

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO SOCCER PLAYERS AND PROMOTERS
OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS MATCH FOR PEACE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Monday, 1 September 2014*

Dear Friends, good evening!

I am delighted to meet with you on the occasion of the Interreligious Match for Peace in which you will play tonight at Rome's Olympic Stadium. I thank you for readily fulfilling my wish to see champions and coaches from various countries and religions compete in a sporting event to bear witness to the feelings of brotherhood and friendship. My special thanks go to the people and organizations that have contributed to the realization of this event. I am thinking especially of "Scholas Occurrentes" which is part of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and the "PUPI Foundation".

The game this evening will certainly be an opportunity to raise funds in support of solidarity projects, but it will be above all an opportunity to reflect on the universal values that football and sports in general can foster: loyalty, sharing, acceptance, dialogue, trust in others. These are values common to every person regardless of race, culture and religious creed. Indeed, tonight's sporting event is a highly symbolic gesture to help one understand that it is possible to build a culture of encounter and a world of peace, where believers of different religions, while preserving their own identity — for when I said "regardless" this did not mean "setting aside", no. Believers of different religions, while preserving their own identity, can coexist in harmony and mutual respect.

We all know that sport, especially football, is a human and social phenomenon of great importance, one that has an impact on contemporary customs and mindsets. People, especially young people, look to you with admiration for your athletic abilities. It is important to set a good example both on and off the field. In sports competitions you are called to demonstrate that sport which expresses the joy of life, of games, is a celebration, and as such it must be appreciated through the recovery of its gratuitousness, its capacity to foster the bonds of friendship and strengthen openness between people. Also with your daily

behaviour, full of faith and spirituality, humanity and altruism, you can render testimony to the ideals of peaceful civil and social coexistence, for the edification of a civilization founded on love, on solidarity and on peace. And this is the culture of encounter: working for this.

May the football match tonight revive in those who are taking part the awareness of the need to commit oneself so that sports may contribute effectively and fruitfully to the peaceful coexistence of all peoples, excluding any discrimination of race, language and religion. You know that discrimination can be synonymous with scorn. Discrimination is a form of scorn, and you, with this game tonight, will say ‘no’ to every kind of discrimination. Religions in particular are called to be vehicles of peace and never hatred, for in the name of God one needs to bear love, always and only. Religion and sports, understood in this authentic way, can work together and offer to all of society eloquent signs of the new era in which “nation shall not lift up sword against nation” (cf. Is 2:4).

On such a unique and meaningful occasion as this match tonight, I want to deliver this message to all of you: expand your hearts as brothers to brothers! This is one of the secrets of life: to expand our hearts as brothers to brothers, and that is also the deepest and most authentic aspect of sports.

Thank you.

FRANCIS PP.

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