

FOOTBALL CAN BE MORE THAN JUST ENTERTAINMENT

Text of the speech given by the Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, during the radio program 'Towards Sunday' of June 3, 1978.

When one looks at the newspapers or in radio and TV programs these days (June 1978), one can easily see that one subject dominates: the World Cup in football. In 1970, 700 million people watched the World Cup Games on television; this year it will certainly be more. Football has become a global event which has brought men from all around the world across all boundaries into one and the same 'place for the soul', where they are united by hopes, anxieties, passions and joy. Hardly any other event on earth can achieve a similar widespread effect.

That shows that it must address something primal in men and leads us to ask where the power of sport lies. The pessimist will say, it is like it was in ancient Rome. The word for the masses was '*panem et circenses*' -bread and circuses. Food and play make up the lifestyle of a decadent society which knows of no higher goal.

But even when one accepts this, it is not enough. One must then ask: What is the fascination of play that it can have equal importance as food? One can answer that by looking back at ancient Rome, in which the cry for bread and circuses was really the expression of a desire for a paradisiacal life, for a life of satiety without effort, and of fulfilled leisure. Because that is what play means: action, that is truly free - without a goal and without a need to do it - while harnessing and fulfilling all of one's personal forces.

In this sense, sport becomes a sort of foretaste of Paradise: a stepping out of the slavish earnestness of our daily life and its concerns into the free seriousness of something that should not be serious and is therefore beautiful. In that way sport overcomes daily life. But it has another character, especially with children: It is a training for life. It symbolizes life itself carried forward in freeform manner.

It seems to me the fascination of football consists of the fact that it unites both aspects in a very persuasive manner. It compels a man to take himself in hand so that through training, he may gain control over himself; through control, mastery; and through mastery, freedom. It also teaches him, however, a disciplined cooperation with others. In team play, he learns to put his individuality in the service of the whole. Sport unites people in a common goal: the success and failure of each one lies in the success or failure of everyone.

And finally, sport teaches fair competition, in which the rules of the game, which everyone mutually supports, binds and unites the competitors. The freedom of playfulness, when everything is played as it should, the seriousness of competition, resolves into the freedom of a completed game.

In watching a game, the spectator identifies himself with the game and the players. He feels himself part of both the team play and the competition, he participates in the players' seriousness and in their freedom of action. The players become a symbol of his own life; and that works vice-versa. The players know that the spectators are seeing themselves represented in them, being affirmed by them.

Of course, all of this can be spoiled by commercialism, which casts the grim pall of money over everything, and changes sport into an industry which can produce an unreal world of horrifying dimensions.

But this illusory world cannot exist when sport is based on positive values: as training for life and as a stepping over from our daily life in the direction of our lost Paradise.

In both cases however, it means to find a discipline for freedom, to train oneself to follow the rules of teamwork, of competition and of self-discipline. Perhaps if we think of these, we can learn from sport to live anew.

Because sport makes fundamentals visible: Man does not live by bread alone. Yes, the material world is only the preliminary stage for the truly human, the world of freedom. But that freedom is based on rules, on the discipline of teamwork and fair competition, independent of outward success or arbitrariness, and is thereby truly free. Sport as life. If we look at it profoundly, then the phenomenon of a football-crazy world can give us more than sheer entertainment.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger