

Call to action for the American Bishops and the American Catholic Church as a result of the March 7, 2019 Symposium on Sports, Education & Pastoral Care held at the University of Notre Dame. This Symposium responded to the Vatican's Dicastery for Laity, Family & Life release of *Giving the Best of Yourself: a Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person*

Background

In Pope Francis' [letter of support](#) for *Giving the Best of Yourself*, he said the document was prepared to highlight "the role of the Church in the sports world and how sports can be an instrument of encounter, formation, mission and sanctification."

On March 7, 2019, a ***Symposium on the Church & Sport*** was hosted by the University of Notre Dame, with the *Play Like a Champion Today Educational Series* as one of the event's co-sponsors. The event was made possible in part by support from the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, College of Arts and Letters; the Cushwa Center for Study of American Catholicism; and Notre Dame Athletics. It provided a theological commentary on key features of the Vatican document as well as a discussion of the document's implications for youth sports in America. Sixty sports leaders from Catholic and non-Catholic youth, high school and collegiate athletic programs across the country participated in person and another sixty on-line. Prior to the Symposium, Cardinal Kevin Farrell, Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery, wrote to the organizers expressing his gratitude for our gathering as a "service to youth and society at large." You can read a full review of the Symposium events and watch the day's sessions by clicking here: <https://www.playlikeachampion.org/news-and-blog/symposium-is-first-step-in-response-to-vatican-document>.

Our Church recognizes the deep connection between Christianity and sport while emphasizing the immense impact of sport in our world today. This document and Pope Francis's accompanying letter lay out the importance of treating sports as play and, therefore, of intrinsic value also that sport can foster the development of the whole person, the common good and the unity of the human family. Yet, the Document acknowledges that the current youth sports system degrades the playful nature of sport while excluding many children from participation. At the urging of Pope Francis and the Dicastery, the Symposium participants identified areas in youth sport that demanded immediate attention and began a developing Pastoral Action Plan to address them.

The immense value of sport and who should defend it

The Document points out that sport because is a "human universal and has taken on a new level of importance in our time", thus the Church "desires to contribute to the construction of an increasingly authentic, humane sport." The Document addresses "all people of good will," especially those "who have been developing programs to defend the human values that are inherent in sport practice." It goes on to include "all the Catholic faithful, starting with bishops and priests" and "especially the laity, who are those most contact with sport as a lived reality." The goal of the document is 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."

Focus on the joy of playing

Our guiding document charges that “Sport only makes sense as long as it promotes a space of common joy.” Fr. Patrick Kelly, SJ, in his Symposium presentation provided a historical account of the presence of joy in sport in the experience of lay Catholics playing sports on feast days in the medieval period, which was supported by the “play ethic” of Thomas Aquinas. Fr. Kelly and the document explain that sport is a “ludic activity,” which means that it has its purpose in itself. Pope Francis in his address to participants of the IV Meeting promoted by Scholas Occurrentes, Feb 5, 2015 agrees with this historical perspective: “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.” Fr. Kelly notes that Catholic schools starting in the Renaissance decided to include sport as part of their curriculum because, following Thomas Aquinas, they understood virtue to be associated with moderation. This led them to the view that students should not be studying all the time, but also needed time and space for play and recreation.

Encourage the development of virtue through sport

Sports are one of the few activities that enable the development of the whole person, body, mind, heart and soul. Athletes grow physically through their athletic training, but they also have the opportunity to develop mentally, socially, emotionally and spiritually through sport. The document reminds us that “sport is one of the most effective contexts within which people can develop holistically.”

Our current culture perverts these ideal values of sport

Our Symposium discussion groups agreed with the importance of encouraging playfulness and holistic development through sport. In fact, all the attendees live their personal ministry in life to make this a reality for the youth in their local areas. However, the group repeatedly acknowledged the many toxic challenges that degrade sport in our current culture. The most troublesome of these realities for the group include:

- A win at all cost mentality
- Sport specialization
- Spectator misbehavior
- “Pay to play” sports, which exclude poor and working class children
- Too much pressure in the sport experience
- Abuse of children (physical, sexual and emotional)

There is no doubt that the Church is genuinely interested in sport as a contemporary human reality of great value. Yet, the Dicastery document cautions that sports only serve humanity if sports are well run. Pope Francis charges, “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* [emphasis added], it fosters loyalty in interpersonal relations, friendship, and respect for rules.”

