

Culture



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March 22, 2025

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One beautiful spring day I sat on the Iowa prairie — but I couldn't see the horizon. I was in a gymnasium, back aching, knees cramped, watching my son play travel basketball. We were a three-hour drive from home and had spent \$120 on a hotel room. There were further outlays for gas, food and entrance fees. As I wandered the 300,000-square foot, \$45 million Des Moines RecPlex that weekend, I couldn't help but wonder: Who are all these people? Where did they come from? Why do they spend money on this? And, who might be excluded?

Sport is an essential part of human culture. It allows us to express ourselves, to practice rigor and endurance and to build community. Too often, however, our sport contributes to and exacerbates the problems in our society. For many families today, youth travel teams are a parental obligation. We participate unthinkingly and feed a behemoth industry whose value is [estimated at \\$19 billion per year](#). What should be a beautiful expression of creation and an opportunity for community becomes [exclusive and costly](#).

I have become increasingly alarmed by how many of my fellow Roman Catholics participate in youth travel sports without regard for their faith or the teachings of the Bible and the church. In particular, the church's clear teaching on solidarity should compel Catholics (and, I might add, all Christians), to use sports as an opportunity for community and inclusion rather than the opposite.

Through sports, Catholics can be an outgoing church, living with solidarity that aligns with the Gospel and the example of Christ.

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I suspect most Catholics have heard the word solidarity. I'm not sure how many know what it means. [Pope Francis recognizes](#) that the word solidarity has become a "little worn and at times poorly understood." Solidarity, as Francis says, must include convictions and habits that are put into practice. Solidarity is not just a principle, but a virtue.

Youth sports ought to be the perfect training ground for solidarity. A team comes together to work toward a common goal. All participate and think about the good of

the whole. Teammates demonstrate empathy toward one another. Sadly, our sports are increasingly bereft of solidarity. We view them more for personal gain than community building. [Dobie Moser calls this](#) the "sports as ladder to success" model of participation. As hand-picked travel teams become the norm, the poor are left out. If sport presents us with an opportunity for solidarity, we swing and miss.

Case in point: No U.S.-born Black players participated in the 2022 World Series. One culprit is the privatization of travel baseball. As more and more families leave affordable community-based organizations like Little League, there are fewer opportunities for poor or marginalized communities to participate. As John W. Miller [wrote](#), "Baseball is becoming a mostly white country-club sport for upper-class families to consume, like a snorkeling vacation or a round of golf." Baseball is now America's pastime only in an ironic sense: It once again mirrors the inequality we see in society.

I have seen this inequality firsthand. Every spring when we start to rake the fields and draft the teams for our local Little League chapter, some of last year's players are gone. No one asks where they went. We all know they've chosen travel teams instead. Many of these teams are private and organized by parents. It costs a player's family as much as \$2,500 to participate for one season. I know families who travel every weekend of the summer for baseball. A friend sold their family cabin because "we can never get there because of the baseball schedule." I have seen footage from high-speed cameras on large-screen iPads analyzing the minutiae of a 12-year old's swing. A travel baseball patriarch once asked me if I knew the spin rate on my son's fastball.

Although the sacrifice bunt is disappearing from baseball, we laud sacrifice in sports all the time. Players "put their bodies on the line" or "take one for the team." These phrases refer to personal sacrifice oriented toward the group. Rarely, however, does that sacrifice extend to a world of solidarity in which we sacrifice for the good of those who are less privileged. Why do we value sacrifice on the field and then forget it when outside the lines? For a Roman Catholic, the words of the Bible are clear: It is our duty to "clothe with great honor" those members who are "less honorable" (1 Corinthians 12:23).

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Pope Francis expresses this same sentiment: that our sports must never forget those at the margins of society. "I am also thinking about those many children and the youth who live at the edges of society," he said in a [2016 address](#) to a global conference on faith and sports. "Everybody is aware of the enthusiasm with which children will play with a rugged old deflated ball in the suburbs of some great cities or the streets of small towns. I wish to encourage all of you . . . to work together to ensure these children can take up sport in circumstances of dignity, especially those who are excluded due to poverty."

When Catholics participate in sports, our faith and its teaching on solidarity should compel us to ask: Who is included and who is excluded by how, when and where we play?

Living with solidarity may seem crazy and unorthodox. The pressure today is to be a good consumer and conform. "Of course my son should play travel baseball. Why shouldn't he? His friends will be there. Shouldn't he have the best?" Such thinking evinces a logic of privilege and lacks solidarity with those who are impacted by our actions.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed" (Romans 12:2). The transformation he describes would entail living as if we are all one body, where we honor and prioritize those whom society deems to be less honorable. Economic pressure and self-aggrandizement push in the opposite direction. Living with solidarity would mean leaving exclusionary practices and working on behalf of those who have been excluded. A life of solidarity would work to ensure that all children can take up sports with dignity, especially those excluded by poverty.

Catholics are dismissed every Sunday (presuming they do not skip Mass as I did when in Des Moines for my son's basketball tournament), with these words: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." Through sports, Catholics can be an outgoing church, living with solidarity that aligns with the Gospel and the example of Christ. We should take notice if we find ourselves in situations where groups are excluded or unable to play. Sports practices built on equality and inclusion might be a good place to start glorifying the Lord with our lives, to show that when we partake of the body of Christ and say, "amen," we mean it.