2. Bishop Sheil, the CYO, and Reflections for Our Times

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Abstract

This article examines the origins and influence of Bishop Bernard Sheil’s Catholic Youth Organization. Interracial and ecumenical from its inception, the CYO, founded in Chicago in 1930, embodied the communal and pluralistic values of Catholic Action theology and New Deal politics. Dioceses across the United States replicated the Chicago CYO model during the Great Depression and World War II. Sheil’s urban liberalism fell from favor by the early 1950s, however, as the U.S. Catholic Church focused its attention on the millions of white Catholic families relocating to the booming, postwar American suburbs. Today, Sheil’s CYO offers lessons for those interested in using Catholic-sponsored youth athletics to cross boundaries of race, class, and geography.

Keywords: African Americans, Catholic action, interracial, sport, youth

Introduction

The Catholic Youth Organization was established to promote among youth a recreational, educational, and religious program that would adequately meet the physical, mental, and
spiritual needs of boys and girls without regard to race, creed, or color . . . while instilling in
their minds and hearts a true love for God and country (Catholic Youth Organization charter,
1932).

Full recognition of his inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is the
legitimate expectation of every American child. That is his heritage, and it is his regardless of
the “race,” the creed or the position in life of his parents. . . . Children have therefore an
inalienable right to play (Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, 1943).

Bishop Bernard Sheil founded the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) in 1930 out of
obligation. He was obligated to follow the directions of his superior, Cardinal George
Mundelein, Archbishop of Chicago, who instructed his auxiliary bishop to “adopt a program
of recreation so adequate, interesting and attractive that our youth will have a desire to partake
of none other” (Sheil). He was obliged, as well, by a promise that he had made to himself a
decade earlier, working as a chaplain at the Cook County Jail, to never forget the young men
whom he accompanied on the “last mile” to their executions for capital offenses. Sheil
believed such juvenile delinquents turned hardened criminals were as much victims as
perpetrators, tragically let down by a society which failed to provide the proper environmental
conditions necessary for all of its children to grow into morally healthy adults (Treat: 37-39).
Finally, Sheil’s understanding of his faith – informed by Catholic social teaching that
emphasized the centrality of gospel values, particularly care for the poor and dispossessed –
obligated him to fight against social injustice when he saw it. Like many American Catholics
during the first half of the twentieth century, Sheil held fast to the principle that his faith was
altogether compatible with his citizenship, championing a church that was “100 percent
Catholic and 100 percent American.” Closely adhering to Mundelein’s Americanization plan
for the U.S. Catholic Church, Sheil designed the CYO to be an inspiration for young people
to conduct their lives in a way that would honor God and country.

Sheil’s sense of obligation should not be confused with a feeling of unwillingness or dread.
On the contrary, he was a happy warrior, fighting the good fight, at least until his final years
as CYO director in the early 1950s, when he became increasingly tired and embittered by
internal organizational problems, a shift in the national political culture, and conflicts with his
ecclesiastical superiors. During the CYO’s first decade, Cardinal Mundelein was Sheil’s patron,
providing his auxiliary moral support and political coverage – his imprimatur. However, when
Mundelein died unexpectedly in 1939, and Sheil was passed over for the position of
Archbishop of Chicago, the CYO founder-director’s influence within the church’s hierarchy
began to diminish. Mundelein’s successor, Cardinal Samuel Stritch, did not share his
predecessor’s enthusiasm for Sheil; nevertheless, he allowed the CYO director free rein to
continue to expand what some critics began describing as “an empire.” As the CYO took on
ever more diverse programming and grew its operations, it began to run budget deficits and
incurred substantial debt by the late 1940s. During the Great Depression and World War II,
however, Sheil was at the top of his game, the country’s leading advocate for Catholic youth
athletics. He spoke enthusiastically about the social virtues of Catholic-sponsored sports and
educational programming, becoming a nationally-recognized figure by the mid-1930s. Riding
the speaker’s circuit, he garnered national press coverage, was heard regularly on radio in
Chicago and across the country, and earned the sobriquet “the Apostle of Youth.”
Between 1930 and 1954, hundreds of thousands of children throughout the Archdiocese of Chicago participated in the CYO. From its inception, the organization welcomed participation by boys as well as girls, African Americans as well as Euro-Americans, and Catholics as well as non-Catholics. In Chicago – one of the nation’s most segregated cities (then and now) – neighborhood and parish boundaries traditionally defined rigid divisions between residents based on race, class, and ethnicity. The CYO, however, helped Chicagoans cross boundaries because involvement was citywide, as it included participants from each of the 350 parishes in the archdiocese; that is, every square-foot of the city’s real estate was covered. Consequently, young people from different socio-economic, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds encountered one another throughout the city in boxing rings, basketball courts, softball fields, running tracks, and even swimming pools a generation before the modern civil rights movement and the Second Vatican Council.

