Sport at the Service of Humanity: Faith and Collegiate Sports

The Sport at the Service of Humanity initiative was created by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture and is built around the “declaration of principles;” joy, compassion, respect, enlightenment, love and balance. Its inaugural conference, held at the Vatican on October 5-7, 2016, included two days of intensive discussion among religious leaders, athletes, business leaders, academicians, media representatives and other stakeholders, with a focus on how sport and faith can drive positive social change and foster inclusion, involvement and inspiration among people from diverse backgrounds.

The conference was organized with the special support of the International Olympic Committee and the United Nations. In opening remarks to the conference delegates, Pope Francis noted:

“Sport is a human activity of great value, able to enrich people’s lives…When we see athletes giving their very best, sport fills us with enthusiasm, with a sense of marvel… When [played] like this, sport transcends physicality and takes us into the arena of the spirit and even of mystery…I trust that these days of meeting and reflection will allow you to explore further the good that sport and faith can bring to our societies. I entrust to God all that you do, every hope and expectation, and from my heart invoke his blessing on each one of you…”

OPENING ADDRESS, POPE FRANCIS, OCTOBER 5, 2016
In response and with the full support of president Fr. Peter Donohue, OSA, Villanova’s own Office for Mission and Ministry, proposed, first to the BIG EAST Conference and then to the Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican, that the “declaration of principles” form the basis for a conversation on the role of faith in collegiate athletics.

“Villanova was excited to build on the Vatican’s Sport at the Service of Humanity initiative and to support His Holiness Pope Francis’ desire to explore how faith and sports can bring people together and ready young people for life’s many opportunities and challenges,” said Fr. Peter. “The principles of the Vatican conference are fully in line with Villanova’s mission and values, and we welcomed the chance to engage other higher education leaders on how faith and sports can bring people together and ready young people for life’s many opportunities and challenges.”

Val Ackerman, Commissioner of the BIG EAST, added that “Intercollegiate athletics programs are an ideal platform to build character and teach values...The Villanova conference will reinforce these benefits and the role that sports play in building bridges and improving lives.”

The first regional conference of its kind was hosted at the Inn at Villanova on June 7-8. In addition to Ackerman, Bishop Paul Tighe, Adjunct Secretary of the Pontifical Council on Culture, Michael Galligan-Stierle, President of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and Rev. Pat Kelly, SJ, Associate Professor of Theology from Seattle University were featured speakers. A delegation from the Vatican Conference including Monsignor Melchor Sánchez de Toca y Alameda Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture was in attendance.
The real work of the conference was structured conversations among athletic directors, coaches, team chaplains, campus ministers and mission and ministry officers from NCAA Division I, II and III schools as well as the NAIA on the intersection of faith and sports at the collegiate level. Their goal was to explore how their activities and resources might be placed more firmly at the “service of humanity.”

Dr. Barbara Wall, Villanova’s Vice President for Mission and Ministry, identified several overarching goals for the conference. “With this initial gathering, we hope to energize key voices in Catholic and Christian higher education on the issue of faith in collegiate sports. Using the Vatican’s guiding ‘principles,’ we hope to expand the conversation concerning the ‘spirituality of sports’ and encourage greater intentionality about faith development for student athletes on our campuses,” she said.

At Villanova
The Athletic Department, Campus Ministry and several academic departments collaborate to connect sports, spirituality and faith on the campus.

Augustinian friars serve as team chaplains. Rev. Robert Hagan, OSA, meets regularly with both the Villanova football and men’s basketball teams. Rev. Anthony Genovese, OSA serves as team chaplain for the Villanova women’s basketball team.

David Walsh, MA, serves as full time campus minister for sports and spirituality. He assists coaches and student-athletes create and implement programs to promote the holistic development among this particular constituency. Facilitating retreats, prayer and reflections for teams, and serving as a liaison between Campus Ministry and Athletics Department are among his primary roles.

At the end of every spring semester the Villanova Athletics Department sponsors a student-athlete service experience, which involves student-athletes working with a Habitat for Humanity chapter in the Appalachian region. The experience is organized by Lynn Tighe, the Senior Associate Athletic Director. The outreach is part of the department’s ongoing efforts to emphasize community engagement and to live Villanova’s Augustinian values.
In addition to ministerial efforts by both Campus Ministry and the Athletics Department, Villanova also offers a number of educational opportunities that focus on the intersection of faith and sports. These opportunities come in the form of academic events and undergraduate courses.

A symposium entitled “The Grace of Playing: A Conversation on Sports and Their Role in Human Flourishing” was offered by the Forum on Faith and Culture this past spring. Last year several academic departments collaborated to present “Academics and Athletics in the Catholic Social Tradition.” Further, since 2012, The Charles Wiger School of Law has been home to the Jeffrey S. Moorad Center for the Study of Sports Law. Its Sports Law Journal has been published continuously at Villanova since 1994.

Among the academic courses offered for credit are “Sports & Spirituality” in Theology and Religious Studies; “The Philosophy of Sport” in Philosophy and “Baseball, Justice and the American Dream” through the Center for Peace and Justice Education.

For more information about sports and spirituality at Villanova, contact David Walsh at david.walsh@villanova.edu.

For more information about the Collegiate Working Group for Sport at the Service of Humanity visit sportforhumanity.villanova.edu.

Content for this article was adapted from the joint press release for the Villanova conference (December 21, 2016).