that inspired them to make many real sacrifices and become champions."<sup>[60]</sup>

The general rights of a life in dignity and freedom must be protected in sports. They apply in particular to the poor and the weak, especially children who have the right to be protected in their bodily integrity. Incidences of abuse of children, whether physical, sexual or emotional by coaches, trainers or other adults are a direct affront to the young person who is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore to God. Institutions that sponsor sport programs for youth, including at the elite level, must develop policies with the help of experts that ensure the safety of all children.

Athletes also have the right to associate and represent their interests together. They must not be prevented from expressing themselves freely as citizens and according to their conscience. They must be treated as persons with all their due rights. Any form of discrimination because of social or national origin, sex, ethnicity, race,

physical constitution or religion must never be accepted in sport. But even beyond the immediate sporting event, sport is responsible for what is happening in its environment. Many people are affected by the preparation and execution of great sporting events, and their legitimate interests and living conditions must be respected.

#### **4.2 Shared responsibility for good sport**

Sport is a multifaceted reality. Critics of sport should not be totally suspicious of it, nor should an estimation of its positive aspects be naive. In addition, we need to distinguish which agents and organizations in sport have concrete responsibility in particular situations. In fact, not only participants or athletes have responsibility but also many other people, such as families, coaches and assistants, doctors, managers, spectators and persons connected with sports in other sectors, including sports scientists, political and business leaders and media representatives.

Spectators and supporters who participate in sporting activities directly or through the media have their own shared responsibility in sporting events. They can show that their respect is for players on both sides in the contest and express their disapproval of unsporting behavior. Fair play is also due to spectators who support the opposing team. Any kind of disparagement or violence is to be condemned and those responsible for the sport must do all they can to counter it. There are models of how violence in the sports environment can be addressed. For example, some professional football clubs in Europe and elsewhere train volunteers who work with fans to counter unsporting behavior and even fan violence that has all too often been a part of football matches in recent years. Responsibility here cannot be offloaded from sport to other institutions.

Many people actively practice sports in the natural environment. Sporting activity does not leave this environment intact, however. It has an impact, in some cases for the long term. So athletes and persons sponsoring sports events have an added responsibility which is the task of treating creation with the utmost respect. Again this responsibility lies on many shoulders. Not only does every person have to consider what ecological costs can be related to their sport. But those who sponsor major sporting events must also consider whether or not they have found a sustainable format with respect to the environment.

Moreover, in sports in which animals are involved, attention must be paid to ensure that they are treated in a morally appropriate way and not as mere objects.

The Church emphasizes the responsibility of each person in the sporting world and appeals to each one's conscience to engage in the promotion of humane and fair sport as much as possible. However, it would not be fair to put the burden of responsibility for good and fair sport only on individual athletes. We must pay attention as well to social structures that affect how we think and act. "These are the sets of institutions and practices which people find already existing or which they create, on the national and international level, and which orientate or organize economic, social and political life." [61] Such structures can influence action in such a way that it is difficult to remain faithful to the internal goods and values of sport. However, these structures are not destiny. "They always depend on the responsibility of human beings, who can alter them, and not upon an alleged determinism of history." [62] Therefore, they remain within the scope of our responsibility. The social importance of various sports organizations and institutions at regional, national and international levels is considerable and so too is their moral responsibility. They must serve the internal goods of sport and the good of the human person.

#### **4.3 Four specific challenging developments**

There are four developments that the Church sees as particularly serious challenges for sport in our time that this document seeks to address. They can be understood to be the result of an unrestrained orientation towards success and the enormous economic and political interests emanating from sporting competitions. The more the various agents involved in sporting events – athletes, spectators, the media, business persons or politicians – insist on ever greater performances or winning at all costs, then the more there is excessive pressure on sportspeople and the more they seek for ways to enhance performance that are morally dubious.

### *The debasement of the body*

While participation in sport can be a positive way of experiencing one's embodiment, it can also be a context in which the human body is reduced to the status of an object or is experienced solely in material terms. As one American football player commented after his career was over, "I realized, paradoxically, how cut off and removed I was from my body. I knew my body more thoroughly than most men are ever able to, but I had used it and thought of it as a machine, a thing that had to be well-oiled, well-fed, and well-taken care of, to do a specific job." [63] When young people are formed in their bodies in this way, they run the risk of becoming alienated from their own affectivity, which compromises their capacity for intimacy, an important developmental task for young adults. [64] This negatively impacts their ability to be in a physically and emotionally intimate relationship, which is one of the gifts and graces of married life.

Parents, coaches, and societies are often involved in automating athletes in order to guarantee success and satisfy hopes of medals, records, scholarships, lucrative advertising contracts and wealth. Aberrations of this kind can be seen in highly competitive children's sports. It is becoming increasingly common for a young person to be put into the hands of parents, coaches and managers who are only interested in the unilateral specialization of a single talent. Because the young person's body is not capable of bearing year-round training in one sport, however, such early specialization all too often results in overuse injuries. In the case of elite women's gymnastics, the ideal body type has changed over the years to a thin, prepubescent body. And this has led in some contexts to the training of very young girls every day of the week for excessive numbers of hours. Girls in these situations too frequently develop a concern with being thin that leads to eating disorders in percentages far higher than in the general population of girls and women. This example points to the importance of the role of parents of young athletes in all sports. Parents have a responsibility of showing children that they are loved for who they are, not for their successes, appearance or physical abilities.

