

The Church's Responsibility for Sports for Children and Youth in the Light of the Teachings of Pope Francis

Odowiedzialność Kościoła za sport dzieci i młodzieży w świetle nauczania papieża Franciszka

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Abstract: The article aims at presenting the teaching of Pope Francis on sport and on the need for active participation of the Church in this area. Based on an analysis of Pope's document titled *Giving the Best of Yourself. A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person*, but also on his other messages and statements, the article encapsulates Francis' position on the responsibility of the Church for the sport community of children and youth. The conducted analyzes show that Pope Francis affirms the Church's responsibility for sport, which is a global phenomenon endowed with numerous values and which can thus be used for the full and harmonious development of young people, in terms of both their physical fitness and health, as well as their socio-cultural, ethical and spiritual condition. Through its pastoral leaders, the Church participates in all dimensions and stages of sports development building its humanistic and personalistic facet as well as in its social practice.

Keywords: sport, the Church, children and youth, the teaching of Pope

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie nauczania papieża Franciszka na temat sportu i potrzeby aktywnej obecności Kościoła na jego gruncie, w oparciu o analizy papieskiego dokumentu zatytułowanego *Dać z siebie to, co najlepsze, w chrześcijańskiej perspektywie sportu i osoby ludzkiej*, ale także innych przesłań i wypowiedzi, stanowiska Franciszka dotyczące odpowiedzialności Kościoła za tę wspólnotę dzieci i młodzieży, jaką jest sport. Z przeprowadzonych analiz wynika, że papież Franciszek potwierdza odpowiedzialność Kościoła za sport, który jest fenomenem globalnym, mającym liczne walory, które mogą być wykorzystane do pełnego i harmonijnego rozwoju młodego człowieka w jego wymiarze sprawnościowo-zdrowotnym, społeczno-kulturowym oraz etyczno-duchowym. Kościół przez swoich duszpasterzy uczestniczy we wszystkich jego wymiarach i etapach rozwoju, zarówno w budowaniu humanistycznego i personalistycznego jego oblicza, jak również w jego praktyce społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: sport, Kościół, dzieci i młodzież, nauczanie papieża Franciszka



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INTRODUCTION

The present article addressing the issue of sport in the teaching of Pope Francis was inspired by was the announcement by the Holy See of a high-ranking document on sport, entitled *Giving the Best of Yourself. A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (Giving the best 2018). The institutional author of this document is the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, under the leadership of the Prefect Cardinal Kevin Farrell. It was prepared by an international team, which included representatives of many professions, holding various positions in the structures of sport, and dealing with it from diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives (Press Conference 2018). It is worth noting that work on the document has been conducted for many years as it originates in a distant past and is related to a project undertaken by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, to which John Paul II entrusted the task of developing cooperation with sports organizations at the international and national level and of inspiring local church communities to create sports pastoral service and care for sports environments.

On the occasion of announcing the new document on sports, Pope Francis sent a letter to Cardinal Farrell, in which he wrote: “The value of sports consists in its being a place of unity and encounter between people. We reach great results, in sports as in life, together, as a team! Sports is also a formative vehicle. Perhaps today more than ever, we must fix our gaze on the young, because the earlier the process of formation begins, the easier the person’s integral development through sports will be. We know how the new generations look at sportsmen and are inspired by them! The participation of all athletes of every age and level is, therefore, necessary; because those who are part of the sports world exemplify virtues such as generosity, humility, sacrifice, constancy, and cheerfulness. Likewise, they should make their contribution to the group spirit, to respect, healthy competition, and solidarity with others. (...) To give the best of oneself in sports is also a call to aspire to holiness. (...) For the Christian athlete, holiness will, therefore, consist in living sports as a means of encounter, personality formation, witnessing, and proclaiming the joy of being Christian with the people around oneself” (Franciszek 2018).

The aim of the article is to present the teachings of Pope Francis on sport and on the need for active participation of the Church in this area. The article uses desk research data, mainly from in the papal document titled *Giving the Best of Yourself. A Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* as well as in other teachings. The article is of a theoretical character, and it lays emphasis on reflection and highlighting the merit of the Pope’s teaching on sport, without referring to empirical studies. The following research methods have been used in the article: analysis of subject literature, as well as axiological, comparative, but also idiographic and nomothetic methods.

