



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE ITALIAN NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

Clementine Hall

Monday, 17 December 2012

Dear Friends,

I am very pleased to receive you, the Leaders of the Italian National Olympic Committee and, above all, you athletes who represented Italy at the recent Olympic Games in London. I cordially greet you, beginning with the President of CONI, Dr Giovanni Petrucci, whom I thank for his courteous and convincing words to me on behalf of all. You participated this past summer in the greatest international sports competition: the Olympic Games. You competed at that venue with other athletes who came from nearly every country in the world. You competed in the field of athletics and of technical skill — but eventually — in the area of human qualities, displaying your gifts and talents, acquired with great commitment, rigorous preparation, consistent training and the awareness of your own limits. Far from the spotlight, you followed a strict regimen and several of you saw your merit recognized: I believe that you won 28 medals at London, and eight of them gold! However, you athletes are not only required to compete and win. Every sporting activity, whether amateur or professional, requires integrity in competition, respect for one's body, a sense of solidarity and unselfishness, and then joy, pleasure and celebration. All this presupposes a path of authentic human maturation, made up of self-denial, tenacity, patience and — above all — humility, which receives no applause but is the secret of victory.

Any sport that aims to be worthwhile for the one who practices it must always be at the service of the person. At stake therefore is not only respect for the rules, but the vision of the person, who does sports and simultaneously is in need of education, spirituality and transcendent values. Sports, in fact, are an instructive and cultural good, able to reveal man to himself and bring him closer to understanding his life's profound worth. The [Second Vatican Ecumenical Council](#) spoke of sports in its Pastoral Constitution [*Gaudium et Spes*](#), in the broad framework of the relations between the Church and the modern world, and places sports in the cultural sector, namely, in the context in which the ability to interpret life, the person and relations is displayed. The Council

wished that sports would contribute to improve man's spirit, that people would enrich themselves with a mutual understanding, help to create a harmony of feeling, foster friendly relations between people of all classes, countries, and races (cf. n. 61). In sum, a sports culture is founded on the primacy of the human person; sports at the service of man and not man at the service of sports.

The Church is interested in sports because she has man — the whole man — at heart, and she realizes that games effect education, on the formation of the person, on relationships and on spirituality. Playing fields and sports areas in parish recreation centres and in youth centres prove this; the Christian-inspired sports associations — a gymnasium of humanity — illustrate this . These are meeting-places in which to nurture that strong love of life and of the infinite that exists in adolescents and young people. The athlete who lives his/her practice fully becomes conscious of God's plan for their life, learning to hear his voice in the long period of training. Thus, athletes learn to recognize him in the face of their teammates and in their opponents! The experience of sports can “contribute to answering the fundamental questions the new generations are asking about the meaning of life, its purpose and its goal” (John Paul II, *Discourse to the Italian Sports Centre, 26 June 2004*, n. 2), when it is lived in its fullness; it can teach human values and it encourages opening to the transcendent. Therefore I am thinking of you, dear athletes, as champion-witnesses, with a mission to accomplish: may you be good models to imitate for all who admire you. Yet, you too, dear directors, coaches and trainers — the various workers in sports — are called to be witnesses to a good humanity, co-workers with families and formative institutions for the education of the young, teachers of a sports routine that should be ever loyal and transparent. The pressure to obtain important results must never push anyone to take shortcuts, as in the case of doping. Let the same team spirit serve as a spur to avoid these dead-end streets, but also as a support for those who realize they have made a mistake, so that they may feel accepted and helped.

Dear friends, in this *Year of the Faith* I would like to emphasize that sports can also help to educate the person in spiritual “competition”, that is, to resolve live everyday seeking to make good triumph over evil, truth over dishonesty, love over hatred, above all in oneself. Then thinking about the commitment to the New Evangelization, the world of sports can also be considered a modern “courtyard of the Gentiles”, that is, a precious opportunity for meeting that is open to all, believers and non-believers alike, where there is the experience of joy and also the effort to converse with people of a different culture, language and religious affiliation.

I would like to finish by calling to mind the radiant figure of Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati: a youth who combined passion for sports — he especially loved mountain-climbing — with passion for God. Dear athletes, I invite you to read his biography: Bl. Pier Giorgio shows us that to be Christians means to love life, nature, and above all, our neighbour, particularly those in difficulty. I wish each of you the greatest joy — may you improve and succeed day after day loving ever a bit more. We seek this from the Lord Jesus as a gift for this Christmas. I thank you for coming and I bless you all and your families from my heart. Thank you.

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