Sports that inevitably cause serious harm to the human body cannot be ethically justified. In cases where we are only recently learning about the harmful effects of a particular sport to the body, including damage to the brain, it is important for persons from all segments of society to make decisions regarding these sports that place the dignity of the human person and his or her well-being first.

### *Doping*

The issue of doping affects the fundamental understanding of sport. And unfortunately today, it is practiced by individual athletes as well as teams and even nation states. Doping raises a series of difficult moral issues because it does not correspond with the values of health and fair play. It is also a good example of how a "winning at all costs" mentality corrupts sports by leading to the violation of its constitutive rules. In the process the "play frame" is broken and the internal goods of sports which are dependent on acceptance of the rules, are lost. In such cases, more important than a sports person's skills or training is the power of those who try to increase their capabilities with all possible and imaginable means. The body of the sportsperson is degraded to becoming an object that demonstrates medical effectiveness.

In some sports that use mechanical means (cycling, motorsports, Formula one) the fair play is deteriorated by adopting mechanical fraud or doping. This fraud can be done individually by the athlete, but also in a broader group, with the help of mechanical assistants and urged by sponsors or even manipulated on a larger scale.

To combat the dangers of physical and mechanical doping and to support fair play in sporting competitions, it is not enough to appeal only to the individual morals of the athletes. The problem of doping cannot be assigned only to the individual sportsperson, no matter how much that individual is to blame. This is a wider problem. It is the responsibility of sports organizations to create effective rules and basic institutional conditions that support and reward individual sportspeople for their responsibility and reduce any encouragement to resort to doping. In the globalized world of sport, effective and coordinated international efforts are needed. Others who exercise significant influence in sports today such as the media and financial and political agents, must also be involved.

Spectators too must consider whether their ever increasing expectations and longing for spectacular excesses during sport events drive the sporting actors to dope physically or to use mechanical doping.

### *Corruption*

No less than doping, corruption can ruin sport. It is used to exploit the sense of sporting competition of players and spectators who are deliberately cheated and deceived. Corruption does not just concern a single sporting event as it can spread to sporting policies. Decisions pertaining to sports are then made by external actors for financial or political interests. Equally reprehensible is any kind of bribery in relation to sports betting. If countless sportspeople and sports enthusiasts are deceived only so that a few can enrich themselves shamelessly, this too threatens the integrity of sport. As in the case of doping, the individuals involved must be warned about this as well as sports organizations which must have their own transparent and effective rules in place to prevent their values being eroded. Sport must not appear to be a space without rights in which the moral standards of loyal and human coexistence do not apply.

### *Spectators*

Spectators during sport activities and games watch and support together as one body of fans. This common feeling across ages, sex, race, religious belief, is a wonderful source of joy, and beauty. The fans are one and the same community when their team wins, but also in the face of loss and defeat. They are behind their players and respect both the players and the fans of the other team and the referees within a reciprocal fair play. These are moments, events and behavior that make us aware of the joy, the strength and the meaning of harmonious sport. Still, the role of spectators in sports can be ambiguous. In some cases, spectators despise the opposing players and their supporters or the referees. This behavior can deteriorate into violence, either vocally (by singing hateful songs) or physically. Fights between competing fans appear and violate the fair play that always should reign during sport events. An exaggerated identification with an athlete or a team can also exacerbate already existing tensions between different cultural, national or religious groups. Sometimes a fan can use a sport event to spread racism, or extremist ideologies. Spectators that do not respect athletes also at times attack them physically or continually insult or denigrate them. Such disrespect also sometimes happens toward athletes belonging to the spectators' own team in the event of poor performance. Teams, conferences and leagues, whether in schools, at the elite level or in professional sports, have a responsibility to ensure that spectator behavior respects the dignity of all persons participating in or attending sporting events.

## **Chapter 5: The Church as a key protagonist**

The document has so far sought to assess and evaluate sports, its significance and its various dimensions viewed within the framework of a Christian understanding of the person and a just society. While the immense opportunities and possibilities of sports were evaluated, the dangers, threats and challenges it poses were also considered.

The Church as the people of God is connected to and is genuinely interested in sport as a contemporary human reality. Naturally, the Church feels called to do everything possible within its immediate sphere of influence to ensure that sport is carried out in a humane and reasonable manner.

“The pastoral care of sport is a necessary moment and an integral part of the ordinary pastoral care of the community. The first and specific purpose of the Church in the sports field is manifested as a commitment to give meaning, value and perspective to the practice of sport as a human, personal and social fact.”<sup>[65]</sup>

### **5.1 The Church is at home in sport**

As already highlighted in the first chapter, the Church has had a fruitful relationship with modern sport, deciding from early in the twentieth century to live in this environment, involving itself in an active and proactive way.

