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Vatican to enlist Christian all-stars to help scandal-ridden sports

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — In an effort to flex its moral muscle in the professional sports arena, the Vatican has invited top-tier Christian athletes Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin to help bring ethical values back to a scandal-ridden world of sports.

The Pontifical Council for Culture is planning to host an international conference on re-instilling values in sports this spring, inviting representatives from top world governing bodies like FIFA (the International Federation of Association Football), the International Cycling Union and the Italian National Olympic Committee.

Msgr. Melchor Sanchez de Toca Alameda, head of the council's "Culture and Sport" section, told Catholic News Service on Wednesday that pro sports "have become a commodity that is subordinate to the free market and, therefore, to profit."

Instead of sports being an activity that builds important values, respects human dignity and helps shape the whole human person, "it has reduced people to merchandise," he said.

U.S. cyclist Lance Armstrong's admission to doping was just the tip of the iceberg, he said, since high-stakes commercial interests pressure almost every professional cyclist into the illegal practice. The world of cycling and soccer is "a world that is rotten," he said.

"We want to work with the big sports bodies to give new value to sports" and the upcoming conference -- titled "We Believe in Sports" -- will be one way to get that initiative started, the monsignor said.

The council will also have Catholic and Christian athletes in attendance, to give witness to how the

worlds of faith and sports can easily come together.

He said the council hoped its participant line-up would include two high-profile Christian U.S. sports stars: NFL quarterback Tebow of the New York Jets*, and NBA basketball player Lin of the Houston Rockets.

The goal of the conference is two-fold, Sanchez de Toca said.

First: "to help put healthy values back into sport and counteract the current market logic, because if the current state of affairs continues, all is lost."

Second: to help the church see sport as an important resource for future priests, Catholic schools, parishes and catechists.

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The former-modern pentathlete-turned-priest said the council also wants to hold a "Race of Faith" -- a 100-meter jog, shuffle or sprint up the Via della Conciliazione toward St. Peter's Square during the gathering.

"We want to see lots of cardinals in tracksuits, too," he said.

**An earlier version of this story listed the wrong team.*

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