An Apostolate for Sports

We must seek to improve sports with the Church’s moral vision to combat the challenges that arise in contemporary US culture. The document lays out this moral vision, but then questions:

How can the Church’s vision of sports permeate into the Bishop’s conferences, dioceses and parishes? This should 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.

Giving the Best of Yourself proposes the establishment of an “Apostolate for Sports” and our Symposium attendees agree with the value of this approach. An Apostolate is a group of leaders engaging in work of evangelization, in this case through the medium of sport. These leaders already exist in the Athletic Directors, coaches, and sport parents of CYO and church-run athletic leagues as well as in our Catholic high schools and universities.

A Pastoral Action Plan for the Apostolate for Sports

An “Apostolate for Sports” can be unified under a common vision for Christian sports laid out by this Vatican document. An Apostolate, however, is only effective when driven to unified action. The Vatican document further provides us with a road-map for a Pastoral Action Plan for an American Church “Apostolate for Sports” to ensure sports are well executed for all.

This Pastoral Action Plan includes four elements:

- Sports must serve the human person in their integral development
- Sport programs must provide continuing education for coaches and pastoral workers
- Sports should create a culture of inclusion
- Sports are an opportunity to create a culture of encounter, peace, mercy

This Call to Action will address each of these four elements of a Pastoral Action Plan to guide how sports can be effectively organized and executed by an “Apostolate for Sports”. The plan will also include recommendations for working in collaboration with non-Catholic youth sport organizations.

At our Symposium, we formed an executive panel to outline these four elements with discussion groups following the panel. The following Pastoral Action Plan, which is based on the Dicastery document, is still very much a work in progress. The plan below focuses on the specific responsibilities of the Catholic community. Yet the Symposium participants and the Document itself make clear that the Church must not focus narrowly within but

work in collaboration with those in other organizations: “The Church desires to be of service to all who work in sport.”

What “Giving the Best of Yourself” declares about the four elements of a Pastoral Action Plan:

1. Ensure sport serves the human person in their integral development

The first element makes clear that sports administrators and coaches commit themselves to an ethic of service to children. From this standpoint, sports are a part of education.

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, if 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

“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.”

In order for the above vision to be realized, we must attend to the second element of our proposed Pastoral Action Plan:

2. Provide quality education for youth sport administrators, coaches, and parents

Coaches and Athletic directors are human beings who are naturally influenced by a culture that values athletic success before the joy of play and character development. We must make a wholehearted commitment to deliberate person-oriented administrator, coach, and parent education.

“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.”

A third element of our proposed Pastoral Action Plan is to:

3. Create a culture of inclusion.

Catholic and non-Catholic youth sport organizations must collaborate to serve a growing number of children, who are excluded because they are poor or are perceived to be of inferior athletic ability or social standing. We must go to the margins of society to serve the poor and vulnerable.

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]

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.”

Once, we as Church provide the opportunity for all children to participate in sport, the fourth element of a Pastoral Action Plan becomes an opportunity:

4. Create a culture of encounter, peace and mercy

Our world is increasingly segregated along racial, cultural and socioeconomic divides. Sport can be a context for encounter with people who are from different backgrounds when all play together on a field as equals, all as children of God.

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.”

The sections above constitute a framework for implementing the vision laid out in the Dicastery Document. Drawing on our group discussions at the Symposium, the Symposium organizers recommend the following practical steps for implementing this Pastoral Action Plan for the American Church:

Action Steps for Sport Programs to enact the Pastoral Action Plan:

1. Ensure sport serves the human person in their integral development

- Sport serves the integral development of the human person when we reject the win at all cost mentality that so pervades our sport culture, and often is connected to the pursuit of money and fame.
- We as Church must take a stand against this toxic culture by committing to be strategic and intentional about not only teaching the physical skills of a sport, but the moral virtues that are part of every sport encounter and are essential to a person's whole development.
- Additionally, we as church must make a commitment to include all children in our games and to give them equal playing time regardless of their physical ability.