#### *A responsible presence*

The Church does not avoid the co-responsibility for development of sport and its fate. Because of this, the Church desires to enter into dialogue with different sports organizations and governing bodies to advocate for the humanization of contemporary sports. She actively seeks to improve sports practices, systems and procedures through collaborative partnerships with sports organizations. The Church can offer a moral vision in the context of malpractices like doping, corruption, spectator violence and the rampant commercialization that

can erode the spirit of sports.

The Church has an organized and institutional presence in the world of sport that allows her to promote a Christian vision of sport, through various forms at various levels. Within its own organizational structures, the Holy See has different bodies interested in the sporting phenomenon which follow and promote sport from an institutional, pastoral and cultural point of view.

In several countries, national Episcopal Conferences work in close relationship with national and international sport associations that promote sport. In some countries, ecclesiastical sports clubs and associations have existed for over one hundred years and are today very much involved in local and national sporting events. These organizations can in turn connect, network and form larger sporting bodies on a national and international level. In addition to the apostolate of many lay people, many priests are involved in amateur sports groups of parishes, in sport associations or serve as chaplains in professional clubs or at the Olympic Games.

#### *An outgoing Church*

Sport is a context in which to concretely experience the invitation to be an outgoing Church, not to build walls and borders, but squares and field hospitals.

More than many other platforms, sport brings together the downtrodden, the marginalized, the immigrant, the native, the rich, the powerful and the poor around a shared interest and at times in a common space. For the Church, any such reality presents itself as an invitation to encounter people from many different backgrounds and in very different life circumstances. While the Church welcomes everyone to itself, she also goes out into the world. As Pope Francis says, “the way of the Church, is precisely to leave her four walls behind and to go out in search of those who are distant, those on the 'outskirts' of life. [...] Not only to welcome and reintegrate with evangelical courage all those who knock at our door, but to go out and to seek, fearlessly and without prejudice, those who are distant, freely sharing what we ourselves freely received.”[66]

#### *A modern Courtyard of the Gentiles*

In several parts of the world there already exists a tradition of opening up the physical premises of Churches themselves for youth – who often come together in the context of sports and games. In today’s culturally diverse environment, such a space becomes one of the conduits that facilitate harmonious interactions across communities, cultures and religions. As has already been mentioned, the Church sees great value in such interactions that can foster a sense of the unity of the human family. Such a space can also make possible, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, a dialogue with those “to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown.”[67] He speaks of the Church’s mission to such people: “I think that today, too, the Church should open a sort of ‘Courtyard of the Gentiles’ in which people might in some way latch onto God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands.”[68]

The Church thus perceives a spectrum of possibilities that come into play in the context of the contemporary reality of sports. These are especially relevant as they are in tune with the larger mission of the Church.

## **5.2 Sport is at home in the Church**

The sport vision of the Magisterium has been concretized in a pastoral proposal that is active through sport, which essentially takes the form of an educational commitment to the person who in turn generates a social commitment to the community.

#### *Sport as an educational experience of humanization*

The human person who is created in the image and likeness of God is more important than sport. The person does not exist to serve sport, but rather sport should serve the human person in his or her integral development.

As has been mentioned, the person is a unity of body, soul and spirit, this means that the embodied experiences

of play and sport necessarily also involve and impact young people at the level of soul and spirit. For this reason, they can be a part of the education of the whole person. Pope Francis has encouraged viewing play and sport as a part of a holistic education which addresses the head, the heart and the hands, or what one is thinking, feeling and doing. According to the Holy Father, formal education in our time has become too narrowly associated with an “intellectual technicality and the language of the head”.[69] He encourages us to open ourselves up to accept forms of non-formal education, such as sport. As he puts it, closed in the rigid exclusivity of formal education “there is no humanism, and where there is no humanism, Christ cannot enter!” [70]

### *Sport and Catholic education*

How can the Church begin to integrate physical activity or sports into its own fundamental framework? How can the Church’s vision of sports permeate into the Bishop’s Conferences, Dioceses and Parishes? This should perhaps begin with the visible establishment of an apostolate for sports. Such an apostolate will be a concrete manifestation of the Church’s commitment to the human person in sport and will also equip the different organs of the Church to directly initiate sports related activities.

Since the origins of Christianity, sport has emerged as an effective metaphor of the Christian life: the Apostle Saint Paul did not hesitate to include sport among human values, which served him as a point of support and reference for dialogue with the people of his time. There are possibilities of introducing sports, games and other playful activities in order to lead young persons toward a deeper understanding of the scriptures, Church teachings or sacraments.

When sport is lived in a way that respects the dignity of the person and is free from economic, media or political exploitation, it can become a model for all areas of life. “When it is like this,” as Pope Francis said, “sport transcends the level of pure physicality and takes us into the arena of the spirit and even of mystery.” [71] To educate in a Christian way is to form people in human values in the whole of reality, which includes transcendence. The profound meaning of sport is that it can educate to the fullness of life and an openness to the experience of transcendence.

Sport is also a way to introduce young people to the cardinal virtues of fortitude, temperance, prudence and justice and facilitate their growth in them. In the field of physical education, St. John Bosco, who was just a youth chaplain in Turin in 1847, was probably the first Catholic educator to have recognized the importance of movement, play and sport for the holistic development of the personality of young people. For Don Bosco, educating through sport means to cultivate the personal accompaniment of the young person as well as mutual respect, even in competition.