1. UNDERSTANDING SPORT

Sport in (post)modern societies, but also in traditional ones, is the subject of interest of researchers representing various fields and disciplines of science. This is the result, on the one hand of recognizing the possibility of realizing many important values, especially among children and young people, and on the other, of the growing popularity, attractiveness and demand for sport in global society. Sport brings numerous and multidimensional advantages. It can support proper development of a person's somatic structure, physical fitness, endurance, health and motor skills. It can serve the implementation of aesthetic patterns and allow to satisfy hedonistic needs of a kinetic nature. Sport can support implementation of universal values, which are primarily manifested by Olympism and its entire humanistic background. Sport involves such values as peace, friendship, justice, goodness, nobility, beauty, solidarity, brotherhood, truth, but also fair play. Moreover, sport can be used to implement patriotic, military, national and ethnic, mercantile, class, health, educational, political, religious, and other values (Dziubiński 2022).

Bearing the above in mind, let us try to organize the knowledge by slightly schematizing and simplifying the issue of sport, according to the criterion of values that we assign to it. The first vision of sport results from focusing on the corporeal and biological nature of man. In this case, sport is intended primarily to achieve development, fitness, performance, health, corrective, compensatory and rehabilitation goals. Therefore, training and competition conducted with this attitude are intended to bring about the desired changes in the biological structure of a person. Such an understanding of sport locates it primarily in the sphere of the culture of existence as sport ensures the development of a person's somatic structure, maintaining a certain level of his or her functional fitness and allows the recovery of the lost physical and motor potential. The second vision of sport serves not only comparison and competition in terms of physical fitness, but above all the implementation of humanistic values voiced primarily in the slogans of Olympism and the Olympic movement. It is the question of universal values such as peace, friendship, brotherhood, beauty, truth, and goodness. Such an understanding of sport additionally serves the purpose of implementing local values related to the cultivation of traditions and customs, as well as national symbols. It locates sport not only in the sphere of the culture of existence, but also in the sphere of social and symbolic culture. The third vision of sport has its theistic, Christian, or more precisely Catholic, origin and has the widest scope. Without questioning either bodily and biological goals of sport or its humanistic values, it expands the vision of sport to include its theocentric, personalistic and religious dimensions. Sport understood in this way gains additional axiological justification, based on the values of Christian tradition, the theological and philosophical background, the *Holy Scripture itself*, but also on the evolving doctrine of the Church. This type of understanding of sport locates it both in the sphere of the culture of existence, the sphere of social culture, but also in the sphere of symbolic culture extended by the issues of the supernatural.

Therefore, we can say that there are three theoretical approaches to sports, namely 1) the somatic-biological approach (focusing on matters of the biological body), 2) the universal-humanistic approach (taking into account biological issues and supplementing the concept of sport with socio-cultural values) and 3) the personalistic-theological approach (accepting and strengthening the meaning of the two previously mentioned approaches and expanding the concept of sport to include the dimension of transcendence) (Dziubiński 2020). The present article focuses on the last one, namely, the personalistic and theological approach.

2. A COMMUNITY OF THE CHURCH'S AND SPORT'S GOALS

According to Francis, the Church is present in sports in an organized and institutionalized way. This allows not only to promote the Christian vision of sport, but also to implement that vision into sports practice, realized in various forms and at various levels. The Church has manifold organizational structures dealing with the phenomenon of sport, which support sport from both an institutional and pastoral perspective (*Giving the best* 2018).

According to the Pope, sport is a reality that is open to all and invites everyone without exception. It is a community that meets people's expectations and helps eliminate various barriers and obstacles. It attracts people to stadiums, pitches and sports halls to help them pursue their interests and realize their passions. Among other areas of life, it is sport that supports the downtrodden and the bereaved, the marginalized and those rejected by their closer or further social environment. It takes care of immigrants, but it is also open to the rich and the poor, to the strong and the weak alike. It offers a common space for encounter and creates opportunities for personal development (Dziubiński 2020, 185).

Sport is a field that brings together young people from different backgrounds and in different life situations. Similarly, the Church reaches out to people and invites everyone to itself. As 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 essentially on the 'outskirts' of life. (...) Not only to welcome and reinstate with evangelical courage all those who knock at our door, but to go out and seek, fearlessly and without prejudice, those who are distant, freely sharing what we ourselves freely received" (Franciszek 2015a).

