

“Sport: rethinking tomorrow” a webinar from 1-22 October, 2020

CLOSING REMARKS

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This past week we have completed the webinar series titled: “Sports: rethinking the future.” I would like to recall some of the ideas that were highlighted in these four weeks of discussion and reflection, ideas which made these sessions a time rich in contributions towards the effort to make sports more centered on the human person, while also looking towards God and towards our society.

I would like to summarize all this in four numbers: 4 sessions, 3 values, 2 projects, and 1 goal.

Four sessions

The sessions were very intense, full of comments and ideas, which are perhaps not easy to enumerate. But to me it seems important to underscore what Mark Nesti said on the first day, on how athletes are not detached from the world, but that they too are part of the reality that we all share. The pandemic has probably made it obvious that sports have stopped—and this is an opportunity to develop new ways of seeing sports as not only something physical, technical, tactical, and psychological, but also as a vehicle for spiritual growth.

Long inactivity induces physical and motor deficits in children, adults, and the elderly. Sooner or later this will have an impact on public health, and thus also on municipal budgets. Montali, in his testimony, emphasized the social and relational aspects of the pandemic as they relate to sports: sports imply respect for rules, for specific roles, and for integration amidst diversity. And so the educational aspect of sports must be safeguarded at all costs.

On the second day, Fr. Patrick Kelly, SJ, and Wolfgang Baumann helped us get to the bottom of the first Vatican document on sports, “Giving the best of yourself.” Because while we as the Church agree that there is much to be done, the Church still has a great deal to offer in terms of improving people’s lives through sports. Interest in and closeness to the world of sports is a pastoral goal of the Church and also of our Dicastery, which has the specific mission of accompanying and supporting the laity, families, and young people. Cardinal Farrell said on the first day that “for our Dicastery and for the

Church in general, the educational value of sports is very important. Sports are an extraordinary tool for the integral formation of the human person.” This idea was reaffirmed by the testimony of Dyan Castillejo, who said that sports are “one of the greatest gifts that God has given us, a gift that can strengthen the mind, body and spirit. Through sports, God teaches us that there is hope, that we must not give up.”

Our desire, with this session, was to remember that sports are above all a way to grow, to develop the capacities of each one together with the others. And this new beginning can be a tremendous opportunity for change for the better. We must reflect on “how” to start again. And the answer is that without values, without putting the human person at the center, all of us will simply and mechanically pick up where we left off and thereby run the risk of repeating the same old patterns, making the same mistakes, and falling into the same mentalities and habits that turned out to be wrong and which are now out of date.

In our third session, we all found ourselves being a bit “excluding.” Timothy Shriver invited us to think about when the last time was when we changed our minds, thoughts, or hearts...even in looking beyond sports. He asked us to think about how we can develop a more inclusive approach to sports in our communities through leadership, education, and the promotion of physical and mental health; and to create places of communion where those who exclude (the excluders) and those who fight for a more inclusive society can be brought together in a joyful meeting, in a celebration of sports.

Finally, we considered the fundamental importance of the family in the development of the person, and of children in particular. We spoke many times about the risk for today’s children, when already at an early age they see sports as only a competition and not a game. Parents are essential for involving children in sports in a positive way. And it is our responsibility to open spaces for them to participate actively in sports. Sports must above all be fun—a pleasure, a game.

In the different sessions, what emerged was the need to remind our athletes that the best performance is their own performance...and not that of others. To give the best of oneself is to offer everything one has for one’s team, for society, for God, so as to reach the crown of justice, as St. Paul says in his letter to Timothy.

As Cristina Gangemi and Alessandra Morelli also pointed out in their presentations, every day we must remind ourselves that in God’s eyes we are all precious, and that by valuing others we strengthen the idea that sports truly have the power to change the world.

Finally, in the last session and thanks to the reports by Renata Simril of the LA84 Foundation, by Jaime Fillol, and by the exponents of Scholas Occurrentes in Mozambique, we were able to outline three values which in my opinion are essential for reviving sports and for rethinking the future.

Three values for the revival of sports

- Integration/inclusion:

Inclusion begins with each one of us. This is why it is important to lead change that is positive, to use sports to help others and to create changes that are physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Fairness

is not the same as equality, and so we must strive to give more to those who need it most, and ask more from those who can give more in a team or in a group.

Pope Francis, in his general Audience of 30 September, emphasized the fact that “We will never be able to emerge from the crisis that was highlighted by the pandemic, mechanically, with new tools — which are very important, they allow us to move forward, and we must not be afraid of them — but knowing that even the most sophisticated means, capable of doing many things, are incapable of one thing: tenderness. And tenderness is the very sign of Jesus’ presence.” It is necessary to approach others in order to walk together, to heal, to help, and to sacrifice oneself for others.

This integration also applies at the organizational and institutional level of associations, sports organizations, pastoral entities, etc. To this end, it is necessary to overcome self-referentiality; i.e. to stop thinking that my company, my association is the best, and that others must do as I do...the Church has always emphasized the value of unity in diversity. It is very important to know how to work with everyone because in sports we are all necessary. Therefore, we must create stable links with other institutions and realities, (government, schools, associations, communities, etc.) even when we do not share 100% in their agenda.

As the Pope also said in his Audience this past 30 September: “A fair and equitable society is a healthier society. A participatory society — where the “last” are taken into account just like the “first” — strengthens communion. A society where diversity is respected is much more resistant to any kind of virus.”

- Formation:

We must not be afraid to manifest Christian values in society and within sports. Sports are a unique means of conveying the faith and showing forth virtues, because the Christian faith shares almost all of the values inherent in sports. And so it is necessary to “form the formators” and give an integral formation to youth ministry and sports organizations in order to reach everyone. This should all be without forgetting that we are not looking for “Christian sports,” but rather to be consistent Christians within sports.

- Sustainability:

We must defend the social value of sport against individualism and materialism, so that players can realize the opportunities they have to get in touch with the world. We need to create a model that highlights the intrinsic benefits of the individual and the community, instead of focusing on economic, ideological and political ideas. And for this to be sustainable over time, we need to generate networks with other public and private institutions, institutions with the government, schools, local communities, universities and clubs. All with a common message, a message of social value, social responsibility and integral education.

Pope Francis has repeated many times that “the gesture that allows one to progress in a society, in a family, in a neighborhood, in a city, with everyone, is to give oneself—is to give, which is not to give alms, but give with the heart. This is a gesture that takes us away from selfishness and the desire to possess.”

Two projects

In conclusion, I would like to point out two projects in continuity with these webinars. First, an international conference scheduled for the end of next year on sports and human frailty, for a deepened appreciation of the value of sports in the face of disability, marginalization, for the fostering of greater inclusivity, etc. It will serve to evaluate where we have failed as a community, and identify our strength in providing life-changing experiences; in short, what we can teach and learn from each other.

The second project is the creation of a working group of a greater scope with people from all over the world who work in the area of pastoral ministry within sports, as well as in fields that promote values through sports. This will be for the purpose of sharing best practices which can be reproduced in other places in the world, as well as for the sake of a deepened understanding of issues related to the future of sports and those who practice them.

One goal

All this is to achieve one goal: change for the better. We must reflect on “how” to re-start, because without serious reflection there can be no improvement, there can be no innovation. And the ultimate goal is nothing more than to put the human person at the center of the priorities of sports in practice, so as to safeguard his or her dignity and to be an instrument of evangelization for the world.