### *Sport to create a culture of encounter and peace*

In a world that is rife with questions about migration, nationalism and individual identity, more and more people are struggling to coexist with those who are culturally different or hold belief systems different from their own. Borders, perceptions and boundaries are constantly being drawn and redrawn. In this context, we must remember that sports are one of the few realities today that have transcended the boundaries of religion and culture. The call of the universal Church to work toward the unity of the human family takes on a special significance when seen in the context of sports. In this sense, the very idea of being ‘Catholic’ goes hand in hand with what is best in the spirit of sports. In the world of sports, the Church can play a significant role by helping to build bridges, open doors and promote common causes – permeating societies like ‘leaven’.

### *Sport as work of mercy*

Sport can also become a powerful medium by making itself present to persons who are marginalized and underprivileged. There are many international sport governing bodies, private institutions and nonprofit organizations that promote and use sports as a positive tool of engagement among youth and teens who live in environments susceptible to gang violence, drug abuse and trafficking. Christian communities around the world are already involved in initiatives that use sport practices, training and events as relevant tools to draw youth away from drugs and violence.

### *Sport to create a culture of inclusion*

Because there are human goods associated with sports, all who desire to participate should be able to do so. This is especially true for poor or displaced children, physically or intellectually disabled persons, the homeless and refugees. Moreover, in some parts of the world, girls and women are denied the right to participate in sports and thus cannot experience the joy and benefits of such activities. Everyone can be enriched by the increased opportunity for all to participate in sport. Elite level athletes, for example, are reminded when watching athletes with disabilities play what sport is really about: the joy of participation and competition with respect for one's opponent and oneself. Such examples help to reorient everyone toward the humanizing potential of sport.[72]

The development of Paralympics and the Special Olympics is a visible sign of how sport can be a great opportunity for inclusion, and is capable of giving meaning to life and being a sign of hope. So too the creation of the first Refugee Olympic Team in 2016 as well as the development of the Homeless World Cup are important ways the awareness of the common good that sport fosters is being extended so that persons who are displaced or experiencing the hardships associated with poverty also have the opportunity to participate.

### **5.3 Environments of sport pastoral ministry**

The Church's commitment to sport is to ensure that sport always remains an experience capable of giving meaning and value to people's lives, at whatever level it is promoted or practiced, in any place or environment where it is organized. Sport must always be aimed at the integral formation of the person, improving social conditions, and the building of interpersonal relationships. This is why the pastoral care of sport is fitting in many environments and can be promoted in many contexts.

#### *Parents as first teachers*

Parents are often the first teachers of faith and of sport for their children. If parents are not the ones directly teaching their children how to throw a baseball, they at least play the role of signing them up for recreational sports teams, encouraging them to try out for a competitive team, or transporting them to their practices and matches. They are often in the crowd cheering for their athlete on the court or field. These examples show us how sports are often a source of bonding between a parent and child. This bond allows parents to educate their children about virtues and the human values inherent to sports. If sport runs the risk of being the occasion to divide a family and to diminish the sanctity of Sunday as a holy day to uphold, it also can help integrate a family with other families in the celebration of Sunday, not only in the liturgy but in the life of the community. This does not mean that sport matches should not take place on Sundays, but rather, such events must not excuse families from attending Mass and should also promote the life of the family within the community.

#### *Parishes (and oratories or youth centers)*

As Pope Francis has said, "It's beautiful when a parish has a sports club and something is missing without one." [73] However a sports club in a parish needs to be consistent with the faith commitments of the parish and anchored in an educational and pastoral project. The parish sports clubs also provide an opportunity for youth to encounter one another at the diocesan or national level through friendly competitions. In addition, parishes could and should promote sport activities not only for youth but also to their elderly members.

Any genuine human reality is definitely bound to be reflected within the Church. The Church should always be abreast of the sporting world, reading the signs of times in the field of sports. Priests should be encouraged to be reasonably knowledgeable about contemporary sports realities and trends, especially as they affect youth and to link sports with faith in homilies when it makes sense.

#### *Schools and universities*

Schools and universities are ideal places to promote an understanding of sport aimed at education, inclusion and human promotion. Parents and families play an important role, in dialogue with teachers and school management, in shaping school sports activities in such a way that they will lead to the integral development of students. Universities in many countries have also taken on the task of studying sport. Courses and research programs seek to educate, form and train the next group of coaches, sport managers, sport scientists and administrators. This context presents a wonderful opportunity for the Church to dialogue with those who have a specific responsibility to educate present and future sport leaders as they help develop sport in a way that

serves the human person and the building of a just society.

#### *Amateur sports clubs and associations*

Coaches and sports managers have great influence over their athletes, so a pastoral and educational action requires an alliance with them. While recognizing the specific nature of the work carried out by clubs and sports associations, it is important to seek a dialogue with them, particularly in terms of pedagogical and cultural planning.

