
“Sport: a School of Moral Values”

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Franciscan University of Steubenville’s Athletic Department kicked off the 2020 fall semester with a department retreat. I was honored to be asked to celebrate and preach at the retreat Mass and chose the topic from Saint John Paul II’s address to the Italian Olympians returning from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Following is my presentation:

“As the Barons’ rugby team chaplain, I remind ruggers that they are not rugby players attending Franciscan University, they are Franciscan University students who play rugby. There is a key and distinct difference in the understanding of priority and importance.

At Franciscan University academic standards and faith formation have priority over athletic accomplishments. Athletics are played from within the Franciscan Culture, not in opposition to it. Don’t get me wrong by any stretch. Winning games is sweet and winning championships is our goal, but developing men and women who can compete well in life, is our primary focus.

Competing in sport at Franciscan University is our field of evangelization, where athletes and coaches witness their skills and prowess tempered with integrity, courage, fairness and compassion. Our goal is to grow men and women, not just athletes.

Saint John Paul II¹, himself a fervent athlete, in speaking to the Italian Olympians said:

‘Sport risks degrading man if it is not based on and supported by the human virtues of loyalty, generosity and respect for the laws of the game as well as the player. Virtues are well harmonized with the Christian spirit because they require the capacity of self-control, self-denial, sacrifice, and humility, thereby creating an attitude of gratitude towards God, who is the giver of all good, and also of the necessary physical and intellectual skills.

‘Sport is not a simple exercise of muscles, but a school of moral values and education in courage, tenacity and overcoming laziness and neglect. It is also an antidote to weakness, discouragement and dejection in defeat. There is no doubt that these values are of the utmost interest for the formation of a personality, which considers sport not an end in itself, but as a means of total and harmonious physical, moral and social development.’

Sport as a *school of moral values*, a school of virtue, is the foundation for Franciscan University athletic programs; integrating the unity of body, mind and spirit. As coaches and chaplains, how will you develop and incorporate moral values and virtues into your training schedule? Instill into your players that competing well in sport is important, but not as important as competing well in the classroom and in their personal faith development — on the field, the court, the pitch and the diamond, and into all areas of life.

Pope Francis wrote in a letter to Cardinal Farrell² on “Giving the Best of Yourself: A document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person” that this document by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life was “prepared with the aim of highlighting the role of the Church in the sports world and how sports can be an instrument of encounter, formation, mission, and sanctification.”

Cardinal Keith Farrell, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, in an interview with ZENIT³ spoke on this first Vatican document on sport and the Church:

‘Giving the best of yourself’ is without doubt an expression that can be applied both in the field of sport and in that of faith.’

‘On the one hand, in fact, it recalls the effort, the sacrifice that a sportsperson must take on as a constant in his or her life to obtain a victory or simply to arrive at the goal.

‘But also in the area of faith,’ he noted, ‘we are called upon to give the best of ourselves to arrive at holiness, which as the Pope [Francis] has shown...is a universal call, addressed to all, including sportspeople.’

A while back, I read an article that might be the most significant piece I have read in a long time — “Schooling the Young into Goodness”⁴:

‘To begin, moral education should be an initiation into a way of life; it should be about schooling the young into habits and practices that will form them in the distinctive excellences of human beings. Those charged with the responsibility of helping the young grow into goodness should teach them to love what is best and to nurture aspirations that are truly worthy. They should strive to cultivate in the young a resilient passion for justice, a costly compassion, and the abiding conviction that fulfillment comes not when our lives are guided by calculated self-interest, but when we expend ourselves for the sake of others. In its most basic terms, moral education is about forming character and changing hearts.

‘The primary aim of moral education should be to present students with a magnanimous way of life, one that will enable them to aspire to and achieve the greatness for which they, as God’s very images, were created to enjoy.