The issue of teleological similarities between sport and the doctrine of the Church was earlier pointed out by John Paul II. "This man is the way for the Church—a way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways that the Church must walk". Thus, the antinomy between anthropocentric humanism and Christian theocentrism, between man's earthly aspirations and his duties towards God, disappears. The pursuit of the absolute highest value leads through the other man, and the implementation of man's earthly plans is somehow on the trail of his supernatural aspirations. This, in turn, is a proof that anthropocentrism and theocentrism are not contradictory, and what is more, they complement each other. Eliminating the antinomy between

anthropocentrism and theocentrism is of great importance for sport. First of all, it does not impose on man the necessity to choose between himself and his sporting aspirations, or God and the pursuit of spiritual perfection. There is no antinomy between the values of sport and spiritual values, on the contrary, there is convergence and harmony between them (John Paul II 1979).

3. SPORT IN THE SERVICE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

According to Francis, the Church is constantly trying to clarify the vision of sport that emerges from the truths inherent in the philosophical, theological, and doctrinal assumptions of the Church, but also from its centuries-old tradition and experience. This specific and original vision of sport emphasizes pastoral duties towards it, which consist in educational engagement in the growth of each young sports participant, regardless of his or her position and role in it. It also consists in creating bonds and building a community of people involved in sport (*Giving the best* 2018).

According to Francis, a man who is created in the image and likeness of God exceeds sport in importance. Man does not exist to serve sport, but it is sport that should serve man in his wholistic development. Each person constitutes a unity of body, soul and spirit, which means that real experiences of competition and sports activity must also affect young people in their spiritual dimension, since only then can sport become an important element of the education of the whole person. Francis encourages participation in play and sports, understood as part or stage of a comprehensive, holistic education, which means that it concerns the head, heart and hands, but also what one thinks, feels and does. According to the Pope, formal (school) education in our times has been limited and reduced to the intellectual and technical sphere, to equipping young people with mental and technological competences. Francis encourages us to open up to all forms of informal education, such as sports. Because, as he contends, in the process of formal education, which is aimed at acquiring utilitarian competences, “there is no room for lofty ideas of humanism, and where there is no humanism, Christ cannot enter!” (Franciszek 2015b).

When sport is truly human, when it respects the dignity of the person and is free from economic, media or political pressure, it can provide a model for all areas of life. According to Francis, when this happens, “sport transcends the level of pure corporeality and takes us into the arena of the spirit, even the mysteries” (Franciszek 2016). Christian education is aimed at preparing young people to discover humanistic values, to live them and strive for them. to achieve them, but it also takes into account the dimension of transcendence. The profound importance of sport is that it can prepare young people for a fully meaningful life (*Giving the best* 2018).

Sport can also be extremely attractive and interesting for the marginalized and those in difficult life situations. There are many international sports organizations, private associations and non-profit organizations that promote and use sport as an effective tool in working with young people who live in deviant environments, susceptible to gang influence, drug abuse and drug trafficking. Christian communities around the world

are already involved in initiatives that utilize sports activities and competitions, training, and various events as appropriate tools to divert young people from violence against others and the use of psychoactive substances (Giving the best 2018).

4. PASTORAL COMMITMENT TO SPORT

Pope Francis states that involvement of the Church in sport guarantees, that sport will always be an experience of deep meaning and thus it will help to make the lives of young people more valuable. Sport must invariably aim at the integral formation of a person, at improving people's living conditions, but also at building positive interpersonal relationships. It should thus lead to the creation of one big family, a community of people of different races and nations, societies and cultures, classes and social strata, educated and uneducated, the wealthy and the poor, those with and without power, those occupying high social positions and those marginalized. That is why, pastoral care for sport is so important. It is in sport that the Church sees hope for solving various problems of individual people, as well as those that plague local and regional communities, but also the community on a global scale (Giving the best 2018).

As Francis said, "It's beautiful when a parish has a sports club and something is missing without one" (Franciszek 2014). However, the ideological and practical assumptions of the sports club in the parish must be consistent with the requirements of faith and be anchored in Christian education and pastoral project. There are many benefits to the presence of parish sports clubs. They enable young people not only to meet during training and go to camps together, but they also create opportunities to meet during tournaments and sports competitions held at the diocesan or national level. In addition, parish sports clubs should offer sports not only to children and young people, but also to older people, whose number is increasing in post-modern societies and who are also waiting for an interesting offer in the field of sports activities, tailored to the needs and possibilities of their age group (Giving the best 2018).