These commitments can and will only be realized when we as Church commit to the second step in the pastoral action plan:

2. Sport programs must address training for sports administrators, coaches, parents, and those who work in pastoral ministries serving children.

Every baptized person is consecrated by God to participate in the salvific mission of our Church. Coaches are individuals who have chosen to provide their service to young people in the Church through sport. In this sense, coaching is a lay ministry of our church. Yet, coaches are human and thus are susceptible to the challenges of a win-at-all-cost sport culture. Additionally, most coaches, many of whom are volunteers, have never received preparation for working with children and adolescents. How can we expect that coaches would be able to live the charge of this Vatican document without formation, guidance, instruction?

If lay ministers are to undertake their responsibility for the church's mission seriously, then a formation adequate to their ministry becomes a necessity. Most coaches are well-meaning, but in order to be effective in living the Church's vision of sport, they need education:

- to embrace their role as a lay minister of the church,
- to make sport child-centered,
- to honor the "play" aspect of sports,
- to facilitate positive team interactions and develop teams as moral communities;
- to learn intentional ways of teaching virtue through sports.

Symposium attendees lamented that the only requirement to become a coach in many dioceses is to be cleared by a background check and attend safe environment training. This does not adequately form a coach for their coaching ministry with children.

The following action steps are recommended as a result of the Symposium:

- Mandating coach education across every diocese in the same spirit as safe environment education. Putting coaches in a position of responsibility with our children without specific training is irresponsible and leaves our children vulnerable along with the diocese/sport organization open to risk.
- In order for coach education to be wholly formational, it needs to be an in-person experience with research-based information from the appropriate academic

disciplines: psychology, moral development and theology, so that coaches embrace their ministerial role.

- Coach education must not be limited to a single training session for the purpose of checking a box, but must be ongoing through the course of a sport season and over the coach's career with constant flow of ways to coach as an effective minister of our church.
- Funding at both the national as well as local level needs to be made available to enable this education to be a reality.
- In addition to training for coaches, an apostolate for sports also has the responsibility to ensure that there is a supportive spectator environment. To honor the Christian vision for sports, we must set universal standards to guard against toxic spectator behavior.

Pope Francis supports mandatory coach education of the highest quality. In an address to the 2015 Vatican Conference "Coaches: Educating People" held in Rome sponsored by the Vatican's Dicastery, he exhorted, "Next to parents, teachers, priests and catechists, a coach can therefore be an effective formator of young people. Every good formator must receive a solid formation. It is necessary to form formators. That is why it is important...all the organizations operating in the field of sport...invest the necessary resources for the professional, human and spiritual formation of coaches. How beautiful it would be if in all sports, and at all levels, from large international competitions to the tournaments in parish recreation centres, young people could encounter in their coaches authentic witnesses of life and of faith lived!"

Therefore, an effective Pastoral Action Plan demands required coach and parent education that involves guidance on a spiritual level, empowering adults "to proclaim Jesus Christ by our words and actions" in and through sports.

The Play Like a Champion Today Educational Program has been providing such educational programming to 250 sport organizations across 87 dioceses in 42 states. This educational series has all the necessary elements required for proper and holy coach and parent education. Given the vast community of diocesan sport partnerships that already exist in the Play Like a Champion Today community, Symposium moderator Bishop Donald Hying proposed the American Church "Apostolate for Sports" be formed under the umbrella of this national organization.

3. Create a culture of inclusion: Go to the margins of society to serve the poor and vulnerable

American history show us a progression within youth sports from sport for the wealthy, to sport for all, and back to sport for the privileged. In the 1800's, organized sports were for the "leisure class." At the turn of the century and into the early 1900's in response to urbanization and the influx of immigrant children, we see the establishment of tax-supported public parks and playgrounds and public-school sports and community-based organized sports programs (e.g. YMCA, Little League, Police Athletic Leagues, and CYO).

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt went so far as to claim that "play is the birthright of every child." In 1930, Bishop Bernard Sheil created the Catholic Youth Organization in Chicago to serve children regardless of "race, creed, color, religion" in order to provide a meaningful activity to engage all children. These facilities and programs were justified as an investment in children's health and character development.