‘Magnanimity is the virtue that habituates us in aspirations for excellence. Literally meaning to be of ‘great soul’ or ‘great spirit,’ magnanimous persons always aspire to what is best, always reach for what is truly excellent and worthy of their lives, and refuse to lower their sights to less promising possibilities. With magnanimity, we become persons who reject puny ambitions and middling hopes, and instead focus our lives on purposes, projects, and goals that demand that we expend ourselves for the sake of something noble. Magnanimity teaches that we find happiness not through self-gratification, not through lives of ease and comfort, and certainly not through wealth, fame, or celebrity, but in risking costly and heroic lives. Indeed, the magnanimous person knows that we grow as humans in the measure that we extend ourselves on behalf of some transcendent purpose. The virtue of magnanimity suggests that our fundamental error is not that we hope for too much, but that we settle for so little.’

Think about that statement. *The virtue of magnanimity suggests that our fundamental error is not that we hope for too much, but that we settle for so little.*

A few years ago, I had a chat with Franciscan alum, Nebraska Congressman Jeff Fortenberry. I asked him what he sees as a major issue while he travels around and speaks.

He said it is a lack of aspiration from today's youth. They do not strive...they seem to simply settle..

A magnanimous man or woman has aspirations. He or she strives to make a difference, to achieve in faith, in life and in sport.

I would consider magnanimity as the 'lost virtue.' It is the virtue of seeking excellence in all areas of one's life, growing and living into the fullness each man or woman was created to achieve. Over the years, I find that too many young people do not seek excellence in their lives, but settle for becoming less than they could be. That is because it involves hard work, discipline and sacrifice, thus making magnanimity the 'lost virtue.'

A favorite book of mine on this topic was co-written by Coach Tony Dungy, former NFL player, former head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Indianapolis Colts, member of NFL Hall of Fame, analyst for NBC's *Football Night in America*, and also a best-selling author of the book titled, *Uncommon: Finding Your Path to Significance*.⁵ Dungy writes:

'I believe that the imprint you are meant to leave on this world is not accidental or coincidental. Your life has been intentionally designed by God to have a uniquely significant eternal impact on the world around you.

'Think about that for a moment — your life has been intentionally designed by God to have a unique and significant impact on everyone you meet, and many you never meet. What if we all lived our lives embracing that idea as true — what would our lives begin to look like? What would we attempt to do that we never would have attempted otherwise? What difference would we begin to make in the lives of those around us? What would our communities begin to look like?'

Let that sink in! Your life has been intentionally designed by God to have a unique and significant impact on the world around you. That is what it means to be *Uncommon*, *Significant*, and *Magnanimous*.

This is the culture of moral values Franciscan University coaches and chaplains are challenged to develop in each of their teams. Are you ready to step up your game?"

NB: For additional resources regarding sport and virtue check out my web page: Athletics and Sports – Ethics and Virtue Web Resources http://www.appleseeds.org/Athletics-Sports_Resources.htm.

Notes:

1. Pope John Paul II, “Address to Italian Olympians who had participated in the L.A. games,” November 24, 1984, Translated using Google Translate, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1984/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19841124_gruppo-olimpionici.html
2. Pope Francis, “Letter to Cardinal Farrell on New Document on Sport – ‘Giving the Best of Yourself: A document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person’”, June 01, 2018 ZENIT, <https://zenit.org/articles/popes-letter-to-cardinal-farrell-on-new-document-on-sport/>
3. Cardinal Keith Farrell, LC, Overview, “To Give the Best of Oneself: On the Christian Perspective of Sport and of the Human Person,” ZENIT interview, June 01, 2018, <https://zenit.org/articles/vatican-presents-holy-sees-1st-document-on-sport/>
4. Darin H. Davis and Paul J. Waddell, “Schooling the Young into Goodness”, (© 2009) Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/86518.pdf>.
Or, Can be found at *Athletics and Sports – Ethics and Virtue* page of web resources: http://www.appleseeds.org/Athletics-Sports_Resources.htm
5. Tony Dungy with Nathan Whitaker, *Uncommon: Finding Your Path to Significance*, Carol Stream, IL:Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2009, p. 211.