In my recent book – *Crossing Parish Boundaries: Race, Sports, and Catholic Youth in Chicago, 1914-1954* – I argue that Sheil’s CYO provided opportunities for thousands of young Chicagoans to engage in positive interracial contact for a 25-year period during the mid-twentieth century. Over time, CYO programming expanded beyond athletics to include summer camps, social services, youth homes, neighborhood centers, a labor school, a radio station, and even an aeronautics college. But it all began with sports. In this article, I will discuss Bishop Sheil’s vision for youth sports and examine how he went about making that vision a reality. Four key steps explain Sheil’s approach: 1) respond to an urgent need; 2) be pragmatic; 3) include everyone; and 4) meld religious virtue with civic engagement. Before examining these elements of Sheil’s methodology, however, it is useful to know something more about the man behind the CYO.

**Muscular Catholic**

James Bernard Sheil, Jr., was born in Chicago on February 18, 1886, the only child of second-generation Irish American Catholics. Sometime between graduating from college and his ordination, the younger Sheil reversed the order of his first and middle names to “Bernard James,” but family and friends knew him simply as “Benny.” Sheil grew up in a solidly middle-class family in St. Columbkille parish on the city’s Near Northwest Side. As a boy, he doubtlessly heard stories about parish elders who fought in the Civil War in the name of God and country. In the second half of the nineteenth century, St. Columbkille grew to become one of Chicago’s largest parishes, its members playing significant roles in the city’s business, political, and church affairs (Neary: 73-38).

Growing up in a financially secure family removed from Sheil many of the economic excuses for bigotry common among ethnic and racial groups competing for social and economic status in the modern industrial order. As part of a middle-class family tied to business and politics, Sheil learned at an early age the advantages of working cooperatively with a wide range of people. He demonstrated pride in his Irish heritage but, unlike so many of his contemporaries, did not adopt a worldview that pejoratively branded non-Irish as “other.” Irish and German Americans dominated his neighborhood, but Sheil encountered a number of other ethnic groups, as well as non-Catholic Christians and Jews. He also lived within a few blocks of several African American families.
After graduation from eighth grade in 1899, Sheil entered St. Viator College, a Catholic boarding school for boys in Bourbonnais, Illinois, sixty miles south of Chicago. The Clerics of St. Viator – or Viatorians – founded the traditional liberal arts school in 1865. The faculty influenced Sheil’s thinking on social issues, urging him and his fellow students to work for a just society as articulated by Leo XIII in his recent papal encyclical, Rerum Novarum (1891). In particular, the Viatorians stressed the rights of workers in an industrialized society. In addition to his studies, Sheil was an avid athlete, competing on multiple teams, but his best sport was baseball. In countless speeches, newspaper and magazine articles, press releases, and his authorized biography, Sheil recounted how he chose the priesthood over a promising career in professional baseball. His prowess on the pitcher’s mound gained him the attention of professional clubs, including Charles Comiskey’s Chicago White Stockings. Sheil loved the excitement of baseball and the attention it brought to him, but he felt called to the priesthood.

Ordained in Chicago’s Holy Name Cathedral in 1910, Sheil quickly climbed the rungs of the church’s hierarchical ladder. During World War I, he served as a chaplain at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, thirty-five miles north of Chicago along the shores of Lake Michigan. After the war, Sheil worked as a chaplain at the Cook County Jail and lived in the rectory of Holy Name Cathedral, a few blocks away. Archbishop Mundelein took an interest in the talented young priest and placed him on the staff of the archdiocese’s central administrative offices in 1923. A year later, Sheil became archdiocesan chancellor and accompanied Mundelein to Rome, where they met with Pope Pius XI. In 1926, Sheil served successfully as treasurer for the 28th International Eucharistic Congress hosted by the Archdiocese of Chicago. As a reward for his efforts, the Vatican named Sheil an auxiliary bishop in 1928 at the relatively young age of forty-two. The following year he became vicar general, second only to Mundelein in ecclesiastical powers in the archdiocese.

Although he chose the priesthood over a professional career in baseball, at heart Sheil remained an athlete, embracing the originally Protestant idea of muscular Christianity. His appeal, in fact, derived in large part from his vigorous athleticism. In his 1951 authorized biography of the CYO founder, sportswriter Roger Treat describes Sheil as “no sissy priest but a rough-and-tumble scrapper,” who could say “a solemn Mass at a certain moment and two hours later [be] prancing around a boxing ring – still in cassock, with boxing gloves added, slapping the ears of a fresh young punk” (Treat: 7-8; see also Kantowicz: 173-88). At five feet, nine inches tall, the stocky “Little Iron Man” worked to create an image of robust virility. George Drury, director of the Sheil School of Social Studies (1943–1946), recalled that Sheil – similar to an athlete – felt restless unless in motion. Like an actor on stage, he thrived in the spotlight of public attention, casting a larger-than-life presence with a magnetic smile. Sheil used his considerable charisma to recruit a large network of allies and CYO supporters, many of them leaders in the worlds of sports, business, journalism, entertainment, academia, the arts, and politics.1

Responding to an Urgent Need

Sheil’s experiences at the Cook County Jail and Great Lakes Naval Training Station left the priest with two lasting convictions. First, society must take responsibility for juvenile delinquency. Second, the church should employ organized recreational and leisure activities to promote Christian and democratic principles among youth. His days on the playing fields and time as military chaplain convinced him that athletics helped young people overcome the “problems of youth.” The hardships of World War I underscored sport’s ability to build character among young people, and the Great Lakes Naval Training Station operated the nation’s largest military athletic program during the war. Working in concert with the federal government, Sheil learned how to organize and promote sports on a large scale. A personal love of athletics and experiences at Great Lakes confirmed his belief that recreational programming provided positive outlets for youthful energy. Sports taught young people discipline, teamwork, and fair play. Most of all, it occupied their time. “Idleness is my enemy,” Sheil declared (Neary: 9, 78–80).

