

The Christian vision of sport in an educational –the pastoral perspective

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Summary

This paper focuses on the development of pastoral work in the field of sports over the past ten years of the Department for the Pastoral Care of Athletes of the Zagreb Archdiocese, founded in 2009. The pastoral care for sports is, first of all, understood as a practical church activity which consists of activities around the full presence through support, counselling and spiritual care for athletes as well as appropriate liturgical celebrations. The paper provides an analysis of the existing contemporary environment where the main protagonist of the pastoral activity is, and that would be the man and the sports as an anthropological reality. Since it is impossible to cover the complexity of sport itself, this paper has been limited to sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon and the documents of church teaching that bring forward specific guidelines regarding pastoral care in sport. The educational, pastoral and cultural nature of sport can be recognized in the context of the Christian values and thus become a developmental path of young people. The church itself is interested in sports because it is an interested of human beings as well as in any area of their life and work. Sports events are an opportunity for an educational but also a moral and ethical growth where the participants meet, exchange experiences, communicate and discover values connected not only to sports and competition but also ethical and Christian values. The analysis of the current practice in this paper presents the projects realized over the ten-year period. The first part of the pastoral work refers to the (supra)diocesan level and parish sports competitions, whereas in the second part special attention has been paid to the activities in the pastoral work focused on professional athletes.

Key words: sports, pastoral care for sports, education, church documents

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today, modern sport¹ has imposed itself as a socio-cultural phenomenon that is interesting and observed through various sciences and their inherent methods.² In this paper, we will interdisciplinary approach the pastoral care of sport as an anthropological reality. The pastoral attention to sport has emerged in recent times and is based on church teaching documents. Sport can be observed through the theological aspect because the Christian message about sport has its centre in man.

It is not enough to accept a sports activity only as a physical category for achieving sports results, but by accepting man as an ontologically complete being consisting of "unity of body, spirit and soul" (Dicastery, 2018: 32), all-round integral development is possible. Through the philosophy of sport, a close connection between life and sport can be observed. In modern society there is a preoccupation with the physical and the material, we live in a culture that glorifies the human body, a healthy diet and a healthy living program. Josip Šimunović brings a whole range of various offers by which a man tries to organise a modern way of life and concludes: "In such a range of offers of various worldviews, religions, pseudo-religions and alternatives of living, there is also the Church that tries to offer man the word of God as a complete truth about man himself and about his life" (Šimunović, 2007: 38). According to Kučič and Spehnjak: "religiosity and sport are two

¹There are many definitions of sport. On the occasion of publishing the Dicastery for Lay People, Family and Life: *Give your best. On the Christian vision of sport and the human person*, a definition of sport has been adopted that includes five basic elements: "Sport is physical activity in movement, individual or team, of a ludic and competitive nature, codified into a system of rules, opportunities (2018: 26). Next: Dicastery.

²Sport is widely observed through empirical sciences such as medicine, biology, chemistry, mathematics, economics, to social sciences such as history, psychology, communication, philosophy, sociology, theology.

social phenomena present in modern society. The point of contact, the thread that connects these two phenomena is the person with their moral and educational needs. Namely, the aspect of religious and sports activities requires education and moral development. In both aspects, religious and sports, the complex structure of a person with the need for growth and development is expressed in the physical, as well as in the mental and spiritual area” (Kučiš and Spehnjak, 2015: 45).

