“A priest, a preacher and a rabbi walked into a bar”. I am sure many of you are familiar with this old joke. Now, put a priest, a rabbi, an imam, together with the Secretary General of the United Nations, and the President of the International Olympic Committee, not in a bar but in the Vatican, and you will have an idea of the atmosphere of the *Sport at the Service of Humanity* Conference held last October at the Vatican.

The idea of this conference was born several years ago. We were considering what it would be like to bring sports leaders and religious leaders together to the Vatican, and having them speak with each other, under the aegis of the UN and IOC.

In fact, faith and sport, or rather, faith communities and sport organizations– both share a common purpose in the promotion of human values, and both have vital, but different, roles to fulfil. Both are powerful platforms, both have strong messages, both have their own set of challenges.

Of course, when we talk about faith and sport, we are not talking about entities of the same nature. Sport is not a religion; the International Olympic Committee president emphasized this point in his opening speech at our Conference in October. There are many believers and religious leaders who love to play sport, and many athletes who are devout faithful of their communities. However, usually, these two worlds rarely touch each other.

And though they have a lot to learn from each other, our communities can benefit from the many values sport embodies: sacrifice, discipline, team work, for example. It’s not by chance that St. Paul talks about athletics and boxing in his letters as an example for Christian life (1Cor 9,24; 2Tm 4). But also the opposite is true: in a time where big sports institutions are experiencing severe crises of values, and when it is clear that sport cannot save itself, faith communities can contribute to bring sport back to its authentic values.

So, we started to explore the feasibility of this idea. The IOC enthusiastically supported this project and facilitated the presence, indeed involvement of the United Nations. In fact, what we were planning had never been tried before: a meeting on sport and faith in the Vatican at the highest level.

Pope Francis, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and IOC President Thomas Bach, with religious leaders and representatives of other faiths and Churches, officially opened the Conference attended by over 400 key leaders and influencers from the worlds of faith, sport, business, government, NGOs and other sectors.

A Conference to do what? We all attend those conferences whose main purpose seems to be attending a conference. In this case, the Conference itself was already a historical achievement. But it could not remain there; it needed to be filled with meaningful content.
Three key themes – inspiration, inclusion and involvement – served as the framework for discussion at the two-day conference.

- INSPIRATION: Pope Francis said: challenge yourself in the game of life as you do in the game of sport. Sport is a metaphor for life. It brings the values of faith to change the way people view and conduct themselves in Sport.
- INCLUSION: Sport for all. How can we help more people practice sport and take advantage of its benefits? Sport is a medium to teach all people in every society to play together so that they can live together in peace and harmony.
- INVOLVEMENT: Is the opposite movement: how can people who practice sport act as game changers, what can sport associations and clubs do to transform lives and help and empower those who are most in need around the world.

The backbone of the Conference was the Six Principles Declaration. I know there are many similar Declarations, and that they run the risk of being rhetorical and empty. In our case, we wanted to try to reflect into a Declaration some principles inspired by religious traditions of humanity, expressed in such a way that they could be acceptable for all religions, and even for those who don’t share a religious vision of life.


These were the principles which made up the Declaration of Principles which were endorsed by all of the Conference participants.

Our goals now are to bring the principles to life. We are currently exploring opportunities to work with interested parties who share our vision and values to bring the Sport at the Service of Humanity principles to life via three key areas of engagement:

- The first is expanding the geographic reach of the faith and sport movement through conferences and facilitating ongoing multi-faith, multi-cultural, and multi-sector dialogue. I am grateful to Villanova University and the Big East Conference for having been inspired to host the first Sport at the Service of Humanity Regional Conference. Particularly, I want to thank Villanova University for its ongoing cooperation with the Pontifical Council for Culture.
- The second area is a partner program: looking for partners and organizations to become involved with our movement by integrating the Principles into existing initiatives and/or to develop new programs based on shared values and objectives that have long-lasting impact and legacy.
- And finally, a third area, community engagement, which currently consists of developing toolkits aimed at making it easy for grassroots organizations such as schools, community organizations, youth sport leagues, clubs, teams, churches, mosques, and parishes to be included and feel that they are part of the movement.

Dear friends, you are the first Sport and Faith Conference outside the Vatican. We rely on you to help us to explore how your sports departments and teams can embody and transform a Declaration of Principles into practices and policies, so that we can continue to enjoy loving our sports, to suffer when our team loses and to rejoice when it wins, and overall, to experience that joy which the eternal wisdom has, “Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; putting his delights with the sons of men” (Pr 8:32).