Youthful idleness worried Catholic leaders, who believed that modernity along with its corollaries – secularism, materialism, and communism – seriously threatened the church. Worldly temptations, particularly in urban areas, endangered not just juvenile delinquents but all Catholic youth. Protestant organizations, like the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), began addressing these concerns during the nineteenth century. Yet fearing Protestant influences, archdiocesan officials dissuaded Catholic young people from frequenting them. In 1920, the Vatican warned American bishops about the YMCA and encouraged them to start Catholic societies to protect youth from the Protestant organization.

Children and adolescents were particularly important to the Americanization efforts of the U.S. Catholic Church in the early twentieth century. Bishops viewed ministry to American-born children as a way to influence their immigrant parents. The rapidly expanding nationwide network of parochial schools ensured that church representatives – especially nuns – interacted daily with children. These encounters provided opportunities to shape the hearts and minds of young people directly and thereby their parents indirectly. On the one hand, church leaders wanted to advance Americanization, integrating white ethnic Catholics into the nation’s mainstream. On the other hand, they desired to protect Catholics from the larger secular and Protestant cultures deemed morally unhealthy. Central to this process was “training of the will.” Young people needed to be taught right from wrong; they needed to internalize a moral code. Schools alone, however, were not enough. Not every Catholic child attended parochial school. While public schools could teach children reading, writing, and arithmetic, they could not teach children how to be good Catholics. Catholic clubs and societies provided further avenues to reach young people.

During World War I, Mundelein instructed each parish to start a chapter of the Holy Name Society, a lay, all-male organization. By the 1920s, Holy Name men had in place a variety of religious, social, and athletic functions at the parish level. For example, a Holy Name basketball league provided opportunity for interparish competition among Catholic youth. The society also ran a big brothers program focused on preventing juvenile delinquency. The cardinal assigned his chancellor to oversee the group, but Sheil saw the need for an even more wide-ranging archdiocesan athletic program. As Mundelein’s protégé, he enjoyed unique
access to his boss, living in the cardinal’s Gold Coast mansion at North Avenue and State Parkway until 1935 when he became pastor of St. Andrew’s in the North Side’s Lakeview neighborhood. Sheil, with the support of Mundelein, began taking the first steps toward realizing his vision of a citywide Catholic sports league.

The creation of the CYO was a calculated response to growing concerns during the 1920s about the moral health of the city’s young Catholics as ever-increasing consumerism, secular temptations, and materialism challenged ecclesiastical authority. Social and athletic clubs, which acted like ethnic street gangs, were of special concern, as they competed with the church for the allegiance of young men. The Irish Catholic Ragen’s Colts, for example, were implicated in Chicago’s 1919 race riot and 1920s “beer war.” The church used the glamour of sports, particularly boxing, to attract its target audience. Sheil modeled the CYO on Protestant reform programs like the YMCA, employing modern marketing techniques to sell it.

The scourge of juvenile delinquency was of great concern to the city’s leaders. The rise of organized crime during Prohibition in the 1920s and the subsequent glorification of gangsters like Al Capone appealed to urban youth, particularly adolescent boys. High unemployment during the Depression and the continued growth and influence of mass media added still further pressure on reformers like Sheil, who were fighting to keep kids on the straight and narrow. As consumers of mass culture, young people in the 1930s had many choices. “The flowering of a new mass media – radio, movies, books, and comics,” writes historian Howard
Chudacoff, “sparked children’s fantasies and consumerism in ways that had not existed previously” (122). Facing such competition, Sheil wondered how to capture the imagination of young people, particularly boys. Boxers, in addition to gangsters, were the most idolized figures in American popular culture during the 1930s. In boxing, Sheil found a hook to draw participants to his program.

**Pragmatic Approach**

The “manly art of self-defense” appealed to young men from tough backgrounds, including those Sheil met in the Cook County Jail. Popular in the nineteenth century, boxing came under attack during the Progressive Era from reformers who thought it too violent and dehumanizing. The sport enjoyed a resurgence after World War I, however, and by 1926 Illinois lawmakers repealed most anti-boxing laws (in large part to allow Chicago to host the second heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney in September 1927). Sportswriter Arch Ward came up with the idea for an amateur boxing tournament in 1923, and the Chicago Tribune began sponsoring the Golden Gloves in 1928. The New York Daily News started a similar tournament in the East, and winners from New York and Chicago met annually to decide the nation’s best amateur boxers. Over the years, Golden Gloves champions included a number of future professional greats, including Joe Louis and Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) (see Neary: 82-85, 89, 94).

