

Sports offer more than competition

Several area high schools, a number of which are Catholic, have been in the news lately over their decision not to have their football team compete against a school (also Catholic) that has recently become dominant on the field of play.

The purpose of this column is not to debate the merits of the rationale on either side. After all, the schools citing concerns for player safety as the reason for their decision have a responsibility to protect their players if they feel the competitive imbalance is so great it could increase the risk of injuries. And it is a worthy cause for a school that has long created opportunities for youths from very challenging backgrounds to do so now through more than academic means, becoming even more attractive to students wishing to open doors through athletics.

Unfortunately, the decisions on both sides have given way to hyperbole and rhetoric in both traditional and social media and prompted some to make claims ranging from unfair recruiting practices to racism.

In the end, these games that brought together students of all walks of life are not going to take place and the greatest loss in this is that the personal experiences and shared interactions that are integral to the mission of Catholic education will no longer take place. Therefore, I am inviting the leaders of these schools - and others - to make it a priority to create opportunities where these children can see each other as individuals, as members of the same human family.

This is a central focus of a Vatican document about sports, "Giving the Best of Yourself: A document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person," which is the first of its kind and, providentially, was released while this conversation was taking place here in Baltimore. The document analyzes the impact of sports on the integral development of the human person and society, as well as the role of sports as a vehicle for common good and the unity of the human family.

A key focus for Pope Francis, which is both instructive and timely for us as we view this situation in Baltimore, is that sports - especially team sports - provide us a communal experience. It is, he writes, "A catalyst for experiences of community, of

the human family ...peaceful competitions can be a context for people to have encounters with others very different from themselves and even help them to have a glimpse of the unity of the human family.”

In an age of texting, online gaming and social media, young people eschew face-to-face encounters for safer and less vulnerable virtual interactions. Sports are a way to bridge those lost personal encounters and mutual experiences.

The recognition of this loss was evident in statements made by some of the schools involved. In a joint statement issued by the heads of two of the schools, the leaders wrote of their schools’ commitment to “explore other ways in which to collaboratively fulfill their common goal of fostering the spiritual, physical and academic development of their students.” Another school head referenced her relationship with her counterpart as “colleagues and more importantly, friends” and called him a “transformational leader who never loses sight of his students or his mission.” These public acknowledgements provide us with a foundation on which we can build the climate of mutual respect and understanding that is necessary and fundamental to helping our young people grow into adulthood and contribute to the common good of our human family.

For these schools and for all our Catholic schools, we must not let a desire for competitive excellence obscure the integral role that sports can play in the development of young people. Sports are a bridge to new experiences, to unfamiliar faces, and can unite young people to each other in a unique and powerful way.

In breaking down barriers, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote of the power of such encounters. I wrote in my pastoral letter on the enduring power and influence of Dr. King’s prophetic teachings: “Often we think we know about our own and surrounding communities. A second look may show, however, that we have a lot to learn. For that reason, Dr. King urged his followers – and now he urges us – to learn all we can about both the challenges as well as the opportunities in our diverse communities. In doing so, we will better understand the nature of the problems to be faced and also the goodness and humanity of people who don’t live so far away from us after all.”