#### *Professional sport*

Elite level and professional sport is an international reality that encompasses players, spectators/fans, sporting organizations, media, marketing organizations and even governments. It is a phenomenon of great communicative scope, able to deeply influence not only youth and amateur sport, but the lifestyle of a whole society.

For these reasons, the Church must continue to improve the development of relevant competencies and to form trained sports chaplains or counselors to aid in the pastoral and spiritual care of coaches and athletes participating in international sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup.

The Church should develop appropriate pastoral plans for the accompaniment of players and athletes, many of whom hold considerable influence in the sporting world and the world at large. A part of this accompaniment should be to help these athletes to stay in touch with the intrinsic meaning of their participation in sport. "This professional dimension must never push aside the initial vocation of an athlete or team: be amateurs. When an athlete, even a professional one, cultivates this dimension of being an 'amateur'[74], society benefits and that person strengthens the common good with the values of generosity, camaraderie and beauty." [75] The Church should accompany these athletes on their personal journey, supporting them in understanding and enhancing their responsibility to be heralds of humanity.

The pastoral accompaniment and spiritual care must extend beyond the active sporting life of an individual. The world has seen many top players and athletes, who at the end of their careers experience emptiness and depression, at times spiraling down to a life dependent on alcohol or drugs. A consistent accompaniment plan can help such people to explore their identity, perhaps for the first time, outside of sports. In the most fundamental sense, their identity and worth come from being created in the image and likeness of God, who continues to call them, albeit in new ways. Pastoral care with athletes after their careers are over, then, needs to include helping them discern how they will use their talents and gifts into the future.

Today, spectators form a very relevant part of the sporting professional environment. Spread around the world, fan clubs, online platforms and merchandising revolve around spectators. Supporters and fans often experience sports passion in absolute terms, which leads to excesses and deviations. The Church, along with leaders of other religious traditions, can help to remind people to keep sport in perspective. While play and sport are good and meant to be pursued with passion and enjoyed, they are not the most important thing in life.

#### *Media as a bridge*

The media is one major conversation partner for the Church when it comes to sports. It is the media – especially social media – that shapes the image of sports in the eyes of much of the public. Thus the Church with its immensely active social media platforms can play an important part in reaching out to the world of spectators and opinion makers in sports.

It is imperative that the Church responds in a meaningful way to sporting events and issues. In fact, the faithful are seldom aware that the Church accepts and perceives sports in a positive way. Such responses will go a long way in helping the younger generation feel connected to the Church.

#### *Specialized sciences*

The Church should also be in dialogue with those working in the fields of sports science and medicine. In conversation with them, the Church can gain vast knowledge on the contemporary realities of sports, so that her

judgments are competent and accurate. Above all, however, these joint conversations should explore how to shape sporting practice and its surroundings in such a way that they correspond to, or come closer to, a humanized body-culture. The Church's conversation with other sciences, such as the life sciences, cultural or social sciences can also offer significant insights into sports and the ways in which they can become a beneficial lifelong activity.

#### *The new places of sport*

There are also fitness centers and parks, where it is possible to come across youth, adults and elderly people interested in a culture of well-being and open to a humanized holistic interpretation of life, of unity between body, soul and spirit.

Beyond traditional sporting places, attention must also be paid to non-formal places where people, especially young people who reject organized and codified contexts, practice new kinds of street sports.

The risk of these environments is that the sport is practiced in "solitariness", favoring individualism, where there is no educational or social purpose. Moreover, it is now essential to take an active dialogue with sports media and e-sports.

### **5.4 Take care of sport pastoral workers**

There is no pastoral care of sport without an educational strategy. This involves an active role of all those who have chosen, in various ways, to provide their service to the Church through sport. Sport needs educators and not simply service providers. Pastoral care through sport cannot be improvised, but requires people trained and motivated to rediscover the meaning of sport in an educational context and get involved in the service of a Christian vision of sport.

#### *Sport educators*

When it comes to sports, coaches, referees, teachers and managers play a significant role in the attitudes of players or athletes. A relevant spiritual/pastoral training plan for them will thus play a key role in humanizing sports. In fact, most of them are constantly seeking the best, most holistic and unique plan for their players.

The Church needs to open a dialogue with sports training agencies, collaborating with them or promoting complementary training paths on pastoral aspects of sport. The pastoral plan can involve materials, one-on-one interactions and highly specialized workshops for sports coaches that will involve guidance on a spiritual/ecclesial level, empowering them to be witnesses, "to proclaim Jesus Christ by one's words and actions, that is, to make oneself an instrument of his presence and action in the world." [76]

#### *Family and parents*

Dialogue with the family, particularly with parents, becomes an essential aspect in the promotion of an organic and continuous pastoral care especially aimed at children and young people. It is important for families to know and share educational and pastoral goals. This does not mean that the sport proposal should be a confessional proposal, but it certainly cannot be a neutral proposal from the point of view of values. It is therefore essential to create moments of meeting and discussion with parents, to make them aware of the objectives of the training offered, to share educational priorities with them, to make them aware of a conscious participation, respecting the roles of coaches and sport managers.