Through the greater part of the 20th century, organized youth sports for all children flourished and were largely free. In the 1950s, as more parents worked outside the home, the demand for after-school and summer programs increased. In 1980, the income gap began to widen and at the dawn of the 21st century, the "youth sports industrial complex" began to flourish. Fees rose, as did the cost of equipment and summer camps. Year-round sports, personal trainers and the travel tournament industry grew. With the "professionalization" of youth sports "moving up the ladder of success" was understood in terms of moving up to higher (and more elite) levels of competition. Yet, there was a dramatically rising expense associated with moving up that ladder.

Today, free public, tax-supported sport programs (e.g. public schools and park and recreation programs) as well as community-funded organizations (e.g. YMCA, CYO, Police Athletic League) that focus on broad participation and child/character development are being dwarfed or even replaced by "pay to play" sports. Thus, children from low income families are largely excluded. In fact, only one of three children from low income families played on a sport team this past year. Income inequality has led to separate and unequal youth sports programs. The pay to play system enables the "haves" to grow and develop through sports while participation among the "have-nots" declines leaving these children more exposed to gangs and to violence by failing to provide a support structure that will enable them to be meaningfully engaged in a healthful developmental activity.

Over 35 million children participate in organized youth sport each year. Although the percentage of participation among children from the most advantaged households continues to rise, the percentage of participation among children from the least advantaged households has been declining precipitously. Economic inequality has led to stifling inequality of opportunity in the United States

We call for the Church to play a prophetic role in collaborating with public and non-profit community organizations to provide sports opportunities for all children, whether or not they are Catholic or involved in a Catholic school or parish. We can meet the needs of all children in this country only if the more economically fortunate are willing to share with the less fortunate. As a Church we need to remind ourselves and all people of goodwill that all children are "our" children. In particular, we recommend the following action steps:

- CYO's (and Church sponsored sport programs) should eliminate all barriers to participation (such as needing to be a member of the school or parish) and open their doors/sport teams to all children.
- CYO's (and Church sponsored sport programs) should provide scholarships to those families that have a hardship with participation fees.

- Every diocesan sport organization should have a program in place to work with community-based organizations to assure that all children have a quality youth sports experience. Play Like a Champion has kinship resources to foster the relationship necessary to bridge social class, racial, and religious divides.
- Financial support for these ventures should be pursued through public and private sources.

4. Sport to create a culture of encounter, peace and mercy

Sports can provide children with a safe and nurturing environment buffering them from stressors, violence and other traumatic events they may experience in their families and neighborhoods. Sports practices, training and events relevantly draw young people away from drugs, gangs and violence. There is evidence-based research to show that providing safe spaces and places for healthy activities to build sense of belonging and identity, accomplishment and recognition and relationships change lives for the better.

Drawing parallels between coaching and crisis management, Phil Andrew, the Director of Violence Prevention in the Archdiocese of Chicago explained that by understanding each person's five basic needs – security, recognition, control, dignity and accomplishment, we can develop relationships that not only resolve conflict but create a meaningful sports culture of service, inclusion and encounter.

We can look to the origins of the Catholic Youth Organization for inspiration on creating a culture of encounter within sports. Professor Timothy Neary authored *Crossing Parish Boundaries: Race, Sports and Catholic Youth in Chicago, 1914-1954* which spanned the history of the CYO from its founding to the present. Neary noted that Bishop Bernard Sheil founded the first Catholic Youth Organization in Chicago in 1930 to serve not only the children in the Chicago Archdiocesan parishes, but “children in need ... regardless of race, creed or color.” Neary pointed out that the original CYO was rooted in Catholic social teaching and fostered both spiritual and civic values. Most notably, the Chicago CYO involved children of diverse family backgrounds crossing boundaries of race and class, long before the desegregation legislation of the mid-1960s. Although dioceses throughout the country developed their own CYO programs, few embraced Sheil's social justice agenda. Today's diocesan CYOs are insufficiently represented in economically challenged urban neighborhoods.