Many church documents speak of the importance of pastoral work in this new and as yet insufficiently recognized area where people meet regardless of their race, gender, religion, or ideology. The Dicastery states: “The Church does not limit itself to encouraging qualified sports practices, but wants to be ‘in’ a sport that is viewed as a modern backyard of the people and an areopagus where the gospel is proclaimed” (Dicastery, 2018: 9). The same document states: “Today, the universality of sports experience, communication and symbolic power, great educational and formative possibilities are recognized and obvious. Sport is a phenomenon of civilization that rightfully constitutes contemporary culture, which permeates the style and life choices of many people. This prompts us to ask ourselves again with Pius XII: How could the Church not be interested in this?” (Dicastery, 2018: 8-9). The pastoral action must always be directed towards man and concrete society, and the dialogue between the Church and sport realizes the various proposals of sports pastoral care. Therefore, “John Paul II supported this process both in teaching and in the decision to open an Office dedicated to sports within the Holy See for the first time” (Dicastery, 2018: 9). On such incentives, the Archdiocesan Spiritual Table of the Zagreb Archdiocese formed the Department for Athlete Pastoral Care in 2009, which has practically operated and has realized various projects at the (arch)diocesan level and has realized pastoral work with professional athletes.³

The approach to the problem: The challenge of sports pastoral care in the modern environment

The first step of pastoral action in sport starts from analysing the existing contemporary environment and critically assessing the existing situation with its protagonist of its observations and actions. The main protagonists of sporting events along with the athletes themselves are coaches, sports associates, parents, fans, spectators, the media. Thanks to the media, sporting events are becoming popular and gaining supranational popularity in the whole society. Today, “sport no longer means only skills, art and knowledge, but also implies institutions, propaganda and marketing, and finds its place in the economic market” (Bartoš, 2012: 165). Furthermore, “presented with the help of the media, it increasingly takes on the specific characteristics of goods that occupy a very high and attractive place in the digital media world” (Rodek, 2018: 116). Sport today is extremely attractive to the masses, but at the same time “it is exposed to political and practical deviations that are not in the service of the person. This applies both to athletes who play sports as well as to spectators and fans” (Dicastery, 2018: 58). Today, especially in professional sports, the extreme vulnerability of the individual, stress, rivalry, fear of making mistakes, constant public oversight and observation, the pressure of the environment that expects constant progress and successful results, victory at all costs, insecurity and concern for own existence, etc. Hence, pastoral action must take into account all these problems that many athletes face. Namely, in the centre of pastoral activity is always a man with all his joys and successes, but also with the difficulties and burdens he carries. The orientation research has shown whether Croatian professional athletes find their job stressful, as well as which of those stressors negatively affect their sports performance has been detected. At the very top, as occasional stressors, are inadequate personal income (3.09), mental exhaustion, feelings of frustration and helplessness (3.09), fear of insecurity whether they will receive their monthly salary (3.05), and overload with training and physical exhaustion (2.96) (Spehnjak and Plenković, 2015: 154).

Furthermore, the Dicastery brings forward the criticisms of various deviations in sports when some want to reduce it only to “a means of linking interests, political goals and demonstrations of power, to simply seek financial gain or to strengthen nationalist aspirations” (Dicastery, 2018: 58). Reflecting on values, Tonči Matulić observes that “reducing the meaning and significance of values to interest, benefit, importance and reputation, so value loses disproportionately on goodness, then on objectivity and increasingly acquires selfishness and consequently subjectivity (Matulić, 2008: 394). Everything in life can become a substitute surrogate, as can sport if it does not include true values. A survey conducted in 2017 in cooperation with the Croatian Football Academy shows that for Croatian coaches, high-ranking values are *benevolence* (4.89), *universalism* (4.75), *independence* (4.76) and *security* (4.24). The values that reflect an individual's self-orientation such as *power* are rated by coaches (3.13), *achievement* (3.98), *hedonism* (3.99). Despite the ratings,

³By the decree of Cardinal Josip Bozanić, in 2009 the Department for the Pastoral Care of Athletes of the Zagreb Archdiocese was established, headed by the Commissioner for the Pastoral Care of Athletes of the Zagreb Archdiocese, permanent deacon Marijan Spehnjak. Due to the appearance of the new Covid-19 virus (as of March 2020), pastoral activities were stopped and the activities of the pastoral department were suspended until further notice.

it is interesting to note a small difference in the choice of individual values compared to broader socially acceptable values. This data indicates the possibility of internal conflict in a specific choice in real reality (Spehnjak; Žilić-Fišer and Labaš, 2018: 539).