#### *Volunteers*

The world of sport has grown and developed thanks to the strategic contribution of volunteers. Volunteers play a fundamental role that goes beyond the sphere of technical and organizational skills. They keep alive, through their choices and their testimony, a culture of gift and a style of gratuitousness; they help sport to remain service-oriented for others, not only focused on the economic and bureaucratic dimension. These people need an accompaniment that helps them grow, affirms their motivations and integrates them harmoniously into the organizational fabric of sport.

### *Priests and consecrated*

The pastoral presence of priests and consecrated people in the realm of sports must demonstrate their role of facilitating the educational purpose of sport and of spiritually accompanying the athletes. This role cannot be articulated in abstract "intellectual" terms detached from daily life. The world of sport is a welcoming world, but it calls for pastoral leaders to have a focused and respectful presence and awareness of the dynamics, roles and specific skills necessary for sport.

It is important that the pastoral care of sport be included in the formation of candidates for the priesthood and that they have the opportunity to practice sport while in the seminary. In many seminaries around the world they are already using "best practices" of sports in their colleges, sometimes in a well-organized way to evangelize.

## **5.5 Some fundamental elements for pastoral planning through sport**

### *The beauty of sport at the service of education*

Sport to be a pastoral good must be promoted well. Sport has its rules, its specificity, its beauty and we are called to promote sport by making the most of technical and organizational quality. However, the beauty of the sportive gesture, the quality of technical teaching and organizational efficiency are not ends in themselves.

Sport generates strong passions and emotions, but the task of a pastoral action is not to stop at the emotional level, but to produce a long lasting effect, capable of being incisive and lasting in everyday life. The pastoral task of sport is to welcome, accompany, guide and give reasons for hope and trust. It is a path which does not end in an event, but requires continuity and must make an impact on daily life.

### *Sport to rebuild educational pact*

"It is possible to change the world only if we change education." [77] To have a concrete impact, a project of pastoral care of sport must be a network project with local educational agencies, starting with families, schools and public institutions. If we want to influence the educational process, it is not enough to delegate the educational responsibility to people who work in silos with no relation to each other. "We need to combine everyone's efforts for education. To harmoniously reform the educational pact, for only in this way — if all those in charge of the education of our children and young people work together — can education change." [78] In this enterprise the Church should work closely and respectfully with the competent authorities to bring to fruition her vision of a sport culture that serves the human person who is a beloved creature made in God's own image and likeness.

### *Sport at the service of humanity*

St. John Paul II pointed out the "Relativity of sport with respect to the primacy of the human person, so that the subsidiary value of sport is emphasized in God's creative project. Therefore, sport should also be seen in the dynamics of service, and not in that of profit. If one keeps present the humanization objectives, one cannot help but feel the indispensable task of transforming sport more and more into an instrument of human elevation toward the supernatural goal to which it is called." [79]

This means that a pastoral plan has to give primacy to the human person, who has an admirable unity of body, soul and spirit. Sport must be promoted and practiced with the highest respect for the person and oriented towards his or her integral development. The athlete cannot be reduced to a mere tool to be used to achieve sports results which today are at times associated with significant economic and political ends.

### *Play as the basis of sport*

Sport is a sub-category of game and playing is the basis of sport, at every level. As Pope Francis put it, "It is important *that sports remain a game!* Only by remaining a game will it do good for the body and spirit." [80] It is especially important that sport remain a game for young people in educational contexts. Reflecting on the direction education should take today, Pope Francis said, "we must discover the depth of the person, the fundamental health, the capacity for lightheartedness, the creative capacity for play. The Book of Wisdom says that God was playful, the Wisdom of God was playful. Rediscover play as a learning experience, as an educational experience, so that education will no longer be merely information, but creativity at play. Rediscover

this playful aspect which enables us to grow in creativity and in joint work.” [81]

### *Teamwork against individualism*

It has been emphasized throughout this document that while participating in sport people “taste the beauty of teamwork, which is so important in life.”[82] To belong to a sports club means to reject every form of individualism, selfishness and isolation and gives “an opportunity to encounter and be with others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in brotherhood.”[83] The sporting experience naturally fosters the dynamics of friendship and cohabitation, which when cultivated and valued can go beyond the boundaries of sports fields and arenas and become an opportunity for meaningful and lasting relationships.

### *Sport for all*

Sport is empathic and brings together people from all walks of life, generating a culture of encounter. It has to reject a throwaway culture and has to be open, welcoming and inclusive. Sport should also allow the integration of diversity of abilities. “Everyone gets to play, not just the best, with the advantages and the limitations that each has, indeed, focusing on the disadvantaged, as Jesus did.” [84] In this way, “sport becomes an authentic service to the growth of the community.”[85]

### *An ecological vision of sport*

The era we are experiencing is not simply an era of changes, but it is the change of an era, a change accelerated by technological and digital revolutions. The young people who are growing up today are profoundly influenced by these revolutions, and sport itself is impacted by them. The presence of e-Sports (electronic sports) and new forms of doping, which are dependent upon technological and medical innovations, are merely the tip of the iceberg of a phenomenon that is more deeply permeating sport.