Sheil modeled his CYO boxing tournament on the Golden Gloves. He capitalized on prizefighting’s power to attract urban teenagers eager for glamour, excitement, and fame. He enlisted legendary boxing professionals – Packey McFarland in the 1930s and middleweight world champion Tony Zale in the 1940s – to coach and promote bouts. Annual CYO championships at Chicago Stadium drew between 14,000 and 20,000 spectators; special exhibitions at Soldier Field and Wrigley Field attracted as many as 38,000 fans. The fights reached even larger audiences through radio broadcasts on Chicago’s WCFL. Beginning in 1932 and continuing for several years, the CYO won the Golden Gloves team trophy.

Sheil viewed boxing as a means to reach teenage males, quipping, “If a boy can come to know about God through a pair of boxing gloves – swell!” He believed only a glamorous sport like boxing could attract the very kind of young men who needed help. “Show me how you can lead boys from saloons with a checkers tournament,” he said, “and I’ll put on the biggest checkers tournament you ever saw.” Critics questioned the propriety of a Catholic bishop working as fight promoter, but Mundelein defended Sheil’s methods during a press conference two days before the first CYO tournament:

The church in these days, particularly in a big city like Chicago, must do some things we did not have to do a generation ago. A generation ago, when a boy had passed through the parish school and had been confirmed, we felt that we had properly prepared him for life. . . . But today we must supervise his recreation. Otherwise he may come under influence and enter into surroundings that may quickly undermine and destroy what we have built up in his soul and in his character.

The cardinal went on to support Sheil’s efforts by invoking prevailing gender stereotypes. “We might as well admit that a growing healthy boy takes as naturally to boxing as a puppy does to
romping,” Mundelein argued. “Mothers for generations have tried to suppress it and haven’t succeeded. The church doesn’t try. Rather we are trying to control it . . . If done properly, it certainly helps develop the boy, it makes him alert, manly, and courageous.” Mundelein also lamented the cowardly use of handguns and Chicago’s high rate of violent crime during the 1920s, results of an “unmanly” culture. He feared losing Catholic youth to gangsters like Al Capone, who promised fame and easy money. However, he felt confident that Bishop Sheil’s CYO could “build real boys” (see Neary: 83).

In addition to finding the most effective ways to attract young participants, Sheil’s pragmatism included cultivating allies and leveraging personal and institutional support networks. For example, he took advantage of the comprehensive organizational infrastructure of the Catholic parish system. Despite an institutional foundation in Chicago’s downtown, the CYO functioned primarily as an association of neighborhood youth centers at the parish level. Each neighborhood already had an existing local Catholic church with a physical plant that often included a gymnasium and social hall. Lay and religious volunteers coached teams and chaperoned activities involving thousands of young people. After meeting on the interparish level throughout the season, teams competed citywide for championship trophies. Brackets of teams and individuals from the North, South, and West Sides of Chicago determined city champions. Initially, the CYO was best known as a boxing league; three of the boxers on the 1936 U.S. Olympic team came out of the Chicago CYO. By the mid-1930s, however, opportunities in an array of sports existed for both boys and girls, including basketball, baseball, softball, tennis, golf, ice skating, bowling, track and field, swimming, water polo, and chess.

Sheil also made use of the close ties between urban Catholicism and the Democratic Party during the 1930s. The early years of the CYO coincided with the creation of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Cardinal Mundelein counted the fellow native New Yorker as a friend and supported the president’s national programs and pluralistic ideology. Roosevelt also developed a friendship with Bishop Sheil, who capitalized on the president’s support. FDR and Sheil met for the first time at a Boy Scouts meeting in New York City when Roosevelt was governor of New York. In 1933, they met a second time at the National Catholic Charities dinner, also in New York. Roosevelt told Sheil that the federal government needed the assistance of private entities like the CYO to fight social problems. Mundelein and Sheil visited the White House on several occasions with the president calling on Mundelein in Chicago at the cardinal’s mansion in 1935 and 1937. The CYO utilized resources made available through the Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and National Youth Administration. In addition, the CYO collaborated with local government agencies, particularly the Chicago Park District.

Sheil championed Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency because he believed the New Deal was in the spirit of Catholic social teaching, representing a middle path between laissez-faire capitalism and godless Communism. In particular, he believed the New Deal was good for African Americans, who, already in a precarious economic situation before the Depression, suffered disproportionately during the 1930s. African Americans did benefit from joining New Deal coalitions found in northern cities like Chicago, but the New Deal never ended the systematic exclusion of blacks from full and equal participation in government welfare programs. Indeed, Sheil recognized the limits of progressive politics when he said in the early
1950s, “The Negro has not received a square deal, an honest deal, or a new deal from white America.” Sheil knew more needed to be done; he envisioned the CYO as a means to promote racial justice and interracial harmony.