The task of pastoral work is to recognize the signs of the times and to notice the changes that occur at all levels of life and work. Great changes affect today's man, the digitalization of social relations, strong individualism and alienation, materialism, consumerism. Furthermore, the distance of the modern man in relation to the Christian faith or to some parts of it, leads to a change in life attitudes, religious practices and attitudes towards religion. Despite this, a large percentage of people in Croatia still declare themselves to be religious. The *European Values Study* from 2008 shows that in Croatia 79% of respondents declared themselves to be religious, 11% non-religious, 4% atheists, while 6% were undecided (Črpić and Zrinščak, 2010: 10). Comparing the survey of the general population with the survey of athletes (in Croatia conducted in 2017 among 208 athletes – handball players), the results show that religion is regularly or often important for 94% of respondents when thinking about the meaning of their lives (Spehnjak, 2017: 54).

The last step in pastoral action is to act practically. It is necessary for every person, especially athletes, children and the young to be available, to notice their needs, problems, interests and to be supportive and to provide a positive example. Where there is darkness, light should be brought. It is necessary to abandon the logic and attitude of possession, and to awaken effective new strategies that place the individual man at the centre of pastoral action. Joseph Gevaert pointed out that man should be encountered where he is, in his concrete position, i.e. with regard to life and with regard to God (Gevaert, 2004: 335). Based on all identified needs and encouraged by church teachers, it is important to focus the pastoral monitoring and spiritual care on all levels of sports activities, from the parish. i.e. (supra)diocesan level as an incentive to form sports groups for children and the young or interest groups, all the way to pastoral work with coaches, sports leaders; next, the pastoral monitoring of recreational and professional athletes, the dialogue with those working in the field of sports science and medicine (Dicastery, 2018: 78-84).

The educational aspect of sports pastoral care

The document *Sport and the Christian Life* points out that “sport is not in itself educational, but only within certain value systems” (Italian Bishops' Conference, 2002: 68). The teaching of the Church permanently warns to be promoting sport for man. Valentin Pozaić quotes the words of Paul VI, whosays: "Sport either educates or corrupts, builds or breaks down those who deal with it or passionately follow it" (Pozaić, 1998: 136). Therefore, it is unquestionably important to educate for sport and "promote 'sport for man' who is able to give meaning and fullness of life, that is able to integrally value a person, his personal moral, social, ethical and spiritual growth" (Dicastery, 2018: 10). According to Pozaić: “the educational role in the life of an individual and society is not something additional or secondary to sport, but essentially related to it. Namely, there can be no physical perfection, achieved through exercise, without a proper mental balance of a person” (Pozaić, 1998: 136).

The educational task of pastoral care in sport is "to promote the Christian vision of sport, focused on building a society more and more tailored to man and oriented towards peace and justice and focused on evangelization" (Dicastery, 2018: 12). The Dicastery states that “there is no Christian sport, but on the contrary, there is a legitimate Christian vision of sport, which is not limited to attributing universally accepted ethical values, but opens its own perspective, innovative and consistent, in the belief that it serves sport and person and society.” (Dicastery, 2018: 36). It is not enough to add the prefix 'Christian' to a sports group, but it is necessary to continuously carry out a new evangelization that recognizes the problems of athletes and offers an answer and a reason for hope and faith.

The pastoral care of athletes promotes a new approach to the reality of sports life that involves the development of a spiritual dimension. It is not just a declarative approach but a new reality related to faith. Some studies have shown that athletes, coaches, and sports associates seek and have the need to address the topics of spirituality, religiosity, prayer, and faith (Coakley, 2003; Hoffman, 1992; Stevenson, 1991, according to Watson and Czech, 2005: 26-35).

