



Student athletes compete at intersection of sports and spirituality

BODY AND SPIRIT

A new Vatican document encourages the development of an “apostolate for sports” and cautions against the dangers inherent in competition.

“Giving the Best of Yourself,” the first-ever official Vatican document on sports, was released earlier this year by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life. It brings together all the messages of popes about sports since the early part of the 20th century.

In one section of the 52-page document, St. John Paul II is quoted as saying that sport is “a form of gymnastics of the body and the spirit.”

“Athletic activity, in fact, highlights not only man’s valuable physical abilities, but also his intellectual and spiritual capacities. It is not just physical strength and muscular efficiency, but it also has a soul and must

show its complete face,” St. John Paul II wrote.

This intersection of sport and spirituality comes alive in the Diocese of Erie, where students are encouraged to turn to their faith before, during and after competition.

Student athletes representing each high school in the 13-county diocese readily shared their favorite pre-game prayers and inspiration with *Faith* magazine. [See sidebar on next page.]

Father Patrick Kelly, SJ, an expert who contributed to the revision of “Giving the Best of Yourself,” is impressed by what

Story and photo by Mary Solberg

some of these students say before competition.

“Bodily activities such as sport also affect young people at the dimension of their relationship with God,” Father Kelly told *Faith* magazine in a telephone interview from his office at Seattle University, Seattle, Wash. “In Catholic schools, we talk about the education of the whole person. What you’re seeing in their statements is this holistic approach. They’re recognizing there is a spiritual dimension of what they’re doing.”

Father Kelly also is the author of many books and articles on sports and spirituality and

THE CATHEDRAL
PREP RAMBLERS
FOOTBALL TEAM
PRAYS BEFORE THE
MARIAN GROTTO AT
DOLLINGER FIELD
OUTSIDE THE HAG-
ERTY FAMILY EVENTS
CENTER IN ERIE.
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Inspiration before competition

In the Diocese of Erie, faith bolsters work in the classroom and on the playing field, according to Doug Chuzie, director of diocesan athletic programs.

“We have a great culture in our schools where athletes are encouraged to do their best on and off the field,” he says.

In the past year, teams representing Catholic high schools captured state titles in football, soccer, tennis and basketball.

Here’s a sampling of what motivates diocesan athletes as they enter competition:

Andrew Stark, SENIOR, CATHEDRAL PREPARATORY SCHOOL, ERIE **SPORTS:** WRESTLING AND LACROSSE

“My favorite prayer to say before I compete is, ‘Come, Holy Spirit.’ I say this short phrase before every wrestling match and every lacrosse game as a way to remind myself that the Holy Spirit is always with me, guiding my every step. This prayer was taught to me by Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of the University of Notre Dame. Father Ted taught me this short prayer in a meeting my family and I had with him shortly before he passed away in 2015.”



Catholic perspectives on sports. He is an associate professor of theology and religious studies at Seattle University.

The Vatican document calls on the Catholic Church to create and promote an “apostolate for sports” that would show how much the church is committed to the well-being of athletes. It asks for pastoral plans for players and athletes, as well as for parents and volunteers.

Additionally, it asks for “an educational strategy” to help coaches, teachers and managers find the “best, most holistic” means by which to humanize sports.

Most notably, it cautions against highly competitive children’s sports, political and economic pressures on athletes to win “at all costs” and the unsportsmanlike, even violent, behavior of fans.

In a message to Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, Pope Francis said, “Sport is a very rich source of values and virtues that help us to become better people.” †



Justin Miknis, SENIOR, DUBOIS CENTRAL CATHOLIC, DUBOIS **SPORTS:** BASEBALL AND BASKETBALL

“Before all of my baseball games in summer competition, I wear the St. Sebastian necklace that I received from my parents for confirmation. My confirmation name is St. Sebastian, the patron saint of athletes. On the back of the medal, it says, ‘Protect this athlete.’”

Ben Hoffman, JUNIOR, ELK COUNTY CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL, ST. MARYS **SPORTS:** CROSS COUNTRY, BASKETBALL AND TRACK AND FIELD

“No two races are ever the same, but I always start mine with a prayer, then close that prayer with the sign of the cross. The prayer always is, ‘I am yours, Lord.’ These words are a reminder to me that God gave me my body, and everything I accomplish with it is done with him and through him. I say it to help me when my legs are getting tired and weak to remember that God will always give me the strength if I just put my faith in him. It also helps me to stay humbled. It might be four short words, but it is what motivates me to be the absolute best I can be.”



Humanae

Aubrey Stuckey, SOPHOMORE, MERCYHURST PREPARATORY SCHOOL, ERIE **SPORT:** ROWING

"Before a rowing competition, I say, 'However this turns out, God has a plan for me. I'm going to give it my all and we are going to do this as a team!'"



Brianna Lepore, SENIOR, KENNEDY CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL, HERMITAGE **SPORTS:** SOCCER, CROSS COUNTRY AND TRACK

"Before each soccer game, our team always says a *Hail Mary* and asks our Mother Mary to protect us and let us have a safe and successful game. When we kneel and pray together, we feel stronger as a team."



Thomas Fink, SENIOR, VENANGO CATHOLIC, OIL CITY **SPORTS:** GOLF AND BASKETBALL

"I have two quotes that I keep in mind during matches for golf. One is an athlete quote and the other is a Bible quote. 'Golf is the closest game to this game we call life. You get bad breaks from good shots; you get good breaks from bad shots, but you have to play the ball where it lies'—Bobby Jones. And the Bible quote is, 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.' (Colossians 3:23)



Kelly Fessler, SENIOR, VILLA MARIA ACADEMY, ERIE **SPORTS:** CROSS COUNTRY, SWIMMING AND TRACK

"In the team huddle before every race, we recite the prayer of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: 'Little Flower, at this hour, show your power.' This prayer means a lot to my team, since we can always look to St. Thérèse for guidance, both physically and mentally. St. Thérèse lived her life with a positive attitude, so this prayer reminds us to keep a positive attitude as she did, regardless of the outcome of a race. Another phrase that I say to myself right before I race is Isaiah 41:10, 'Be not afraid, for I am with you.' Every athlete gets a little nervous before a competition, but in the heat of the moment, this quote reminds me that God is right by my side to guide and protect me through it all. This little reminder calms me down, and helps me get ready to compete knowing that he is there with me." †



SHERI LANG OF DUBOIS WAS ONLY 12 YEARS OLD WHEN BLESSED PAUL VI RELEASED *HUMANE VITAE* ("OF HUMAN LIFE"), HIS 1968 ENCYCLICAL ON THE INTEGRITY OF MARRIED LOVE AND ARTIFICIAL CONTRACEPTION.

Little did she know that the document would have a lasting impact on her, and that it would persist as one of Catholicism's most enduring teachings on the sanctity of life and the importance of using natural means by which to regulate births.

As the Catholic Church marks the 50th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae* this year, Lang celebrates the completion of her re-training in the Creighton Model of Fertility at the Mercy Fertility Care Center in St. Louis, Mo.

A nurse practitioner, she now teaches Creighton to couples who meet her at Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Sykesville, Jefferson County. Previously, she had taught the Creighton Model under the auspices of what is now Penn Highlands DuBois.

Creighton tracks fertility and a host of other health issues by observing cervical mucus.

"I felt God was calling me back to teaching natural family planning [NFP] with a special interest in infertility," Lang, 62, says. "The Creighton Model can help with so many of women's health issues,