



*Journal of
Religion & Society*
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 20 (2019)

Catholics and Sport in a Global Context

Edited by Patrick Kelly, S.J., Seattle University

3. Football *Plus* Human and Spiritual Formation

The Sports Pastoral at Santo Domingo Parish, Managua

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Abstract

In this article the sports pastoral in Managua, Nicaragua started by the Our Lady of Guadalupe Christian Life Community and supported by the local Jesuit parish is described and research with participants is shared that was conducted by the sociology department at the Universidad CentroAmericana. The members of the CLC arrived at the idea for the football league for adolescent males and young men ages 14-25 while they were trying to think of ways to reach the young people in their community, particularly those who were socially excluded and at-risk. According to the participants, playing in the league and participating in mandatory workshops had a positive impact on their lives, drawing them away from bad habits such as alcohol and drug abuse, helping them to make friends and expand their social network, pulling them away from violent situations and helping them to adopt positive values such as coexistence, respect, solidarity, and tolerance.

Keywords: at-risk youth, Christian Life Community, poverty, social exclusion, sports pastoral

Introduction

Sports practice as a means of securing well-being and benevolent purposes for youth is a long-standing practice in Nicaragua. In recent years, the National Police has been prominent in this area. This public entity has worked with community intervention plans in order to neutralize the operation of gangs and youth groups at risk. In addition to football (soccer) and other sports activities, police offer workshops about topics such as conflict resolution, leadership and self-esteem, drug consumption, and peaceful coexistence.

In the same manner as Nicaragua, other countries in Central America have also had significant experiences tapping into sports as a violence prevention mechanism. To that effect, it must be recognized that sports activities have had important acknowledgment in the social science area as a strategy of social integration and inclusion. Nevertheless, promoting sports has been less common among religious groups.

In this article I will discuss the sports experience with youth in high risk social conditions initiated by Santo Domingo Parish, directed by the Jesuits in downtown Managua. The young people in this barrio inhabit marginal contexts and some are involved in alcohol and drug consumption, delinquency, experience intrafamilial violence, unemployment, and various other personal difficulties. For six years pastoral work has been done with these youth through a football league that started with twelve teams and now has twenty-five. The league provides space on Sundays throughout the year, allowing male adolescents and young men aged 14 to 25 to enjoy themselves while playing football. In addition to providing a space for enjoyment, the parish also offers formation workshops for these youth as part of their participation in the league, conforming with the requests that they themselves have made. Among these, religious themes have been present, above all the importance of personal growth.¹

In order to obtain information about the ways that young people are living, each year the sociology department at the Universidad CentroAmericana conducts a diagnosis about the conditions of their personal, social, and familial lives, as well as of their needs for formation. The objective has been to obtain knowledge about their situation as young people within their context, as well as about how to improve their experience of playing in the league and the formation and community building that the parish offers them.

Methodologically, the diagnosis about the reality of the youth has taken place through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The information collected towards the end of 2016 will serve as the basis for this article. This document will be organized in three parts: first, the conceptual debate, which we held as a pastoral team in order to organize the sports league;

¹ The parish does not yet sponsor a league for girls and young women. There are currently many barriers to overcome to be able to do so. In part because the barrio is not viewed as a safe place, most parents want their daughters to stay close to home. And so girls are not as likely to go out to play sports. In order for girls and women to be more involved in sports in general many things would need to change in terms of the harsh reality of life in the barrio and people's mentalities. The Santo Domingo league is trying to take the first steps in changing the way people think by addressing issues associated with "machismo" culture and gender relations in its workshops with male participants.

then, information about the league itself and the context of the young people; and lastly, reflections of the young people who have participated in the league.

Sports or Religion?

A parish is a community of Christians belonging to the Catholic Church that identifies with a specific territory; one of the functions of this religious unit is to educate in the faith, to teach integral evangelization (Reyes Viscaino). Yet when we use traditional strategies like catechism and youth groups alone, many young people are not motivated to get close to the church. For this reason, in the Parish of Santo Domingo we endeavored to discuss what would be a better way of working with youth in our parochial territory. In this context the idea of operating a sports league emerged. Since the early twentieth century the main sport in Nicaragua has been baseball, but globalization and new media has allowed soccer to reach everywhere and soccer has become increasingly popular in recent years.

During the first year of the sports league we realized that even though the sport in itself was something good, it was not sufficient to fulfill the integral evangelizing purposes of the church. Therefore, we went about the task of reflecting on soccer as a strategy to go beyond – to try and help young people in the framework of an apostolate with social characteristics.