From our Symposium discussions, the following blueprint for action at the diocesan level began to emerge. First, we need to assess the needs of the “newer communities” that we are attempting to serve. “Helping” does not occur in a vacuum but should be done in accord with the principles of Kinship (<http://www.kinshipmovement.org/mission>) to complement the existing strengths and relationships in the community. Community organizations, churches, schools, park and recreations and other organizations should serve as points of connection. Second, following the Kinship process of solidarity, mutuality, and shared responsibility, strategic planning in each diocese should be undertaken based on a shared vision for youth sports and a commitment to a sustainable organization rooted in the

community. Developing more inclusive sport programs will require a shift in mindset embracing a culture of encounter found in Sheil's original vision for CYO's.

We recommend that every CYO and diocesan sport program:

- Pay particular attention to including the children who aren't participating in youth sports. Instead of competing against club and travel teams for children's participation, we should go to the margins for children who often have the greatest need for regular exercise, mentoring, and a group to belong to.
- Collaborate with community organizations, churches, schools, park and recreations and other organizations that serve youth to create a plan to provide sport programs that serve all children.
- Cross geographical, racial, and social class boundaries through inclusive, solidarity-building sporting events.

A Special Plea to Our Bishops

In order for this Pastoral Action plan to be effective, it must be viewed as a collaborative partnership with the clergy and the laity. Tens of thousands of lay volunteers are serving children as coaches and mentors. Many Symposium attendees noted and lamented that clergy in their diocese not only do not acknowledge the great value of sport, but fail to give it any heed at all. One attendee shared that his Bishop complained, "Kids are in my gym and not always in my church." We must acknowledge this reality and go where the children and their families are to be Church for everyone.

To date, the American Bishops have not formally acknowledged the place of sport within youth ministry. Sports were not even mentioned in their last statement on youth ministry, "Renewing the Vision" (1997) . The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops does not even have an office overseeing youth sports.

We ask that our Bishops become engaged by:

- Acknowledging the power of sport as envisioned by the Vatican and to educate local clergy on the topic.
- Providing the necessary resources to enable sport programs to be well executed so they have the administrative and financial support to meet our responsibilities to our children.
- Hosting a Symposium on Church and Sport in your own diocese bringing together local individuals to discuss how to implement this Pastoral Action Plan in your diocese.
- Creating a day to formally bless the ministry of sport in each diocese bringing all entities together: coaches, parents and athletes.
- Adding "Sport Ministry" as an office within the USCCB.

- Creating an “Apostolate for Sports” in the American Church that can implement the proposed four steps of a Pastoral Action Plan in sport organizations nationally as well as locally.
- Collaborating in kinship with other organizations to serve the least advantaged children, non-Catholic as well as Catholic, in our dioceses.

The document leaves us with this as the Church’s charge, “She actively seeks to improve sports practices, systems and procedures through collaborative partnerships with sport organizations.” This “Call to Action” lays out a course to achieve this improvement in our church sports programming so that all of God’s children receive the best of our church through sport and have the opportunity to “give and become their best”. We need to combine everyone’s efforts and we can only do this together as Church.

Through the Play Like a Champion Today program, we, as Church, will keep track of how sport programs are implementing this Pastoral Action Plan in order to live this Christian vision of sport as outlined by the Vatican’s document. To read how action is taking place, go to <https://www.playlikeachampion.org/symposium>

Signed by Symposium Attendees,

Bishop Donald Hying, Bishop-designate of Madison, Administrator of Gary
 Clark Power, Play Like a Champion Today, Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend
 Jim Power, Play Like a Champion Today, Diocese of Minneapolis
 Kristin Sheehan, Play Like a Champion Today, Diocese of St. Louis
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 Fr. Patrick Kelly, Seattle University, Archdiocese of Seattle
 Edward Hastings, Villanova University
 Phil Andrew, Violence Prevention, Archdiocese of Chicago
 Mike Poole, Positive Outlook Youth Sports
 Vince Guider, Old St. Patrick’s Kinship Initiative, Archdiocese of Chicago
 Brian Bolt, Calvin College
 Darryl Boykins, South Bend Police Athletic League
 Deb Brown, St. Joseph High School, Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend
 Jason Budd, CYO, Archdiocese of Philadelphia
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Michael Suchy, St. Pius School, Archdiocese of Detroit
Tim Welsh, University of Notre Dame
Christopher Werner, CYO, Archdiocese of Detroit