**Including Everyone**

Sheil’s Americanism embraced the concept of pluralism. In numerous cases, the CYO promoted the multiethnic and multiracial backgrounds of participants. “All Races and Nations Participate in the C.Y.O. Program” read a 1935 headline in the archdiocese’s weekly newspaper. An accompanying photograph showed nine boys lining the ropes of a boxing ring in the CYO gymnasium at 31 East Congress Street. This “C.Y.O. League of Nations” included boxers of various ethnicities and nationalities: Croatian, Austrian, Assyrian, Polish, Irish, Chinese, Italian, “Colored,” and Mexican. The following year, a similar picture showed fifteen young men from diverse backgrounds huddled around a large kettle with the banner, “The C.Y.O. Melting Pot.” The 1937 CYO boxing tournament in Chicago Stadium included Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, French, Spanish, Greek, “Colored,” Austrian, Mexican, and Slovak boxers. Like the Democratic Party and organized labor, the CYO formed interracial and panethnic alliances during the 1930s. The organization followed inclusive practices from the beginning, its charter promising to serve youth “without regard to race, creed, or color” (see Neary: 94-97, 131).

The CYO employed a universal – or catholic – model that considered all youth residing within the archdiocese to be under its care. Within this model, Chicago’s African American community, growing in numbers but still only 7 percent of the city’s population in 1930, acted as one of several nationalities. Like Irish, Polish, and Italian CYO participants, African Americans represented their own “national” parishes, three mission churches – St. Elizabeth, Corpus Christi, and St. Anselm – located within the racially segregated Bronzeville neighborhood on the city’s South Side.

The CYO League of Nations embodied pluralistic values which had gained currency during the Depression and would become ingrained in the national consciousness during World War II. For example, several Hollywood films from the era depicted the ideal of American pluralism by casting an assortment of ethnically diverse actors, epitomized by the platoon movie *Bataan* (1943). This ideal was a new phenomenon in U.S. history. While the eighteenth-century motto *E Pluribus Unum* originally referred to thirteen states uniting to create one nation, Americans in the second half of the twentieth century began to understand the phrase to refer to one people emerging from many races, ethnicities, and religions. *Bataan*, according to cultural historian Richard Slotkin, was the “first fully articulated statement of . . . a new fable of American nationality,” marking “the shift from the myth of America as essentially a white man’s country, to that of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy” (470).

In the early 1930s, Chicago’s Democratic mayor Anton Cermak – paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah (56:7) – dubbed his multiethnic and multiracial working-class coalition of voters “a house for all peoples.” Following Cermak’s death in 1933, Irish Catholics took control of Chicago’s Democratic political machine. For the next half century, a series of Irish Catholic mayors, closely aligned with the Archdiocese of Chicago, governed the city with a parochial mindset. It was widely understood that in order to achieve political clout, one needed to be a Democratic insider – preferably Irish Catholic – or at least have the backing of an insider.
Those asking for political favors without such connections were rebuked. Democratic ward bosses were known to say to political outsiders asking for favors, “We don’t want nobody that nobody sent.” In other words, one should not ask for favors without a connection to an insider. Insider status meant access to civic power and opportunities for advancement in business and electoral politics (Mivka). Participation in the CYO and Catholic school sports often provided an entrée for African Americans seeking careers in business and politics in a city dominated by Irish Catholics. In chapter four of Crossing Parish Boundaries, I tell a number of stories of black athletes who used their participation in Catholic-sponsored youth sports to achieve professional success later in life.

One example is Joseph Bertrand, a standout athlete at St. Elizabeth High School in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood during the late 1940s. Born in Biloxi, Mississippi, Bertrand and his family were part of the great migration of six million African Americans who left the largely rural South for the mostly urban North between the 1910s and 1970s. After graduating from Bronzeville’s Corpus Christi parochial school, he attended St. Elizabeth High School where he starred on the “Iron Man” team that won the 1950 National Negro Basketball Championship. Recruited by the University of Notre Dame, as a sophomore Bertrand became in 1952 one of the first two black varsity basketball players in the school’s history. Bertrand thrived at Notre Dame, earning All-American honors and graduating with a economics degree in 1954. After serving in the Army, he returned to Chicago and began a successful career in Chicago’s Irish Catholic political machine. In 1971, Mayor Richard J. Daley chose Bertrand as the Democratic Party’s nominee for city treasurer. A Catholic, he became the first African American elected to citywide office in Chicago’s history. When doling out patronage positions in the city’s African American wards, Mayor Daley preferred Catholics over Protestants, relying on the group with whom he was more comfortable. Political scientist William Grimshaw dubbed these black Catholic politicians Daley’s “loyalist black elites” (118). Bertrand’s son, Jason, described the network of black men involved in Democratic Party politics, sports, and Catholicism as a “club,” an association that continued to function in the twenty-first century (Bertrand).

Civic Engagement

The success of the CYO allowed Sheil to reach thousands of young people throughout the city with a message of Christian morality, civic-mindedness, and clean living, and at the same time encourage Chicago’s youth to adopt a civic-religious expression rooted in principles of Catholic social teaching. Sheil followed in a long American tradition that linked (usually Protestant) religious convictions to civic participation (see Neary: 83-85, 136-37, 160-61).

