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Audience with Participants in the International Conference “Sport for all. Cohesive, Accessible and Tailored to each person” – International Summit to present the Declaration on Sport

This afternoon, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the International Conference “Sport for all. Cohesive, Accessible and Tailored to each person” – International Summit to present the Declaration on Sport, organized by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, together with the Dicastery for Culture and Education, in collaboration with the John Paul II Foundation for Sport in Italy, taking place in the Vatican’s New Synod Hall from 29 to 30 September.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Eminences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good afternoon!

I am pleased that we have this opportunity to meet and I offer a warm welcome to all of you, athletes, managers and officials participating in the International Summit on Sport. I greet in particular Cardinal Kevin Farrell – whom I thank for his words of introduction – Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, and Cardinal Ravasi, who is a pioneer of culture, even the culture of sport.

You have come from many parts of the world, representing various sports organizations as well as civil and religious institutions. You are inspired by a noble goal: promoting the notion of sport as something for everyone; sports that are “cohesive”, “accessible” and “fit for every person”. Without doubt, this is a weighty commitment, a challenge that no one is capable of carrying out alone. But you well know that in order to achieve lofty, arduous and difficult goals – *altius, citius, fortius* – it is necessary to play as a team, to work together, *communiter*.

The Church feels close to the world of sport, because she sees games and sporting activities as a place of

personal encounter for people, a formation in virtue and fraternity. For this reason, sports find a home in the Church, especially in schools and parishes or youth centres.

A sense of participation, sharing and being part of a group is fostered when sports are played in such a way that the person is placed at the centre and the joy of playing together is valued. Indeed, I like to remind athletes, including professionals, not to lose the flavour of the game and “to live” their sport while always preserving the spirit of being an “amateur”. This is important. The reality of play is fundamental, especially for the very young: it gives joy, fosters sociability and engenders friendships, while also being formative. Thanks to sport we can establish strong and lasting relationships. Sports create community.

As the limbs form the body, so players form a team and people form a community. Sport can be a symbol of unity for a society, an experience of integration, an example of cohesion and a message of concord and peace. Today we are in great need of a pedagogy of peace, of developing a culture of peace, starting from everyday interpersonal relationships and culminating in those between peoples and nations. If the world of sport conveys unity and cohesion, it can become a formidable ally in building peace.

I would like to address a word in particular to you athletes, who are a model for younger people. Unfortunately, in our societies a throwaway culture treats men and women as products, to be used and then discarded. The “use and discard” culture is widespread. As athletes, you can help combat this throwaway culture, with a sense of educational and social responsibility. How many marginalized people have overcome the dangers of isolation and exclusion precisely through sports! Playing a sport can become a way of personal and social redemption, a way to recover dignity!

Sport, then, should be considered and promoted as a life-giving activity. In fact, if organized well, it contributes to the formation of mature and successful personalities, and thus becomes an important aspect of education and socialization. Outside this context, it runs the risk of degenerating into a “machine” of business, profit, and consumer-driven showmanship, which produces “celebrities” to be exploited. But this is no longer sport. Sport is an educational and social good and it must remain so!

For this reason, we have a responsibility to ensure that sports are accessible to all. We must remove those physical, social, cultural and economic barriers that prevent or hinder access to sports. We should be committed to giving everyone the opportunity to play sports, to cultivate – one could say to be “trained” in – the values of sport and transform them into virtues.

It is not enough for sports to be accessible. Together with accessibility there must be acceptance. It is important that we find an open door, but also find people there to welcome us, people who hold the door of their hearts open to everyone and, consequently, help to overcome prejudice, fear and, at times, just plain ignorance. To welcome means to give everyone the opportunity to challenge themselves by playing sports, to measure their limitations and put their potential to good use.

In this way, finding the right sport for each person becomes easier, and each person can develop their talents, starting from their own situation, including frailty or disability. This is an adventure which you athletes know well, because none of you is a superman or a superwoman. You have your limitations and you try to give the best of yourselves. This adventure implies asceticism, the search for what perfects us and what makes us go farther. After all, at the root of this quest is the yearning for that beauty and fullness of life that God dreams of for each of his creatures.

Before concluding, I encourage you to strive to make sport a home for everyone, something open and welcoming. In this home, never lose the family spirit, for in this way, we may find brothers, sisters and friends in the world of sport. I am close to you in this mission; the Church supports you in this educational and social commitment. I bless you and your families with all my heart. And I ask you to please pray for me. Thank you!