The Church should develop appropriate pastoral plans for accompanying and assisting coaches and athletes, i.e., for those who have a significant impact on the reality of sports, but also on other areas of life outside sports. Part of this accompaniment should consist in helping athletes understand the true role, meaning and the essence of sport, as well as its socializing impact on the attitudes and behaviors of numerous children and youth, but also adults. "This professional dimension of sport must never ignore its impact on beginner athletes. When a competitive or professional athlete cultivates the humanistic values of sport, when through sporting practice he or she strengthens the basic values of sport, such as the common good, generosity, camaraderie and beauty, the benefits for young athletes and society in general are difficult to overestimate." The Church should accompany athletes on their personal journey, helping them understand their responsibility for the socializing impact on large numbers of spectators, especially young people, for whom the attitudes and behaviors of athletes are role models (Dziubiński 2020, 196).

5. PASTORAL CARE OF SPORTS ANIMATORS

Pope Francis contends that without an educational strategy pastoral care of sports for children and youth is not possible. This involves the active role of all those who have chosen sport as a way to serve the Church and help achieve its goals. Sport needs, above all, teachers, not only services providers devoid of any ideals. Pastoral care of sports cannot be improvised, but it requires competent people (having professional, cultural and moral competences) as well as those motivated to rediscover the educational role of sport and having the need to engage in serving the Christian vision of sport. Coaches, referees, teachers, and managers play extremely important roles in sports, because they have a decisive influence on the attitudes and behaviors of athletes. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare a formation and pastoral plan addressed to sports animators. The implementation of such a plan may eventually play a key role in humanization of sport. In social practice, each animator looks for the best, most holistic and unique plan for those entrusted to his or her care. Supplementing this plan with a pastoral content can help create an integral, wholistic plan that would address all dimensions of a young person's development (*Giving the best* 2018).

Dialogue and cooperation with the family, especially with parents, becomes an important element of integrated and continuous pastoral care, especially for children and young people. It is extremely important that families recognize and accept the educational and pastoral goals that should be incorporated into the sports training process. Of course, this does not mean that a sports proposal should be a confessional one, but it certainly cannot be a neutral proposition as regards values. Therefore, it is important to organize meetings and create conditions for dialogue with parents to make them aware of the roles and importance of educational elements in the sports training process, share with them priorities in the field of upbringing, but at the same time emphasize the key roles of sports coaches and managers in this process (*Giving the best* 2018).

According to Francis, sport is developing, among other things, thanks to the involvement of many volunteers. They play a fundamental role in the development of sport, which goes far beyond technical and organizational skills. Through their actions and testimony, they cultivate a culture of gift and a style of gratuitousness. They help sport maintain its service-oriented function towards others, not only focus on the economic and bureaucratic dimension. These people need an accompaniment that will help them develop, validate their choices and motivations, and let them be harmoniously integrated into the organizational structure of sport. The presence of priests in sports must be validated by their usefulness. They should demonstrate that it is them who, through educational activities, assist athletes and facilitate achieving by them moral, cultural, and social goals. Their role cannot arise solely from theoretical justifications or intellectual analyses, often somewhat detached from everyday life. It is because sport expects specific ideas, strategies and practical actions that will help it develop harmoniously and sustainably. Sport is a world open to everyone, but at the same time it calls for pastoral leaders to

mark their competent presence in sport, to be aware of its dynamics, the roles played in it and specific skills necessary to function in sport (Giving the best 2018).

According to the Pope, it is vital for the pastoral care of sports to be included in the formation of candidates for the priesthood. In this case, it is the question of both providing the necessary knowledge in the field of pastoral care of sport and creating conditions and opportunities for them to practice sports at the seminary. Many seminaries around the world use proven programs and practices in this area. They make sport a permanent element of evangelization, as well as of seminary formation of seminarians, present in the process of priestly, human, spiritual and intellectual formation (*Giving the best* 2018).

6. SPORT AT THE SERVICE OF PASTORAL CARE FOR EDUCATION OF THE YOUNG

According to Francis, sport, as a great pastoral good must be valued and promoted in society. We are called to bring forth its great potential, values and advantages, including its distinctive principles, specificity and beauty, while emphasizing its technical and organizational quality. However, we must realize and constantly call to mind that the beauty of the human body in motion, perfectionism in performing various technical tasks, as well as organizational efficiency are not ends in themselves. Sport triggers passions and generates strong emotions, but the goal of pastoral activity must go beyond the level of emotions, it needs to produce long-term effects that can have a deep and lasting, and, above all, useful impact on everyday life. The task of pastoral leaders in sport is to accept athletes as they are, accompany them on their sports journey, help them make their choices in sport and other life spheres, but also give them reasons for hope and trust. It is a long-term process that does not end in a sports event, but requires patience and continuity, because it must bear fruit in everyday life, also after the end of a sports career (*Giving the best* 2018; Vecchi 1983).