2 For forty-three consecutive years during the mid-twentieth century, the mayor of Chicago was an Irish Catholic graduate of the same South Side, all-boys Catholic high school, De La Salle Institute: Edward J. Kelly (1933–1946), Martin H. Kennelly (1946–1955), and Richard J. Daley (1955–1976). Chicago’s longest-serving mayor, Richard M. Daley (son of Richard J., mayor for twenty-two years between 1989 and 2011) also graduated from De La Salle. Other influential politicians, like Democratic Party leader Dan Ryan (Cook County board president, 1954–1961) graduated from the Catholic school as well.

3 Other examples mentioned in Crossing Parish Boundaries of African American Catholics succeeding in Chicago’s Democratic machine include Olympic sprinter and U.S. Congressman Ralph Metcalfe and Arkansas native and Cook County President John Stroger.
Although the United States claimed no official state religion, civic-religious expressions, like those found in the CYO, attempted to link God and country within an urban Catholic context during the 1930s and 1940s. The CYO represented the youth component of Mundelein’s Americanization campaign to create a church that was “100 percent Catholic and 100 percent American,” removing from American Catholicism the stigma of alien customs and foreign values. Sheil took every opportunity in public to demonstrate CYO patriotism and civic involvement. In 1935, for example, 75,000 CYO supporters marched along Michigan Avenue in a three-hour parade. A 1940 editorial in a secular daily newspaper declared, “C.Y.O. has become, in ten short years, one of the most powerful influences for good citizenship in Chicago and one of the great forces for Americanism in America” (Chicago Herald-American, July 9).

On Friday evening, December 4, 1931, Bishop Sheil and the CYO hosted the first of its annual citywide boxing tournaments at Chicago Stadium. Approximately 15,000 fans from across the city came to watch some of the area’s best amateur fighters duke it out. The thirty-two CYO finalists entered the ring escorted by an honor guard of 1,000 Catholic Boy Scouts from parishes throughout the city. Sheil opened with a prayer and then led participants in the CYO Pledge:

I promise on my honor to be loyal to my God, to my Country and to my Church; to be faithful and true to my obligations as a Christian, a man, and a citizen. I pledge myself to live a clean, honest, and upright life – to avoid profane, obscene, and vulgar language, and to induce others to avoid it. I bind myself to promote, by word and example, clean, wholesome, and manly sport; I will strive earnestly to be a man of whom my Church and my Country may be justly proud.

A later “My CYO Creed” was more specific:

1. To love God and Country; 2. To love the poor and afflicted; 3. To acquire physical and mental courage; 4. To understand myself and my group; 5. To strive for a better life for myself and my fellowmen; 6. To promote social justice by rigid application of the principles expressed in the Encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI; 7. To foster the spirit of American Democracy as expressed in the deeds of Jefferson and Lincoln; 8. To abstain from excesses of any kind; 9. To emulate virtues of the victorious Apostolate of Christ; 10. To be humble in victory; undaunted in defeat.

In the public venue of Chicago Stadium, the CYO tournament transformed the normally secular event of a boxing match into a celebration of religious and civic values, which made the atmosphere surrounding the occasion considerably different from professional boxing bouts or even amateur Golden Gloves matches. The CYO challenged the conventional view of boxing as a vulgar and immoral activity and in the process advanced Catholic Americanism.

In the late 1930s, Sheil expanded the scope of the CYO beyond youth sports. The CYO applied for membership in the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, began a social service agency, and continued offering scores of CYO vacation schools each summer in public parks and parish plants (the vacation schools began in the summer of 1931). In his 1938
application to the Welfare Council, Sheil wrote that the CYO was “a community organization and, therefore, wishes to participate in a coordinated program for community planning” (Neary: 136). Following in a tradition dating back to at least the sixteenth-century Council of Trent, Sheil believed the church was responsible for all people residing within the borders of the archdiocese, and, as their bishop, he had responsibility to care for their well-being. While sports were central to the CYO mission, a holistic approach to social justice required moving beyond athletic contests.

Sheil’s thinking was heavily influenced by the Catholic Action movement, which began in the nineteenth century and gained prominence in the U.S. during the pontificate of Pius XI (1922–1939). Catholic Action is defined as “active participation of the laity in the apostolate of the Church under the guidance of the hierarchy.” Central to Catholic Action was the Pauline notion of the Mystical Body of Christ, which held that Catholics were united in the literal body of Christ through their reception of the Eucharist. The movement called upon laypeople to take responsibility for building the kingdom of God on earth; the church could not rely solely on the actions of clergy to achieve social justice. In 1931, on the fortieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum, Pius XI issued Quadragesimo Anno, an encyclical reasserting the importance of protecting basic human rights in industrialized societies, including the rights of workers. Chicago’s Catholic Church, under the leadership of Cardinal Mundelein, was a national leader in this area, with Bishop Sheil’s CYO a high-profile manifestation of the principles of Catholic Action.