The first point that we realized was the fact that the Catholic Church is not a stranger to the sports phenomenon. Lay Catholics have been involved in sports for centuries, playing games on feast days throughout the medieval period, in the humanist schools of the Renaissance and the schools of the Jesuits and other religious orders from the early modern period to the present (Kelly). Lay Catholics have also been very active at professional and elite levels of sport, as players, coaches, and owners. The institutional church, also shows its solicitude for all aspects of human life, including sports. The popes have given numerous addresses about sport from the beginning of the twentieth century, some of them of considerable length (Lixey). John Paul II instituted the “Church and Sports” section in the year 2004, as part of the Pontifical Council for Laity. The purposes of this section were: First, to be a reference point for the national and international sports organizations; second, to sensitize the local churches about the importance of pastoral work and the sports environments, reminding them of the need to foster collaboration among associations of Catholic athletes; third, to favor a culture of sports as a context for the integral growth of the person and the service of peaceful coexistence; fourth, to promote the study of specific themes relative to sports, especially from the ethical perspective; fifth, to organize and support initiatives that elicit testimonials of athletes leading a Christian life (Pontifical Council for Laity).

Recently, the Catholic Church continues to point out that engagement with sports is an important way to accompany youth in our times. This is evident in a conference organized by the Vatican in 2016 called “Sport at the Service of Humanity.” This meeting attracted athletes and coaches as well as thought leaders in business and education and representatives from the religious traditions of the world. Meeting participants discussed how faith and sports can best be utilized to promote positive values in our societies (Glatz). Under the heading of “Inclusion,” conference participants discussed how to make opportunities for participation in sport available for poor or displaced children.

Precisely this approach that the Catholic Church now assumes is what has been taking place in our parish. We wish to facilitate substantive changes in youth, especially those young people who find themselves in high social risk situations in marginal neighborhoods. We consider it important that young people should be able to have fun in a healthy manner, but we also take advantage of the opportunity of their being together to invite them to reflect on their personal lives, families, and the problems that exist in their community. In the end, then, the league is not only about football per se, but about football *plus* human and spiritual formation. This is what makes it appropriate to have a sports league in the parish.

Our reflections have also been informed by perspectives coming from the social sciences, which allows us to use interdisciplinary tools. Research has shown many benefits of youth sport participation such as the reduction of stress, improved academic performance, and improvement in familial relationships, which constitute ways to counteract or prevent drug abuse (Naciones Unidas). Indeed, there are many points at which the perspective of the social sciences and the Catholic Church coincide when it comes to sport. For example, both view sport as an important way to bring about social inclusion and violence prevention (Durán Gonzalez et al.). And both view physical activity generated by sports as a way of promoting personal and social values. But the practice of sports in itself is not sufficient. Important too is the broader commitment that the social actors bring to the activity, and the need to combine this with a systematic approach.

Lastly, sport is a practice that is interrelated with culture and allows us to understand social processes better that, at the same time, enables us to modify them in service of the integral development of at-risk youth (Capretti: 1).

These perspectives from the social sciences have allowed us to have a conception of sports that complements the religious proposal of the Catholic Church and is very helpful given the harsh realities the young people in our parish are facing and the pressing needs they have.

In the next section I will discuss how young people in the parish experience their participation in our league which links sports and personal, social, and spiritual formation.

The Santo Domingo League: General Information

The Santo Domingo Parish belongs to the Archdiocese of Managua and has been directed by the Jesuits (Society of Jesus) since 1931. The parochial jurisdiction is made up of the Santo Domingo, Candelaria, Rubén Darío, Carlos Reyna, and the 19th of July neighborhoods. Its population is estimated at 19,000 inhabitants. Some of these neighborhoods form part of the old Managua downtown, next to the Oriental Market place, while others are located at the edge of Lake Xolotlán (Chavarría et al.).

According to the situational study that took place at the Universidad Centroamericana, the context of the neighborhoods of the Santo Domingo Parish is characterized as chaotic because of its high grade of social, economic, and geologic vulnerability. Among the manifestations in this regard is high unemployment in the economically active population, a concentration of youth without access to education, the high incidence of crimes associated with lack of civilian safety, interfamilial violence, sexual commerce, and consumption of drugs and alcohol (Prado et al.).

This social context – not uncommon in the marginal neighborhoods in Nicaraguan cities – is what motivated the parochial authorities to conduct an apostolate focused on working with youth, with the intention of promoting changes in their lives. A motto that arose among the team was that “one day playing is one day less of drug consumption.”

The work with youth began by organizing a sports league around football, given the popularity that it has in our country. One of the most important things we have done is to provide access to a quality football field that is a space for healthy and secure recreation. In the neighborhoods near the parochial territory the grassy areas are not adequate for sports, in part because of the traffic and vehicular danger, and there are no other areas for recreation or sports.

