

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE MEMBERS OF THE
ITALIAN SPORTS CENTRE

Clementine Hall

11 May 2019

Dear friends of the Italian Sports Centre,

I am pleased to see you today, actually to see you again, after our meeting five years ago of which I have a good memory. I greet your President, who I thank for his words, and the Directors. And I greet all of you, boys and girls, and your coaches, referees and educators. You are celebrating the 75th anniversary of your association, which has more than 1,200,000 members and brings together numerous clubs and sports associations, as well as members and affiliated parish groups and oratories, present in every part of Italy.

The competitions and the activities that you organize, aimed particularly at young people, but open to all age groups, embrace a large number of different subjects, more than one hundred! I am not even capable of identifying such a large number of different subjects, and this allows me to imagine the diversity of your proposals and the immense fantasy of the world of sport, where everyone can find the specialty they feel most comfortable with.

It is through this great commitment to sports animation that the Italian Sports Centre carries out its mission, that of offering young people, through sport, a healthy and positive lifestyle, based on the Christian vision of the person and society. Sports, in fact, is a great school, on the condition that the self-control and respect for others is practiced, in a commitment to improve oneself, that teaches dedication and perseverance, and in a competitive spirit that does not make you lose your smile and also trains you to accept defeats.

A great lesson in sport, which also helps us face the daily fatigue of study and work as well as relationships with others, is that you can only have fun in a *framework of very precise rules*. In fact, if in a race someone refuses to respect the offside rule, or to start before the “go” signal, **o in uno slalom saltasse qualche bandierina**, there would be no competition, but only individual and disorderly performances. On the contrary, when you face a competition, you learn that rules are essential to live together; that happiness is not found in unruliness, but in pursuing your goals faithfully; and you also learn that you no longer feel free when you have no limits, but when, with your own limits, you give your best. We must be masters of our limits and not slaves to our limits.

These are the horizons that open in the world of sports, many being beneficial effects, for yourselves and the society as a whole, of a sporting practice lived as an opportunity for gathering, growth and brotherhood. That is why in your *Statute* it is said that the Italian Sports Centre intends to testify the value of sport as a tool to promote hospitality, health, employment, equal opportunities, safeguarding the environment, the protection of children and adolescents, cohesion and social integration (cfr *Premessa*).

They might ask how can you hope that sport can be a tool to resolve so many problems, and how to achieve a profound transformation of our society. We can say that sport can do this because it can better the person, and can foster a culture of dialogue and respectful encounter. The fight with the opponents in competitions should always be defined as a “meeting” and never a “clash”, because in the end, although it is better to win, in a way you both win. This is the world we dream of and that we want to build with determination on the basis of healthy competition, which always sees in the opponent as a friend and a brother.

This is the heart of the Christian vision of man, which for you is also the basis of sporting activity. With this attitude and a heart so big, any sporting activity can be called a game. Children play; play is the activity of joy, always. Only on this basis can we achieve such high and beautiful ideals. Perhaps you children will ask me: "Father, what would this Christian vision of life be that you propose to us? Is it perhaps an abstract principle, or a concept that can be understood after having studied it a lot? No! You can't study this! The Christian vision means learning to look at others and things with the very eyes of Jesus: with the eyes of God, with the same eyes in which God looks at me; seeing how he saw Jesus, seeing how he sees God. It means listening to his words to understand his feelings and try to imitate his gestures. Be assured: from the Gospel comes a more beautiful and just world, in which the diversity of others is not a reason for division, but for growth and mutual help.

I encourage you to live with this spirit in the oratories and parishes you work at, and to guard the faith that is given to you, which is the most precious good for your life. May you always be grateful to those who educate and accompany you, to the coaches, to the educators, to the parents and to your families. May you be bearers of hope in all the environments in which you find yourself living; and always be close to those among you who are weakest because of a disability, so that they may participate in the various activities together with others and never feel excluded. May you also accompany, with your friendship and active support, those of you who are involved in international voluntary sports projects, who are achieving in different countries and representing a precious sign for our time. This is free. Your activity must be inspired by generosity: give! It is for this reason that it is important for sport to keep an amateur dimension. It is very important because it preserves gratuitousness, the gratuitousness of being, of giving oneself.

I wish that you always live your associative life with joy and that you become missionaries in your daily environments, transmitting the joy of improving yourselves every day and always extending your friendly hand to those around you. May the Lord bless your journey, and may he also bless mine. Pray for me, and I pray for you. Thank you!

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