**Let faith Grow… and the ball roll!**

**By Giovanni Abreu**

It feels as if it was only a short time ago when we were together in a field in south Birmingham, Alabama sharing the closing moments of a catholic leadership encounter for young adults and also sharing the beautiful game, Soccer or Fútbol as many prefer to call it. As part of the Encuentro Regional de pastoral Juvenil, we gathered on the last day of the retreat organized by SEPI to play the very first edition of the Copa Católica organized in partnership with Catholic Extension.

The anticipation was strong, 7 teams from different states across the southeast of the United States traveled to Alabama to take part in the tournament. All the players from each team participated fully of the retreat which started Friday and culminated on Sunday with the Copa Católica. Throughout the weekend the players had the opportunity to deepen their spirituality, learn leadership skills, and connect with one another and build relationships.

Sunday morning finally came, and the atmosphere was festive, teams had fans cheering, taking pictures, the players were ready and eager to start and let the ball roll. Then came the initial prayer, the starting whistle and the ball rolled.

What took place afterwards was a very passionate tournament, beautiful and artistic plays, many *golazos*, series of PK’s and much more. The format was a round robin with the 4 top teams progressing into the semifinals after two rounds, the semis and final were games that defied all odds, with both underdog teams beating the two strongest teams in the semis to book their place at the grand Finale! In a passionate and intense game, the team representing the Diocese of Nashville ended up defeating the team from the Diocese of Knoxville 2-1 to become the champions of the first edition of the Copa Católica.

It is all in our memories now, and in the pictures, and as I mentioned on the first sentence of this recount, it all seemed so short ago yet here we are getting ready for the second edition of the Copa Católica 2025! This time Atlanta will do the honor of hosting both the Encuentro and Copa Católica.

What a wonderful thing that this beautiful Fútbol event continued to be supported, providing the space and the occasion for a second time around, allowing our Catholic Latino young adults to gather in a safe space where they can share their love for Christ, His Church, and the beautiful game. Kudos to Catholic Extension Society and the Southeast Pastoral Institute.

This time 12 teams will have the opportunity to learn, grow and play at this year’s Encuentro Regional de Pastoral Juvenil. As in last time’s Encuentro the teams will fully take part of the program beginning Friday November 7th and ending Sunday morning November 9th with the tournament. Again, our main objective will be to provide the young adults with formation, providing a window for them to explore deeper into our Catholic faith, time and space to connect with their fellow players and friends from across the southeast. Each team will have the opportunity to participate in virtual sessions where formation and accompaniment will be offered in the months leading up to our Encuentro and Copa.

The excitement Is already there, young adults from different Dioceses in the southeast have already reached out asking for details and at SEPI’s Easter Book reveal workshop this last February in Saint Augustine FL, the Copa Católica was officially announced by Catholic Extension’s Veronica Avila. I have heard that some young adults have already started meeting up to brush up their skills. With 12 available spaces for teams now in the roster the table is set for an even more passionate and joyful Copa Católica this coming fall in Atlanta, GA.

They say Fútbol is the beautiful game, some say it is because of its inherent simplicity, its accessibility, you don’t need anything but a ball and some space, sometimes neither, any object can serve as a ball, any space can serve as a field, others say it is because of the passion and artistry it inspires. All this can apply as true, but I would add that Fútbol is the beautiful game because of the power it has to unite us as one, because it connects us and promotes a feeling of community, of belonging, awakening a feeling of hope in us. Fútbol is a great tool for unity.

Perhaps Fútbol most of the times is not even about the game, it’s about the player, the human being whom you play with. Some of my longtime friends whose friendships are dear to me I met kicking a ball. Trying to follow our faith’s teaching that the dignity of the human person is above all, we hope this coming November, the Copa Católica brings hope, joy and dignity through the game and formation offered to our young adult Latino communities from across the Southeast and beyond.

Who will take home the Copa Católica? We shall know in November, when we let faith grow and the ball roll... see you on the field!