



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MANAGERS, PLAYERS AND SUPPORTERS
OF THE ROMA SPORTS ASSOCIATION***

Thursday, 30 November 2000

1. I am pleased to receive you, dear "Romanisti" friends - managers, athletes and supporters - who form the Roma Sports Association. I greet you with affection and I congratulate you on your decision to celebrate the Jubilee together as one big family.

I extend a special greeting to Dr Francesco Sensi, President of your association, who organized this spiritual initiative, and I thank him for his kind words expressing the sentiments you share.

Your association wanted to take the name "Roma", to be identified in a way with the rich and glorious history of our city. You know that it is a history especially of holiness: the martyrdom of Peter and Paul was followed by that of many other witnesses; down the centuries numerous saints were also born or lived in Rome. Rome, moreover, as the See of Peter's Successor, "presides in charity" (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 1, 1).

The fact that your association is named Roma means that you, dear "Romanisti", have a special duty to live the Christian faith coherently; it is an invitation to bear daily witness to Gospel love in your surroundings. We could say that the Lord is telling you, as he does every believer living in Rome, what he said to St Paul: "You must bear witness [to me] also at Rome" (*Acts* 23: 11).

2. You are asked to bear this faithful witness especially in sport, which has become one of the characteristic phenomena of our time. Sport concerns and involves vast crowds, especially through the communications media, thus becoming a worldwide event in which different nations and cultures find themselves joined in one festive experience. It is precisely for this reason that sport can promote the building of a more fraternal and united world, thus helping to overcome situations of reciprocal misunderstanding between individuals and peoples.

If played as they should be, sports become a kind of asceticism, an ideal context for practising many virtues. Some of these virtues were clearly stressed by my venerable Predecessor, Pope Pius XII: "*Fair play*, which forbids resorting to subterfuges, *docility* and *obedience* to the wise directions of whoever is guiding the team exercise, a *spirit of self-denial* when it is necessary to stay on the sidelines for the good of one's 'colours', *fidelity to one's commitments*, *modesty in triumphs*, *generosity* towards the defeated, *serenity* in misfortune, *patience* with a not always fair audience, *justice*, if competitive sport is linked to freely negotiated financial interests, and, in general, *chastity* and *temperance* already recommended by the ancients themselves" (*Address to the Italian Sports Centre*, 5 October 1955).

Sport, however, becomes an alienating phenomenon when the performance of skill and physical strength results in idolatry of the body; when exaggerated competition leads to regarding one's opponent as an enemy to be humiliated; when the enthusiasm of fans prevents an objective evaluation of the person and events and, above all, when it degenerates into violence. A predominating commercial interest, moreover, can turn sports into a mere search for profit.

Another aspect not to be overlooked is that, due to the way sporting events are currently organized, the proper sanctification of Sunday is sometimes not easy for the faithful, while for families it becomes more difficult to spend moments of beneficial relaxation together.

3. As for football, this is an activity that can be enjoyed by everyone, from children to adults. Because of its ability to bring people together, it offers appreciated entertainment in a general atmosphere of festivity. Due to its popular nature, football is able to express many expectations and to offer healthy recreation to individual enthusiasts and to entire families.

Sometimes, however, it becomes an occasion for clashes with disturbing episodes of intolerance and aggressiveness, and leads to serious displays of violence. How important it is, then, to remember the proper respect for the ethics of sport! How pressing is the responsibility of managers, athletes, reporters and fans! I am thinking especially of the responsibility that athletes have towards their spectators, especially young people, who look at them as models to imitate. By their example they can communicate a message of high human and spiritual value. Misconduct, on the other hand, causes damaging effects that, unfortunately, are amplified with an unforeseeable negative impact. We must always be aware of this.

4. Friends of the Roma Sports Association! May your Jubilee help you to understand, through the metaphor of sport, the demands of the spiritual life. Life, St Paul reminds us, is like a race in the stadium, where everyone participates. But while in a race there is only one winner, in the race of life all can and must be victorious. And to do so we must be moderate in all things, keep our eyes on the goal, realize the sacrifice and continually train in avoiding evil and doing good. In this way, with the help of God, we will victoriously reach the heavenly goal.

May Mary, whom you invoke in the chapel of your sports centre as *Salus Populi Romani*, assist you in this match that lasts a lifetime; may she protect you, your families and all the "Romanisti". For my part, I bless each of you and all who have joined you for this Jubilee celebration.

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