FAITH, LOVE AND SWEAT

Passing, shooting, running, thinking, growing, praying:

Grant us a personal acceptance of the dignity of all individuals.
Above all, let us, in all things, demonstrate a spirit of love and respect for all.
This scene happens hundreds of times each weekend in gyms around the Archdiocese of New York, with children from fourth through eighth grades – the bold, natural athletes and the quiet, hopeful learners. The prayer ends and all head to positions on the court or bench; the whistle blows, the referee tosses the ball for the tip-off. The game is on.

It was the Great Depression which gave rise to the founding of the Catholic Youth Organization, whose first chapter was instituted in Chicago in 1930. Grounded in Catholic social teachings, the program was designed to lead young people away from the unhealthy, amoral culture of the streets toward faith and physical health. In December 1936, John Cardinal Hayes announced the establishment of the CYO in New York. “We must be watchful shepherds,” he noted in encouraging every parish to start a CYO program.
“All Catholic children – those in public as well as those in Catholic Schools – are our charges, yours and mine.”

CYO of the Archdiocese of New York – now a division of Catholic Charities Community Services – has undergone significant change since Cardinal Hayes inaugurated it some 82 years ago. The social events that once were part of the program have become the province of youth ministry groups. Today, the best-known CYO program is basketball, with 17,000 boys and girls playing in the winter season and an additional 2,300 in the new spring league.

During winter, hundreds of games are played each weekend across the archdiocese. The program, however,
“Unlike other sports and youth activity programs, the CYO is about seeing the goodness of God in each person, developing God-given skills and talents, and setting the stage for a life of faith in action.... A parish with a strong CYO is a strong parish.”
Msgr. Edmund Whalen, Vicar for Clergy, Archdiocese of New York
Former Catholic school principal, pastor - and “CYO kid”
The CYO legacy, circa 1960. Clockwise from top left: A game of chess at the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Memorial Center in Harlem; CYO basketballers, including future NBA Hall-of-Famer Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar); lining up for afternoon programs in Manhattan; a dance program at the Cardinal Spellman Center.
“Having CYO programs in our school community reinforces our Catholic beliefs. The children discover the importance of commitment, collaboration and sportsmanship - traits that will lead them to great success in life.”
Anthony P. Naccari, Principal, St. Gabriel School, Bronx

is not primarily focused on racking up wins or even on the development of basketball skills. Its main goal is to develop Christian values in players: fairness, honesty, respect, discipline, kindness and a spirit of loving competition. “Learning how to lose is just as important as learning how to win,” according to CYO New York’s statement of purpose, and “learning how to win graciously is more important than winning itself.”

“CYO is not just basketball,” says Father Joseph P. LaMorte, vicar general and chancellor of the Archdiocese of New York and a former pastor in Poughkeepsie and Garnerville. “In addition to teaching sportsmanship and fair play, its many programs build character and maturity. At the parishes in which I have served, I was always grateful for the presence of the CYO.”

The program’s values are not just taught on the court. “CYO promotes community by having players attend Mass together, collect food for the needy and prepare dinner at a local soup kitchen,” says John Hannaway, CYO coordinator at Sts. John and Paul Parish in Larchmont. “It shows that the Church and the parish are worthy focal points for our activities.”

Every Catholic child needs this sort of education, but not every child plays basketball. For this reason, CYO New York is going through some changes. “We’re taking our values and expanding our programs to allow other kids the opportunity to participate,” says Seth Pelosi, interim director.

For children interested in running, the track programs currently serve 2,500 boys and girls in seven counties. “Our track and field archdiocesan championships take place at Carl Icahn Stadium on Randall’s Island, and we have regional cross-country meets at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx,” Pelosi says. “The teams have also competed at Walt Disney World in Orlando. We’re hoping to expand into more counties in the next couple of years.”

Since most racing events, unlike basketball, are individual, there’s no sitting on the bench; every kid gets to run and work on individual accomplishments while also being part of a team. “It doesn’t matter what place they finish,” writes Stefan Anikewich, the volunteer coach for CYO Track Club, whose team has runners from all over Westchester and the Bronx. “We always look for the real wins: enthusiasm, hard work, attention to running mechanics, achievable goals, teamwork, good sports (woman/man) ship, community awareness and using a TON of heart.”

Few are aware that CYO also has programs for volleyball (in Ulster and Dutchess counties), bowling (on Staten Island), golf (in Ulster County and on Staten Island) and cheerleading (30 teams on Staten Island and in the Bronx). Beyond athletics, CYO sponsors Boy and Girl Scout troops, an annual art and essay contest, and chess programs in 30 schools.

“Chess is an area where we can expand our reach,” Pelosi says. “Its benefits – the development of logic and strategy skills – are also critical skills in life.”

Peloso looks forward to a future serving more and more kids. “We’re now embarking on a plan to determine how best to serve youth in today’s society,” he says. With all the negative influences in our current tech-dominated culture, that’s good news for parents. *

For more information, visit cyony.org. For information on how to start a new program in your parish or region, contact Seth Pelosi at Seth.Peloso@archny.org or 646-794-2050.