Figure 2. The 1950 CYO swim team poses in the second-floor gymnasium of the CYO Center, 31 East Congress Street; Left to right Coaches Dorothy Ziegler, John M. Walsh (CYO athletic director), and Udell Weathers (Archdiocese of Chicago’s Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives and Records Center).
After expanding the CYO to include social services in 1938, Sheil took the organization a step further during World War II by opening a tuition-free “workingman’s college” in downtown Chicago. The school provided a forum for working adults to discuss issues of the day in an atmosphere charged with Catholic Action communalism alongside the Enlightenment ideals of democratic self-government, protection of individual liberties, and religious toleration. As Chicago’s “Catholic Times Square,” the Sheil School of Social Studies bustled with mostly young adults attending classes in the evenings and on weekends. The demands of World War II had temporarily interrupted debates over controversial issues facing the American public, including labor and race relations. Once an Allied victory was in sight, however, Americans began considering the organization of the postwar world. Communism and Fascism had ravaged the world, but the Sheil School explored ways to promote a pluralistic democracy committed to the welfare of the urban working class. Like the rest of the CYO, the school continued into the early 1950s, but it became increasingly clear that American society was turning in a different direction.

The Legacy of Bishop Sheil and the CYO

The CYO concept, especially its athletic component, was copied in communities across the United States beginning in the mid-1930s. Sheil took part in discussions during the late 1930s about nationalizing the CYO, but it never happened. Control of CYO programs remained decentralized at the diocesan level with each diocese adopting its own approach. One reason the CYO did not become a centralized national program was that Sheil’s methods were not universally accepted among church leaders. Some saw his positions on social and political issues as too extreme. Sheil’s pro-labor stance, for example, drew criticism from some of his fellow clerics. Cardinal Dennis Dougherty of Philadelphia, for instance, baited Sheil, derogatorily calling him the “Red Bishop” (Dever; Lasch: 26). The bishop’s politics, however, are not easily labeled; he was at once a staunch anticommunist, staunch antifascist, proponent of the State of Israel, and harsh critic of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy. His ideology did not follow the typical Left-Right political spectrum, but rather was rooted in the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church. Specifically, Sheil’s thinking was shaped by Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, or “Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor” (1891), which argued for the amelioration of “the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class.” Sheil’s interracialism is better understood in this context because his support of the rights of labor to form unions, rejection of communism and unrestricted capitalism, and affirmation of the right to private property were at the heart of *Rerum Novarum* (on the influence of *Rerum Novarum* on Catholics in the United States, see McGreevy: 127-65).

Bishop Sheil is not completely unknown to historians of American Catholicism, but for the most part the CYO founder-director has been relegated to the margins in the history of the United States and the history of American Catholicism (for examples of Sheil receiving scholarly attention in recent years, see Orsi: 37; Smith: 6, 29, 47, 112; Baker: 175-80). In many

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4 As chairman of the National Catholic Welfare Council’s administrative board, Milwaukee archbishop and Sheil’s future boss, Samuel Stritch, prevented Sheil from nationalizing the CYO in 1939. Since the 1930s, the American Catholic hierarchy has sponsored various Catholic youth offices headquartered in Washington, D.C., including the current National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), established in 1982. These offices have offered leadership and guidance but control has remained at the diocesan level.
respects, he was the alter ego of Father Charles Coughlin, Detroit’s reactionary and anti-Semitic Depression-era “radio priest.” Sheil was the antithesis, both theologically and politically, of Coughlin. Yet, while American history textbooks regularly mention Coughlin’s white ethnic parochialism, evidence of Sheil’s equally important cosmopolitan Catholicism is ignored and absent. A close examination of Sheil complicates our understanding of white ethnics during the interwar period. He was as much a creation of twentieth-century urban pluralism as the CYO was the creation of the bishop.

The CYO brand of social corporate responsibility, rooted in pluralistic values, did not fare well in postwar America. The Catholic Church, as well as American society generally, turned attention away from social concerns like race relations and focused primarily on the nuclear family, personal piety, and anticommunism. Moreover, postwar economic expansion and government spending, which included the building of superhighways and federal subsidies for home loans, paved the way for the rapid growth of American suburbs. Not only the “push” factor of dramatic racial turnover in previously all-white, urban areas, but also the “pull” factor of suburban living, led many white Catholics to leave their old neighborhoods. Such rapid postwar suburbanization exacerbated preexisting racial divides in metropolitan regions. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, widespread urban renewal and suburbanization not only maintained residential segregation between blacks and whites; it made even modest attempts at interracial cooperation extremely difficult.

As African Americans and Latinos (particularly Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans) played more prominent roles in CYO athletics, many white Catholics began to believe the CYO had reached a racial tipping point. They no longer saw black involvement in the CYO as the participation of just one ethnic group among many. Rather, they felt that racial minorities had overrun the organization. Some even referred to the CYO derisively as the “Colored Youth Organization” (Time: 63). Health issues, financial problems, and declining support – from the church hierarchy as well as from many everyday white Catholics – led Sheil to step down from his position as CYO director. After a public feud with Senator Joseph McCarthy, he resigned in September 1954.

