



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

ON THE OCCASION OF THE ATHLETICS WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS *Wednesday, 2 September 1987*

Dear young Athletes,

1. Thank you for this visit on the occasion of the *Athletics World Championships being held in Rome*. I am happy to meet you and welcome you in friendship, and I wish you every success in your demanding competitions.

I am happy to greet, and also thank in a particular way, the Council members of the International Amateur Athletic Federation, the Council of the Italian Athletic Federation, all the members of the International Sports Organizations, the leaders, the coaches and all the athletes from the 167 countries who are taking part in these Championships. A special word of welcome, prompted by happy memories of meetings similar to this one, goes to the sport veterans, all the participants in past competitions, who have come to the present meeting in order to honour sport and admire the achievements of the new champions. I also wish to greet the journalists and the representatives of the press and television, promoters of information and interest in the world of sport among people of all ages and especially among youth. A particular word of thanks goes to Doctor Primo Nebiolo for his kind address and the gift of the gold medal of the Championships. 2. This year's meeting coincides with the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the foundation of the International Amateur Athletic Federation. I would therefore like to express my cordial best wishes to the Federation and to commend you for your work. You aim not only to coordinate and develop athletic disciplines within the member countries, but you also strive to create, through international sports meetings, *opportunities for the fostering of friendship, brotherhood and understanding between peoples*. The Church gives willing support to such initiatives. The Second Vatican Council observes in this regard that people are enriched with mutual understanding also "by means of physical exercise and sport, which can help... to foster friendly relations between peoples of all classes, countries and races" (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 61). 3. We all know that sport is a highly disciplined exercise of the human body. It seeks to develop a person's physical faculties, such as strength, stamina, skill—all working together toward a harmony of movement and action. Through sport we try to attain physical excellence, by means of necessary training and practice. Its aim is perfection in a given event, as well as the breaking of significant records, as has already happened during these

competitions. However there is another dimension to sports activity. Sport is also an important *moment for guaranteeing the balance and total well-being of the person*. In an age that has witnessed the ever-increasing development of various forms of automation, especially in the workplace, reducing the use of physical activity, many people feel the need to find appropriate forms of physical exercise that will help to restore a healthy balance of mind and body. And from here arises that special interest and attention to sporting events, which today attract great masses to athletic competitions of every kind. This phenomenon exposes you athletes to considerable psychological pressures because people tend to extol you as heroes, as human models who inspire ideals of life and action, especially among youth. And this fact places you at the centre of a particular social and ethical problem. You are observed by many people and expected to be outstanding figures not only during athletic competitions but also when you are off the sport field. You are asked to be *examples of human virtue*, apart from your accomplishments of physical strength and endurance. 4. For this reason there are *certain values* in your life which cannot be forgotten. These values will set you on that clear track which has to be followed in order for you to reach life's ultimate goal. Primary among them is the *religious meaning of human existence*. Sport, as you well know, is an activity that involves more than the movement of the body: it demands the use of intelligence and the disciplining of the will. It reveals, in other words, the wonderful structure of the human person created by God as a *spiritual being*, a unity of body and spirit. Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall that moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of his creative work. As the Scriptures tell us: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Cfr. *Gen. 2, 7*). We are reminded then that even the laws of sport belong to a certain order, which is basically that of all creation. The observance of this order is the condition for success. May this truth never be overlooked or set aside in the world of sport, but may it always shine forth clearly. For athletic activity is never separated from the activities of the spirit. If sport is reduced to the cult of the human body, forgetting the primacy of the spirit, or if it were to hinder your moral and intellectual development, or result in your serving less than noble aims, then it would lose its true significance and, in the long run, it would become even harmful to your healthy and full growth as human persons. You are *true athletes* when you prepare yourselves not only by training your bodies but also by constantly engaging the spiritual dimensions of your person for a *harmonious development of all your human talents*. 5. My prayer for you, young athletes, is that you will always grow in respect for the authentically human values of sport, thanking God the Creator who has endowed you with extraordinary talents—talents that can be used to work for true peace and fraternal understanding among all peoples of the world. May your meeting in these days serve this worthy aim. I entrust to the Lord all your noblest hopes and aspirations and I invoke divine blessings upon you, your families and all the persons who are dear to you.

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