



# Letters

"A FAR GREATER POVERTY — SPIRITUAL POVERTY"

## "WE MUST ALL BE 'ATHLETES FOR CHRIST'"

Christ's message of selfless love must displace America's pride, materialism

■ BY CRAIG STAMMEN, MIKE SWEENEY AND MIKE PIAZZA

*Dear Pope Francis,*

As Catholic baseball players and members of Catholic Athletes for Christ, we eagerly await your arrival and will be thrilled to welcome you to the United States. We know your message of mercy and hope will uplift and enrich the faith and spiritual fabric of our country. We humbly submit the following thoughts as an expression of love and highest regard for you, and for your position as the Vicar of Christ.

We look forward to the message you will communicate to America at the World Meeting of Families — a country founded on the bedrock of family, faith, freedom and fortitude. We understand the family — our domestic Church — when modeled on the Holy Family of Nazareth, as our "little laboratories of love." As you have repeated throughout your papacy, the message of Christ brings happiness to our families and our lives.

We athletes daily encounter the young and see their honest search for meaning and joy. Sport can be a wonderful way for young and old alike to find enjoyment and enthusiasm for something beyond themselves. In a small way, through our humble and inarticulate preaching of the Good News to sports fans, we hope they will see the joy of dedicating their lives to Jesus, and of carrying their enthusiasm beyond sports, to an eternally meaningful encounter with their Creator. Dear Pope Francis, *we humbly ask you to explain the seeming paradox that it is only by losing yourself through selfless love of others that you find your true self.*

We have confidence that your visit will unite and encourage Catholics, non-Catholic Christians and all good-faith believers in God. As our Blessed Lord Himself prayed, may we all be one in Him as He is one with



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the Father. We humbly ask you to emphasize the vital importance of this unity. The recent tragic shootings of our brothers and sisters in Christ in a South Carolina house of worship highlight our desperate need to come together in love and faith.

We also pray that God enables us, and you, to help reverse our prideful tendencies to reject God's moral teachings, and to initiate a true revival of goodness in America. You have rightly said that we are not to judge the eternal state of another's soul, as that is God's role alone. Sadly, the moral relativism of our age distorts this biblical warning as if it were a license to ignore the Ten Commandments and our Judeo-Christian moral standards. *Please explain to America that following the Commandments actually frees us to be the best persons we were made to be.*

While we in the US are materially prosperous, moral relativism threatens to bankrupt our souls. It introduces a far greater poverty — spiritual poverty — than the

country experienced in the Great Depression of the 1920s. Many athletes are well compensated for their physical talents and enjoy a high material standard of living. While grateful to God for our gifts and the ability to provide materially for our families, we remain mindful of the temptations that inevitably accompany these blessings.

The greatest temptation is pride, which, Holy Scripture tells us, is the first and most per-

nicious. Pride tempts us to believe we deserve these gifts, that our athletic prowess makes us better than others and therefore *entitled* to a better material life style — and erodes our reliance on the time-honored moral standards of the Commandments and the Church.

This attitude of entitlement is widespread in sports; its sad consequence is wrecked lives, marriages and families, which litter the sports landscape like dandelions. Casual observers tend to "idolize" athletes, and envy our material standard of living. The truth is, no material thing compares with a life rooted in Christ and his Church. Only as obedient servants to the Divine Master do we find the peace and joy our hearts clamor for.

We humbly suggest you guide us in avoiding the fallacy of this prideful mindset. As you so beautifully said in Paraguay recently, Our Blessed Lord and the Devil are captains of two very different teams. The Evil One tells us his "gifts" of power, money and fame will make us happy. Jesus tells us exactly the opposite: humility, selflessness and love of God alone bring joy.

As your saintly predecessor John Paul II said, we must all be "athletes for Christ." Many, especially the young, try to emulate us as athletes. It is here, and everywhere, that we must remain mindful of the admonition of St. Paul, "to imitate me, as I imitate Christ." (1 Cor 11:1)○