Tomislav Ivančić in his research of faith and the human spirit, points out that the experience of the spirit is manifested through the so-called transcendental, i.e. its basic characteristics, which are "unum, bonum, verum and pulchrum - one, good, true and beautiful" (Ivančić, 2013: 76). It is through the development of transcendent in sports that manifestations such as “decision for moral good, tolerance, self-giving, ability to self-control, perseverance, initiative, sense of duty and responsibility, positive speech, sacrifice, fair play, trust, faith, love, solidarity, overcoming egoistic aspirations” can be recognized (Spehnjak, 2017: 46). Unfortunately, modern circumstances and pressures on athletes show that it was not easy to achieve. Namely, applying Ivančić's theory of spirit to the sports field, the lack of transcendence is recognized through visible phenomena. For example, the lack of truth in cases where lies and deception seek to succeed, by circumventing the rules, by taking stimulants and drugs, by actively or passively falsifying the results. Lack of kindness is manifested

through arrogance, turning exclusively to one's own self-realization and interests or turning your back to those in need, negative speech, exclusively emphasizing the importance of points and victory. Lack of beauty in the absence of creativity, creativity and life optimism. Lack of unity through lack of vision of one's own development, not recognizing one's integrity, gifts and talents to be developed, excessive individualism, exclusive focus on one's own success without worrying about one's own team's success, etc. (Spehñjak, 2017: 46).

One of the goals of the pastoral work is to make the athlete aware of the importance of asceticism and paideia, through which the whole of sports activity and realization is realized. The notion of sacrifice, renunciation, the ability of self-control, courage, solidarity, equality and respect is clear to a serious athlete. Successful upbringing of an individual and a team must be reflected through competition and play with the opponent. Through paideia, i.e. the educational aspect of pastoral care in sports, it is always necessary to have a vision of education for both victory and defeat. Namely, the problem in sports is not agony because it represents the very core of sports. The real problem is the abuse of victory as the only determining factor to which everything else must be assumed. Agonism is "in sports like salt in food: its absence makes competitive play bland and excessive amounts destroy it" (Crepaz, 2002: 460). In addition to educating for victory, the young man should be instructed in reality that defeat is not the end and that good can be gained from every defeat, that one can always start from the beginning, therefore, "learn to lose and not feel lost" (Italian Bishops' Conference, 2002: 56).

The Dicastery further states: "in order to be effective, a pastoral sport project must be a networked cooperation between educational agencies, starting primarily from the family, school and public institutions" (Dicastery, 2018: 88). The document *Sport and Christian Life* emphasizes: "He who is responsible for sports must play a role of high pedagogical and social quality" (Italian Bishops' Conference, 2002: 69). Particularly important is the role of sports educators and coaches who play a fundamental role in directing players' behaviour. The role of coaches in the education of young athletes is extremely important because "the coach is a model that shows morally desirable behaviours, so coaches must take into account the extent to which their overall behaviour affects the young people entrusted to them" (Spehñjak; Žilić-Fišer and Labaš, 2018: 564).

The bishops warn: "both the most sublime perspectives and the noblest messages remain a truly dead letter if there are no those who, with appropriate expertise, experience and wisdom, and especially true love, complete devotion and a true spirit of service, know how to put it into daily life" (Italian Episcopal Conference, 2002: 70). Personal communication is important in the dynamics of pastoral action. In terms of communicology, it means communication 'face to face' or biblically speaking it is the transmission of the message in the form 'word-of-mouth'. Without such an approach, without direct communication, pastoral action is doomed to failure. The effort and time invested in a personal tour and interviews with all the protagonists involved in a particular project is inevitable to be successful. At the same time, continuous work, monitoring, recognizing possibilities and offering reasons for hope and truth are essential.