While the technological and digital revolutions have brought many benefits to humanity and it is right to celebrate these, the current dominant technological paradigm also has negative impacts. According to Pope Francis, these are evident in a number of symptoms, “such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living.” [86]

Sport in this context can be counter-cultural in that it provides young people with the opportunity for face to face encounters with other youth, who at times have very different backgrounds from their own. While playing on a team, they learn how to deal with conflict with one another in a direct way, while engaging in an activity that means a great deal to them. They also have the opportunity to play against young people from other parts of their community, country or the world and so expand their range of human contacts. Such experiences can help young people to realize that they are a part of something larger than themselves and be a part of what gives meaning and purpose to their lives.

## **Conclusive Remarks**

Sport is one context in which many young people and others from all cultures and religious traditions learn how to give the very best of themselves. These kinds of experiences can serve as a “signal of transcendence.” [87] This document has shown how the experiences people have while participating in sport –of joy, encounter with others different from themselves and the building up of community, growth in the virtues and in self-transcendence –can also teach us something about the human person and his or her destiny.

In his talk to the Italian Sports Center in 2014, Pope Francis encouraged his listeners and encourages us today to give the very best of ourselves, not only in sport, but in the rest of our lives as well: “As sportsmen, I invite you not only to play, like you already do, but there is something more: *challenge yourself* in the game of life like you are in the game of sports. Challenge yourself in the quest for good, in both Church and society, without fear, with courage and enthusiasm. Get involved with others and with God; Don’t settle for a mediocre “tie”, *give it your best*, spend your life on what really matters and lasts forever.” [88]

- [1] *Gaudium et spes*, 1.
- [2] Francis, Address to the Italian Tennis Federation, 8 May 2015.
- [3] Cf. D. Vanysacker, *The Catholic Church and Sport. A burgeoning territory within historical Research!* Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique. Louvain Journal of Church History 108 (2013), 344-356.
- [4] John Paul II, Homily in the occasion of the Jubilee of the Redeemer, 12 April 1984.
- [5] Francis, Address to members of the European Olympic Committee, 23 November 2013.
- [6] In a US context according to J. Stuart Weir, sport chaplaincy in professional sports began with Christian ministry to NFL players as early as the mid-1960s. In addition, he writes that John Jackson was the first chaplain officially appointed to an English professional football club in March of 1962. J. Stuart Weir, "Sports Chaplaincy: A Global Overview" in: *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates*. Ed. by A. Parker, N.J. Watson and J.B. White. London 2016.
- [7] Pius XII, Address to Italian Sportsmen, 20 May 1945.
- [8] Paul VI, Address to the members of the International Olympic Committee, 28 April 1966.
- [9] John Paul II, Address to the participants in the National Convention of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 25 November, 1989.
- [10] Cf. P. Kelly SJ, *Catholic perspectives on sports. From Medieval to modern times*, Mahwah, NJ 2012.
- [11] Cf. A. Stelitano, A.M. Dieguez & Q. Bortolato, *I Papi e lo sport*, 4-5.
- [12] Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *Sport e Vita cristiana*, n.32.
- [13] *Ibid.* n. 11.
- [14] John Paul II, Homily in the occasion of the Jubilee of the Redeemer, 12 April 1984.
- [15] P. Gummert, "Sport", in: *Brill's New Pauly*. Ed. by H. Cancik and H. Schneider, English Edition by: Christine F. Salazar, Classical Tradition volumes.
- [16] John Paul II, Homily on the occasion of the Jubilee of Sports People, 29 October 2000.
- [17] Cf. P. Kelly, *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times*, Mahwah, NJ 2012.
- [18] W. Behringer, *Kulturgeschichte des Sports: Vom antiken Olympia bis ins 21. Jahrhundert*, München 2011, 198-238.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 257.
- [20] Cf. N. Müller, "Die olympische Devise 'citius, altius, fortius' und ihr Urheber Henri Didon", in: *Wissenschaftliche Kommission des Arbeitskreises Kirche und Sport* (ed.), *Forum Kirche und Sport 2*, Düsseldorf 1996, 7-27.
- [21] Cf. D. Vanysacker, "The Attitude of the Holy See Toward Sport During the Interwar Period (1919–39)", in *Catholic Historical Review* 101 (2015) 4, 794-808; see also D. Vanysacker, "La position du Saint-Siège sur la gymnastique féminine dans l'Allemagne de L'entre-deux-guerres (1927-1928) à partir de quelques témoignages tirés des archives des nonciatures de Munich et Berlin" to appear in *Miscellanea Pagano*.
- [22] Cf. C. Hübenthal, "Morality and Beauty: Sport at the Service of the Human Person", in *Sport and Christianity: A Sign of the Times in the Light of Faith*, ed. by K. Lixey, C. Hübenthal, D. Mieth & N. Müller, Washington DC 2012, 61-78.
- [23] Cf. H. Reid, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Sport*, Lanham, MA 2010, 180-185.
- [24] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* nn. 234,236.
- [25] In a similar vein, the sport historian Allen Guttman applied binary distinctions to define sport. He starts from the general category *play*, and then goes on by determining sport as organized play (= *games*), competitive games (= *contests*), physical contests (= *sports*). See A. Guttman, *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports*, Chapel Hill - London 1988.
- [26] John Paul II, Address to the Italian and Argentine National Soccer Teams, 25 May 1979.
- [27] Idem, Address to the Italian National Olympic Committee, 20 December 1984.
- [28] Idem, Address to the managers and athletes of the Italian soccer team of Milan, 12 May 1979.
- [29] Idem, Address to the international convention on the theme: "During the time of the jubilee: the face and soul of sport", 29 October 2000.
- [30] Cf. *Mt* 7:13-14.
- [31] Acquired by Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the Modern Olympic Games at the end of the XIX century.
- [32] Francis, Address to participants of the IV Meeting promoted by *Scholas Occurrentes*, 5 February 2015.
- [33] John Paul II, Address to the Mexican national soccer team, 3 February 1984.
- [34] Benedict XVI, Address to the members of the Austrian Alpine Ski team, 6 October 2007.
- [35] John Paul II, Address to members of the fifa, 11 December 2000.
- [36] Francis, Address to members of the sports associations for the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center), 7 June 2014.