During the first years we worked with male adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 years old. Afterwards we increased the age, adapting to the growth of the adolescents. Six years ago, we started with 12 teams formed by 12 players, and now we have 25 teams, with about 14 members each. In total, we work with about 300 young people, every Sunday from February until November.

In addition to playing football, all of the players are required to attend workshops on topics such as leadership, emotional intelligence, addictions, community, masculinity (with “machismo” culture being addressed, in particular), violence, and spiritual growth. There is also Mass before every game. While every player is required to attend the workshops, only representatives from each team are required to attend Mass.

Each football team functions in an organized manner; they may finance their sports equipment themselves, or they may secure funds from friends or local businesses. For its part, the parish corresponds by organizing the league – scheduling the soccer fields and other spaces, as well as finding physical and human resources for formation workshops. The sports pastoral is an integral part of the ecclesiastic structure, one which has a representation in the parochial counsel. The league for its part has a minimal structure in order to function throughout the year; it is made up of the young people who participate and people who support the parish.

The Benefits of Participation in the Parochial League

In the survey conducted by the Sociology department of the Universidad Centroamericana (Chavarría et al.), it was found that the young people had positive views about the formation that they were receiving. For example, 20% of them gave an excellent evaluation of the workshops that they had been given, and 71.59% considered them very good. As one can observe, about 90% of these young people have a favorable opinion of the formation they received.

The youth said that the themes delivered that most impacted their lives were in the areas of personal growth (40%), family dynamics (22%), community life (14.5%), and spirituality (7.6%). We can observe that there is a higher rating in the themes that address personal growth. This should not come as a surprise, because this was the area that the young people themselves requested.

On the other hand, the young people affirmed that the main motivation for participating in the league of the parish was to have the opportunity for recreation and enjoyment. Also, they said this activity helped to prevent them from “falling into bad habits,” such as alcohol or drug use.

They mentioned in particular that they valued participation in the league because it offers a space where their relationships and friendships are strengthened. Eighty percent of the youth considered that their relationship with the members of their own team was between “good” and “excellent.” Many of the players on the teams have known each other for many years, and their interactions with one another are not limited to the scheduled games and trainings. But playing together on a team allowed for their friendships to deepen.

They also valued the league because it was a context that allowed them to make new friendships. Because they participate in workshops with players from the other teams, it allows for there to be recognition and exchanges among them. They pointed out that the unity among the players and the friendly competitions pull them away from violent situations, allowing them to adopt values like coexistence, respect, fellowship, solidarity, and tolerance.

Other Significant Experiences Expressed in a Personal Way

For many young people, participating for six consecutive years in the league contributes significantly to their personal growth, given that they annually count on this environment for recreation and formation as human beings. For example, Luis from Team Arsenal, comments: “My greatest happiness of the week is to know that Sunday is coming so that I can play soccer with my parish friends, and, at least once a month, I participate in the talks/conversations that they give us. I like them because they amuse me and I learn something new.”

For his part, José from the Mohicans team says that the themes he connects most with have to do with violence and family, because in his home there are many conflicts, and “some things about the church.” As he puts it, “You know, I live and work in the market place and every day it’s the same thing, so then, here I can distract myself and I can spend the entire day, and then I arrive home calmer.”

The majority of the youth appreciate the fact that the people from the parish who organize the sports league treat them with respect. They mentioned that in other spaces where they play soccer “it is not the same thing for them,” that often they are treated as “vagrants.” Even though at times some people that come to church “stare at us because we are wearing shorts and slippers – but it’s because afterwards we are going to go to the field to play.”

The youth appreciate that they can count on people who will treat them with dignity and respect, and that they will be listened to. And this happens often. Many of the young people take advantage of the opportunity they have to converse with members of the Christian Life Community about their personal and familial experiences and they count on confidentiality and counsel from us.

Some Conclusions About the Experience

The experience of generating a space for recreation for at-risk youth is valid all on its own, given that youth in the context of the poorer barrios have nowhere to have fun. Often they are excluded even from the inadequate spaces that do exist for recreation because of the

stigma against them: they are seen as delinquents, vagrants, dirty, potheads, and dangerous, among other things. In this sense, the parish is responding to a vital need of adolescents and young people.

The themes that are developed in the formation components of the league, even though they do not instantly change the lives of the youth, do contribute to long term changes. The players expressed satisfaction with the experiences and knowledge that they gradually obtain on Sundays, aside from playing soccer.

As a team that accompanies the sports pastoral, we are conscious that formation for youth is something that can always be improved. For example, we could improve in following-up on the themes presented in the workshops, providing pedagogical materials in order to better facilitate activities, and by acquiring specialists in working with youth in situations of high risk, and in the areas of theology and spirituality.

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