Results of pastoral activity in sports in the Zagreb Archdiocese

With the establishment of the *Department for Sports Pastoral Care* of the Zagreb Archdiocese in 2009, the leadership of the Catholic Futsal League and the Catholic Volleyball League, which until then had been operated under the auspices of the Association of Catholics in Action, was taken over. The department also takes over the organization of the athletes' pilgrimage to Marija Bistrica, which has been carried out since 2003. The door of cooperation has been open to all sports federations operating in the Zagreb Archdiocese.

The enthusiasm of busy believers and athletes, their desire and need to give sports activities and accompanying facilities a higher dimension that would be under the auspices of pastoral care, were crucial for the emergence of sports leagues. The title 'Catholic League' does not mean that there is Catholic football, Catholic handball or any other Catholic sport, but through pastoral care it wants to contribute to the development of human and Christian values that are manifested through sport.

The pastoral care of athletes of the Zagreb Archdiocese at the parish level includes seven different competitive sports, namely:

- Catholic Indoor Soccer League, Catholic Volleyball League for Girls and Catholic Volleyball League - mixed (continue their previously started activities)
- Catholic Table Tennis League (starting in the pastoral year 2011)
- Catholic Basketball League 3x3 (active since 2013)
- Catholic Chess League (active since 2014)
- Catholic Tennis League (operating since 2016 in Velika Gorica)

In addition to them, since 2011 there have been:

- Catholic First League: First Communion
- Catholic Futsal League: Holy Confirmation

Tournaments of Catholic indoor soccer leagues of children who are preparing for their first Communion and the Holy Confirmation are an opportunity for parents, religious teachers and parish catechists to meet. In addition to sports activities and a positive educational environment, socializing with children and young people is important.

The pastoral care of athletes aimed at professional athletes

The goal of the pastoral walk towards professional athletes and their institutions is dialogue and partnership, assistance in their autonomy and support for the process of humanization and spirituality of professional sports. Professional athletes expressed their spiritual needs by making pilgrimages to the National Shrine in Marija Bistrica. It all started in the organization of the Zagreb Football Association in 2003 at the suggestion of the Zagreb mayor.⁴The pilgrimage included professional athletes from the area of the city of Zagreb (Football Club Dinamo, Football Club Zagreb, Water polo Club Mladost and Basketball Club Cibona). Since 2009, after the formation of the Department for the Pastoral Care of Athletes, cooperation has been established with all National Federations operating in the Zagreb Archdiocese. This cooperation is reflected in the support, counselling and spiritual care for athletes, in the animation of Holy Mass of Thanksgiving,⁵ spiritual renewals and testimonies of personal experiences of the faith of professional athletes through various media.

In cooperation with the Croatian Olympic Committee, the Croatian Paralympic Committee, sports national and regional federations operating in the Zagreb Archdiocese, the projects implemented at the (arch)diocesan level are:

- a fixed date of the athlete's pilgrimage to Marija Bistrica is included in the sports calendar (first Monday in May)
- spiritual and pastoral formation through one-day spiritual renewals for coaches, sports staff and players. The goal of such meetings was the growth of personal faith and knowledge through which an individual can recognize and respond to their own tasks, learn to deal with both victory and defeat, recognize the values of sport and its meaning.

The pastoral work includes the participation of athletes in organized liturgical celebrations, especially Holy Mass of giving thanks for the past sports season.

- since 2009, holy masses of giving thanks for athletes of the city of Zagreb have been held continuously
- in Karlovac in 2010, professional athletes celebrated for the first time the Holy Mass of giving thanks, which since 2016 has grown into the Holy Mass of Thanksgiving for athletes with disabilities, which is organized in cooperation with the Croatian Paralympic Committee.
- Holy Mass of Thanksgiving for athletes of the city of Velika Gorica since 2016
- Holy Mass of Thanksgiving for athletes from the Croatian Zagorje since 2016
- Mass of thanksgiving for athletes of the city of Samobor since 2016.