- [37] Cf. J. Parry, S. Robinson, N. Watson and M. Nesti, *Sport and Spirituality: An introduction*, London 2007.
- [38] John Paul II, Homily on the occasion of the Jubilee of sports people, 29 October 2000.
- [39] John Paul II, Address to the delegates of the Italian mountain climbing club, 26 April 1986.
- [40] Cf. J. Pieper, *About Love*, Chicago, 1974.
- [41] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n.1.
- [42] John Paul II, Address to athletes of the Athletics world championships in Rome, 2 September 1987.
- [43] *Guadium et spes*, n. 61
- [44] John Paul II, Address to athletes of the Athletics world championships in Rome, 2 September 1987.
- [45] 1 Cor 12:21-27.
- [46] John Paul II, Address to a delegation of “Real Madrid Club de Futbol” soccer team, 16 September 2002.
- [47] Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 59.
- [48] Benedict XVI, *Ángelus*, 8 July 2007.
- [49] Cf. Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church, n. 194.
- [50] John Paul II, Address to a delegation of “Futbol Club Barcelona” soccer team, 14 May 1999.
- [51] Francis, Address to the Italian Tennis Federation. Paul VI Hall, 8 May 2015.
- [52] John Paul II, Address to a delegation of “A.S. Roma” soccer team, 30 November 2000.
- [53] Francis, Address to members of the European Olympic Committee, 23 November 2013.
- [54] Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 267.
- [55] *Guadium et spes*, 12.
- [56] Cf. H. Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, Cambridge 2006.
- [57] *Guadium et spes*, n. 9.
- [58] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 1, Article 8, Response to Objection 2.
- [59] Francis, Address to the Fiorentina and Napoli soccer teams and to a delegation of the Italian Soccer Federation and of the Serie A League, 2 May 2014.
- [60] Francis, Address to members of the European Olympic Committee, 23 November 2013.
- [61] Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Instruction on Christian freedom and liberation “*The truth makes us free*”, 22 March 1986.
- [62] *Ibid.*
- [63] Cf. D. Meggysey, *Out of Their League*, Berkeley, CA 1970, p. 231.
- [64] Cf. E. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, New York 1980.
- [65] Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, “Sport e Vita Cristiana”, n. 43.
- [66] Francis, Homily at mass with the new Cardinals, 15 February 2015.
- [67] Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2009.
- [68] *Ibid.*
- [69] Francis, Address to the participants of the World Congress “Education today and tomorrow: A Passion that is renewed”. Paul VI Hall, 21 November 2015.
- [70] *Ibid.*
- [71] Francis, Address to participants of the Conference “Sport at the Service of Humanity”, 5 October 2016.
- [72] Cf. N.J. Watson & A. Parker (Ed.), *Sports, Religion, and Disability*. New York, 2015.
- [73] Francis, Address to members of the sports associations for the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center), 7 June 2014.
- [74] *Amateur* is intended here as an athlete who participates out of love for the sport, and not only for the money.
- [75] Francis, Address to a delegation of the National soccer teams of Argentina and Italy, 13 August 2013.
- [76] Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Doctrinal Note on some aspects of Evangelization, n. 2, 3 December 2007.
- [77] Francis, Address to participants of the IV Meeting promoted by *Scholas Occurrentes*, 5 February 2015.
- [78] *Ibid.*
- [79] John Paul II, Address to the participants in the National Convention of the Italian Episcopal Conference. 25 November, 1989.
- [80] Francis, Address to members of the sports associations for the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center), 7 June 2014.
- [81] Francis, Address to participants of the IV Meeting promoted by *Scholas Occurrentes*, 5 February 2015.
- [82] Francis, Address to members of the sports associations for the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center), 7 June 2014.
- [83] *Ibid.*
- [84] *Ibid.*

[85] John Paul II, Address to a delegation of “Juventus” soccer team, 23 March 1991.

[86] Francis, *Laudato si'* nn. 107, 108, 110.

[87] Cf. P.L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, New York 1969.

[88] Francis, Address to members of the sports associations for the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the CSI (Italian Sports Center), 7 June 2014

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