“It is possible to change the world only if we change education” (Franciszek 2015c). In order to have a real impact on the formation of the athletes encompassed by our activities, the project of pastoral care for sport must be closely networked with local educational agencies, starting with families, schools and various types of public institutions. If we want to influence the educational process of youth, we must go beyond delegating educational responsibility to people working in silos, who often lack sufficient pedagogical competences. We must combine everyone’s efforts for education to develop a modern educational program together, using everyone’s specific experience. Only in this way, providing that all parties responsible for the education of our children and youth cooperate with each other, can education change and become more effective and thus better serve both individuals and society (Franciszek 2015c).

Pope Francis points out that by participating in sports, young people “taste the beauty of teamwork, which is so important in life”. To belong to a sports club means to reject every form of individualism, selfishness and isolation and provides “an

opportunity to encounter and be with others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in brotherhood". Sports experience naturally promotes deepening friendships and building bonds. When valued and cultivated, they can transcend sports fields and arenas and become the basis for meaningful, important and lasting relationships between people. Sport, so to speak, has an empathetic character because it understands and connects people from all walks of life, creating a specific culture of encounter and being together. The throw away culture, the culture of marginalization are alien to it. Instead, the culture of openness and friendship is somehow attributive to it. Sport should also enable the integration of diversity, including diversity as regards the skin color, national and social affiliation, represented civilization and culture, religion, gender, age, class, wealth, social position, physical or intellectual disability. Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in the game, not only those who have exemplary developed bodies and virtuoso movement skills, but also those with limitations of various nature. Sport should also focus on the disadvantaged, just as Jesus did. In this way, sport becomes an egalitarian reality and an authentic element serving the development of society (Franciszek 2014).

The era in which we live and which we experience is not simply an era of changes, but it is an era that changes everything, a change intensified by technological and digital revolution. The young people who are growing up today are profoundly influenced by those changes, and sport itself is at their very heart, benefiting from scientific and technological achievements. The emergence and dynamic development of e-Sports (electronic sports) and new forms of doping, which are dependent on technological and medical innovations, are just the tip of the iceberg of a phenomenon that deeply permeates sport and gives its development a post-modern character. Technological and digital revolutions have brought many benefits to humanity, and they are rightly approached with respect. However, we must acknowledge that the currently dominant technological paradigm also brings negative effects. As Francis points out, those effects manifest themselves in many ways, including through "such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living". Sport in this context can constitute a kind of preventive and therapeutic measure because it provides young people with the opportunity to meet other young people who sometimes come from very different social backgrounds (Franciszek 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

According to Pope Francis, sport constitutes one of the contexts in which many young people from all cultures and religious traditions "learn how to give the very best of themselves". The experiences of people participating in sports, such as joy, encounter with others, building a community, developing the virtues and learning the rules of conduct, can be helpful in realizing the transcendent values and getting closer to God.

Pope Francis points out that the Church is responsible for the development of sport, understood as a community of people passionate about realizing their plans

and ambitions in competition with others. The Church is present in this community and participates in building its humanistic and personalistic face, however, she is also engaged in practical activities aimed at achieving success in sports, but also in life, in the physical, health, intellectual, social and cultural as well as ethical and spiritual dimensions. Church structures play an important role in this area, but those who carry the most responsibility for sports animation of children and youth, are priests in parishes, who need good teachers and educators, those professionally competent in sports, but at the same time empathetic, open and friendly, loving young people and their sports passions. Just like athletes during a competition, all pastoral leaders should do their best to guide young people through the effort of body and spirit to the desired sports prize, but also to the everlasting one.

Therefore, both athletes and everyone involved in sport, including pastoral leaders should make maximum effort to improve every day. Physical effort in sports serves the purpose of winning a competition, whereas in life, this effort is of a spiritual nature, and here, the ultimate goal of the fight is the everlasting prize of eternal life. There can be only one winner in sports, whereas, in Christian life everyone can be rewarded with the prize of salvation. Competition in sports often brings with it various dramatic events. In this, it is similar with the life of a Christian, which is full of unforeseen and distressing events. Both in sports and in life, championship is determined by the ability to seize one's opportunities, to use one's abilities and talents. In sports, work is aimed at achieving championship, while in life it is aimed at meeting God. Not infrequently, striving for success in sports is an excellent way to achieve the supernatural goal.

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