Sheil’s resignation led to a policy of “decentralization” by the archdiocese. His successor as CYO director, Msgr. Edward Kelley, “was critical of the whole ‘liberal philosophy’ of the CYO program” (Avella: 146). Immediately following Sheil’s resignation, Cardinal Stritch dismantled the CYO, either terminating programs or parceling them off to different archdiocesan offices. The CYO headquarters relocated from the spacious Congress Bank Building to smaller offices at 1122 South Wabash Avenue. The entire board of directors, including Sheil, resigned. And the CYO program of social services became part of Catholic Charities. Twenty-five years earlier, the archdiocesan newspaper heralded the CYO for “organizing all parish activities in the Archdiocese into one efficient, extensive unit.” By 1955, however, the CYO empire had fallen.

Nearly 50 years later, a controversy during the summer of 2001 painfully exposed the limits of Catholic youth sports to bridge racial divides in the Chicago metropolitan area. Parents representing parishes in the mostly white Southside Catholic Conference (SCC) voted 11-9 to refuse admission to St. Sabina, an African American parish in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood on the city’s Southwest Side. The story made front-page headlines. Cardinal
Francis George intervened, and the black parish was accepted into the SCC following a revote. After six months in the league, however, St. Sabina dropped out, citing incidents of racial harassment. Unsuccessful in their attempt to play in a Catholic sports league, the African American Catholic school instead joined the Chicago Public League. Despite Cardinal George’s directive to “let the kids play,” Catholic interracial sports remained unachievable.

A more recent incident in Chicago involving white Catholic teenagers highlights the continued existence of racial animosity. In November 2016, Black Lives Matter protesters took to the streets in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood on the city’s Far South Side after two off-duty, white police officers fatally shot a 25-year-old armed black man involved in a road rage incident. In response, Blue Lives Matter demonstrators marched in support of the police in Mount Greenwood, a “largely Irish neighborhood” with “one of the highest percentages of residents in the city working in law enforcement.” The neighborhood is also home to Marist High School, a coeducational institution operated by the Marist Brothers. A white Marist student, commenting on the events surrounding the shooting, sent a text message to another white Marist student which read, “I F------ HATE N------,” to which her classmate replied, “same.” The exchange was posted on social media and soon created its own controversy (Guthmann). Chicago Cardinal Archbishop Blaise Cupich, responded quickly and publicly, declaring, “Racism is a sin and has no place in the church, including the Archdiocese of Chicago” (DNA Info). The two students were later expelled from Marist High School.

It is clear to me that young people in Chicago and communities throughout the United States and around the globe would benefit today from the kind of values-based instruction offered by Sheil’s CYO between 1930 and 1954. The CYO was far from perfect and by no means a panacea for all that ailed the communities it served. It did, however, respond to an urgent need, was pragmatic in its approach to reach large numbers of young people, embraced ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, and capitalized on the appeal and lessons of athletic competition to advance civic engagement that was rooted in religious convictions. American society today faces many of the same or similar problems that plagued Chicago in the 1920s: crime, gangs, gun violence, a popular culture celebrating materialism and instant gratification, and growing social instability based on racial and economic class divisions, to name just a few. If Sheil were alive today, my guess is that he would be looking for ways to reach young people where they were. He likely, for instance, would use social media to capture their attention and attract participants. He would also not be afraid to take forthright stands on difficult issues. During the 1940s Sheil spoke out against Jim Crow policies, including those within the Catholic Church, and championed the Double V campaign during World War II, reminding Americans that Nazi Germany did not hold a monopoly on racism. These positions lost him support in some quarters, but he was confident that they were rooted in Catholic social teaching and the right thing to do.

Bishop Sheil’s vision for youth sports developed out of his commitments to Christian morality and American democracy. He was grateful for the positive ways that faith and patriotism shaped his life and believed others deserved the chance to enjoy similar opportunities. It was this conviction that obliged him to create an organization for the purpose of attracting and engaging large numbers of young people in activities meant to foster ethical development and civic engagement. Not only did the fun, excitement, and glamour of athletic competition appeal to young people, it developed habits and skills which served them well in
their lives outside the ring, pool, court, or playing field. Sheil knew that the values of hard work, resilience, cooperation, and fair play were often in short supply in modern society, and he used sports to instill these values in future workers, voters, parents, and parishioners.

Today we live in a time when sports in general – and youth sports in particular – enjoy a place of prominence in society. Historically unprecedented amounts of money, time, and effort are put into youth athletic programs across the United States and internationally; there is no doubt they profoundly influence our culture. The question is: What kind of influence do we want sports to have on our young people?

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Kathleen Sprows Cummings, the William W. and Anna Jean Cushwa Director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism and Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame, as well as F. Clark Power, the Founder and Director of Play Like a Champion Today and Professor of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Kathy and Clark invited me to give the keynote address at a Sport Summit on “Bishop Sheil’s Vision for Youth Sports,” co-sponsored by the Cushwa Center and Play Like a Champion Today on Notre Dame’s campus, 10-11 February 2017. This article is a version of that lecture.

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