

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Teaching sports, morality

By Scott A. McConaha
Catholic News Service

MILWAUKEE —The priest-author of a book about athletic programs in Catholic schools is convinced that it pays for schools to budget for student participation in sports.

Augustinian Father Richard J. McGrath, president and principal of Providence Catholic High School in New Lenox, Ill., spoke at an April 18 National Catholic Educational Association convention seminar titled "To Play as Jesus Did: Athletics and the Gospel Mission of the Catholic School."

"We remember the parable of the talents, how Jesus distributed different things to different people, and expected them to make a return, expected them to do more with what they had than just to bury it or hide it," Father McGrath said.

"So there's precedent, then, for developing (students') talent in all areas. Each of us is called to develop our full human potential and God-given talent," he said. "Athletic talent is ability given to us by our creator, who expects us to use it."

Along with physical development, he contended that students involved in sports learn the importance of striving for excellence and also learn about leadership, both how to respect leaders and to develop leadership skills.

Father McGrath, author of *Athletics and the Gospel Mission of the Catholic School*, published by NCEA, said that, since athletics is "clearly an agreed-upon and approved priority, we can stand up and say that athletics is entitled to its fair share of resources, has a right to be there, and does not have to wait for charity or hand-outs in order to fulfill what it is supposed to do."

But before they participate in sports, he said, students must first demonstrate academic achievement. "Only after children have become learners should anyone dare to invite them to become athletes."

Another seminar, "Monday Night Football and Moral Theology," featuring Chris Godfrey, president and founder of Life Athletes, based in South Bend, Ind., focused on an instructional program that has professional and Olympic athletes encouraging students to abstain from sex until marriage and to respect the lives of others, especially the unborn and elderly.

Godfrey, on the New York Giants team when it won Super Bowl XXI in 1987, said "Relationships are the key to our happiness, because only in them can we find love, which is something we are all after."

Helping students act morally in their relationships is the goal of Life Athletes' curriculum, "That's Where I Live: A Guide to Good Relationships," which Godfrey wrote. "Virtues are the basis of a good life," Godfrey said. "We all want good friends, but are we all willing to pay the price to be a good friend?"

Avoiding selfishness in relationships and caring for the welfare of others are what being a good friend is all about, Godfrey said.

People in sexual relationships without the bond of marriage begin to lose emotional attachments to their partners and "studies have shown that people who sleep around before they get married ... have lost the ability to bond, have become emotionally deadened."

Students who participate in the Life Athletes program — www.lifeathletes.org — are asked to commit to doing what is morally right (even when it's difficult), to abstain from sex until marriage, to respect life and to persevere, even after failure.

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