Several regular researches conducted among professional athletes have shown the need to deepen personal faith and prayer. As stated in the dicastery, “the dialogue with those working in the field of sports science” is extremely important (Dicastery, 2018: 84). Several studies have been conducted on religiosity, faith, prayer, spiritual needs, stress, dialogue and communication among athletes, coaches and sports leaders (Spehnjak and Plenković, 2015; Kučič and Spehnjak, 2015; Spehnjak, 2017; Spehnjak; Žilić Fišer and Labaš, 2018).

Media coverage of the pastoral care of athletes

Pastoral activity in sports is also promoted through both electronic and printed media:

- For several years, the Croatian Catholic Radio broadcast the show *Poluvrijeme (The Half-time)* every other week, in which the guests were prominent sports workers who analysed and commented on sports events at both national and local levels in the context of the system of Christian values.
- The sports show *Church and Sport* on Radio Marija also hosted experts and participants in sports who, through their lives and testimonies, reveal the educational, teleological and axiological dimensions of sports.
- The Sports Television in their show *Poluvrijeme (The Half-time)* since April 2019, three times a day, a sports minute has been broadcast with the interpretation of the daily gospel.

⁴More in: Zagreb Football Association (2019) 100 Golden Years, 1919 - 2019, Zagreb Football Association, 359-362.

⁵The presence of the Archbishop of Zagreb, Cardinal Josip Bozanić, the Bishops of Zagreb, Ivan Šaško and Mija Gorski, and the Episcopal Vicar, Marko Kovač, contributed to the importance of the events themselves at the liturgical Mass celebrations.

- In the print media: Sportske novosti, Večernji list, Jutarnji list and Glas Koncila, a short report on existing pastoral activities in sports, interviews which they the pastoral care of sports is further explored are regularly published on internet portals.⁶

- On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Zagreb Football Association and the publication of the book "100 Golden Years" there is an article *Church and Football*, which presents a cross-section of the connection and involvement of church pastoral in the practical life of sports, especially football.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper is dedicated to the topic of the systematic and holistic pastoral care in the complex social circumstances in which the contemporary athlete finds himself. Starting from sports as a socio-cultural phenomenon capable of gathering masses of people of planetary proportions, this paper considers not only the promotion but also basic activities related to the pastoral care of sports in the Zagreb Archdiocese. The aim of this paper is to review the current activities in this still unrecognized area of action. Due to the weight and complexity of the problems that result from the modern way of life, the solution should be sought in deep reflection and promotion of new projects in building a new pastoral expression and actions aimed at reaching and meeting a particular person no matter where he was. The basic task of educational and pastoral engagement is to make athletes aware that the psycho-physical aspect of sports and achieving successful sports results are only one of the extremely important goals. Namely, only when this goal is connected with systematic development through the ethical-moral category, it becomes a true source of joy, satisfaction, fulfilment and purpose. Such an educational-pastoral systematic action strengthens and develops positive willing qualities such as perseverance, honesty, sacrifice, honesty, responsibility, innovation, creativity and many others, all of which are reflected in everyday life and as such become a methodological principle for many living realities.

The analysis of previous activities shows continuity in work and increase of new projects throughout the years. The number of projects involving different age groups at the parish level as well as the work with professional athletes at the (supra)diocesan level have been continuously increasing over the past 10 years of work. The wide range of different pastoral activities includes liturgical celebrations (Holy Mass of Thanksgiving), pilgrimages, spiritual renewals, spiritual accompaniment, support, counselling, media coverage and scientific research.

The conducted research is only an orientation research and an incentive for conducting further scientific research, namely, regardless of the positive quantitative effect of pastoral work, it is necessary to further maintain and develop the qualitative effect in work by using any of the qualitative methods, such as interviews or surveys.

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⁶One of the interviews in which you can learn more about pastoral work in sports: <https://www.zupa-zabok.org/razgovor-s-vlc-marianom-spehniakom-povjerenikom-za-pastoral-sportasa-zagrebacke-nadbiskupije/> (accessed June 7, 2020)

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