

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO MEMBERS OF THE SPORTS
ASSOCIATIONS FOR THE 70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE
FOUNDATION OF THE CSI (ITALIAN SPORTS CENTER)**

*Saint Peter's Square
Saturday, 7 June 2014*

Dear Friends from the Italian Sports Centre!

I thank you for your presence — there are so many of you! — and I thank the President for his kind words. It is a real sports festival that we are celebrating here together in St Peter's Square, which today is also serving as playing fields. And it is a very good thing that, instead of being alone, you wanted to celebrate your 70th birthday with the entire Italian sports world represented by CONI [Italian National Olympic Committee], and especially with the many sports associations. Congratulations! Now the only thing missing to celebrate the 70th birthday is a cake!

The biggest greeting goes to you, dear athletes, coaches and managers of the sports clubs. I am aware of and appreciate your commitment and your dedication to promoting *sports as an educational experience*. You, young people and adults working with the little ones, are, through your precious service, teachers in every respect. This is a cause for just pride and it is especially a responsibility! Sports are a means for education. I find there are three paths for young people, for children and little ones. The path of education, the path of sports and the path of work, when there are jobs for young people to start with! If there are these three paths, I assure you there wouldn't be dependencies: no drugs, no alcohol! Why? Because school leads you forward, sports leads you forward and work leads you forward. Don't forget this. To you, sportsmen, to you, managers, and also to you, men and women working in politics: education, sports and job opportunities!

It is important, dear boys and girls, *that sports remain a game!* Only by remaining a game will it do good for the body and spirit. And as sportsmen, I invite you not only to play, like you already do, but there is something more: *challenge yourself* in the game of life like you are in the game of sports. Challenge yourself in the quest for good, in both Church and society, without fear, with courage and enthusiasm. Get involved with others and with God; Don't settle for a mediocre "tie", give it your best, spend your life on what really matters and lasts forever. Don't settle for lukewarm lives, "mediocre even-scored" lives: no, no! Go forward, seek victory, always!

In sports clubs one learns how *to accept*. One accepts every athlete who wishes to join, they accept one another with simplicity and kindness. I invite all managers and coaches to be, above all, accepting people, capable of holding the door open to give each one, especially the least fortunate, an opportunity to express himself.

And you, boys and girls, who experience joy when you receive your jerseys, the sign of belonging to your team, you are called to behave like true athletes, worthy of the jerseys you wear. I hope you can merit them everyday through your *commitment* as well as your *hard work*.

I also hope you can taste the beauty of teamwork, which is so important in life. *No individualism!* No to playing for yourselves. In my homeland, when a player does this, we say: “This guy wants to devour the ball all by himself!”. No, this is individualism: don’t devour the ball, be team players. To belong to a sports club means to reject every form of selfishness and isolation, it is an opportunity to encounter and be with others, to help one another, to compete in mutual esteem and to grow in brotherhood.

Many teachers, priests and sisters began using sports as a way of bringing their mission as Christians and as human beings to fruition. I recall, in particular, a wonderful example of a priest, Fr Lorenzo Massa, who gathered groups of young people from the streets of Buenos Aires in a parish field and gave life to what would become a major football team.

Many of your sports clubs were born and still live “in the shadow of the Church steeple”, or in the oratories, with priests and sisters. It’s beautiful when a parish has a sports club; something is missing without one. If there is no sports club, something is missing. Yet a sports club like this needs to be well executed, in a way that’s *consistent with the Christian community*. If it isn’t consistent, better not to have one! Sports in a community can be an optimal missionary tool, where the Church comes close to each person and helps him or her to excel and to encounter Jesus Christ.

All the best, then, to the Italian Sports Centre on its 70th anniversary! And best wishes to all of you! I heard before that you made me your captain: thank you. As captain I spur you not to close yourselves on the defence: don’t lock yourselves into the defensive, but go on the offense, play together for our team, which is that of the Gospel.

I recommend that everyone get to play, not just the best, but everyone, with the advantages and the limitations that each has, indeed, focusing on the disadvantaged,

as Jesus did. And I encourage you to carry on with your commitment through sports for children from the outskirts of cities; in addition to footballs, you can give them reasons for hope and trust. Always remember these three paths: school, sports and job opportunities. Seek this always. And I assure that this road won't lead to drug or alcohol dependencies and other vices.

Dear brothers and sisters, we are at the eve of Pentecost: I invoke upon you an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. May he by his gifts sustain you on your journey and make you joyful and courageous witnesses of the Risen Jesus. I bless you and pray for you, and I ask you to pray for me, because I too play in my own game, which is your game, it is the game of the whole Church! Pray for me that I can play this game until the day the Lord calls me to himself. Thank you.

At the end of the encounter, the Holy Father said:

Now let us say a prayer in silence, everyone. Each of you think of your teams, your fellow players, your coaches, your families. And let us pray to Our Lady that she may bless us all: *Hail Mary...*

FRANCIS PP.

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