

THE HOLY FATHER
SPEAKS TO ATHLETES

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Do not purchase

NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE

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CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

Translation of an address by His Holiness, Pope John XXIII on April 26, 1959 to participants in the Sixth National Congress of the Italian Sports Center and to delegates to the Thirteenth National Congress of the Italian Federation of Timekeepers.

The spectacle you bring before Us today gives Us sincere satisfaction, beloved sons who are taking part in the sixth national congress of the Italian Sports Center, which met in Rome to discuss and to examine closely—under the guidance of your national leaders—the problems in sports.

In fact, in viewing such a distinguished assembly, which is like a triumph of youth and wholesome energy, We think of all whom you represent and who, like you, are engaged in the peaceful and joyful efforts of various athletic competitions.

We are also happy to welcome, together with you, many delegates to the 13th national congress of the Italian Federation of Timekeepers, to whom We also extend greetings, filled with consideration for their delicate task, which is accomplished by them with a watchful sense of care and responsibility.

Such a spectacle of freshness and strength is to Us a source of consolation because We truly rejoice in finding Ourselves surrounded by valiant youths who are the future hope of the Church and of civil society.

It makes Us happy also because We know that you wish to participate in sports with a Christian spirit, and to use them for the complete and harmonious development of your personality.

The theme of the congress of the Italian Sports Center, made ready by 30 years of fruitful activity and by numerous provincial congresses, has shown to Us clearly the program set before your good will: "Sound sports for a better youth."

The great value in sports lies in their particular effectiveness in building inner perfection which is developed through external discipline and attained when one's body is trained with constancy and seriousness.

We are happy to observe such spiritual value in the life of sports in our fortunate meeting of today, the first with you since Our elevation to the supreme pontificate.

We trust, beloved sons, that you will never forget that your efforts are not an end in themselves; that the body which you

use, and whose agility and harmony reflect a ray of the beauty and omnipotence of the Creator, is only an instrument which you must render obedient and receptive to the strong influence of the soul.

Your training exercises and your competitions, which are like serene interludes between the monotony of study and of daily labor, must aid the spiritual and immortal part of you.

Should they exercise a dangerous influence on this part; should your life of sports represent a danger to your souls rather than a protection, or be an obstacle in the accomplishment of religious practices, you would then find yourselves off course, like racers who because they did not plan their race properly, failed to finish first.

Sports still have first-class value for the exercise of virtues in your life. You constantly keep in training, so that your muscles may not lose their elasticity, freshness, or effectiveness. Such a constant preparation, though intended above all, to provide physical and technical excellence, must nevertheless have fruitful and lasting results on the soul, which thus becomes enriched by valuable habits.

In sports, in fact, real and strong Christian virtues can also be developed that God's grace afterwards renders stable and fruitful. In a spirit of discipline one learns and practices obedience, humility and renunciation. In teamwork and in competition one learns to practice charity, brotherly love, mutual respect, generosity and, sometimes, even forgiveness. In the set laws governing physical efficiency, one learns and practices chastity, modesty, temperance and prudence.

How fortunate you are to be able to practice these ancient virtues with youthful enthusiasm, without which you may indeed be an outstanding athlete but not a Christian one.

The spiritual value of sports is still drawn from the sense of temporality which—because of the search for constantly better performances—characterizes every competition.

In each sports season, as your specialized news reporters say, new records are made, achieved by the tenacity and courage of champions. Such experience, while placing you in the condition of never being satisfied with results obtained, has a very great pedagogic and spiritual value.

It teaches you that in the physical world, and particularly in the spiritual, one must never be satisfied with the level attained, but with God's help and good will, one must try always to

reach new heights and aim toward that continuous improvement which rises to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ.”¹

These are brief observations, simple thoughts that We offer you as aids in the fulfillment of your activity, which already unfolds on the shining path of the Faith and in obedience to the wise norms which Our predecessor, Pius XII, instilled in you on many occasions, from the time of the establishment of the Italian Sports Center.

Persevere therefore in such faithfulness, which is the guarantee of your success as sportsmen and of your happy future as Christians.

A high and stimulating goal is before you: preparation for the 1960 Olympic games in Rome. It will be an important event. We hope, God willing, on that occasion to welcome the athletes who will take part in the games.

In thinking of this coming event, We recall with pleasure Our visit to the ruins of Olympia, the city—universally famous—that lies in the pleasant valley of the Alpheus, with its picturesque hills, with the eloquent traces of its civilization and games.

While We were traveling through its remains—clothed in silence—the words of St. Paul to the Christians of Corinth strongly re-echoed in Our minds: “Do you not know that those who run in a race, all indeed run, but one receives the prize? So run as to obtain it. And everyone in a contest abstains from all things—and they indeed to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable.”²

What power these words attained there, words written for Greeks who, not too far from Olympia and fond of the renowned sports competitions, could understand their sense and their effective application! We repeat them to you today, knowing that in you they find fruitful ground.

You also run, you also strive—in stadiums, on track fields, in gymnasiums and in sports arenas. We repeat, therefore: Do not run only to win transient trophies, but also to gain imperishable victories written in the Book of Life.

1. *Eph.* 4, 13.

2. *I Cor.* 9, 24-25.

Take courage, therefore, dear sons. Always keep before you the goal to which all of us are called: the eternal life to be earned through good works and the practice of Christian virtues.

Furthermore, do not forget that, as members of a center which was born within the youth movements of Catholic Action, you have the duty of being apostles among your colleagues in competitions and training.

Be untiring in doing good, in spreading the good word of Christ, in making those who, unfortunately, are strangers, understand that only in obedience to Him and to His Church can be found true balance and power, complete esteem of the dignity of the human person, and protection from every exploitation and danger.

Be aware of the enlivening power of your Faith; be the good yeast that leavens the mass of the sports world.

Strive in peace and firmness so that movements contrary to the holy values of the spirit may not adulterate the healthy qualities of Italian sports.

We also address the same exhortations to you beloved sons who are members of the Italian Federation of Timekeepers, so that the beneficial services rendered by you to the sports world, may in addition to their technical nature, precision and responsibility, be fulfilled always in a spirit of love, sacrifice and generosity.

In this manner you will truly be deserving of the high esteem of the Church, and of the divine flow of grace upon your good and worthy activities.

We are with all of you, beloved sons, in extending our support, in encouraging you and particularly in praying for you so that, according to the Collect of today's Mass, "even amid the changes of this world, their hearts may always be fixed upon the true happiness of heaven."

As a pledge of the celestial gifts which We fervently invoke for you, We are happy to impart to you, your beloved families, your colleagues and to leaders of the Italian Sports Center and of the Italian Federation of Timekeepers, Our paternal apostolic blessing.

ADDRESS TO OLYMPIC ATHLETES

Translation of an address given by His Holiness, Pope John XXIII on August 24, 1960 to participants in the Summer Olympic Games in Rome.

This message is to express Our affection for you, the athletes taking part in the Olympic Games at Rome.

The colonnade of Bernini, holding you within its outstretched arms, seems to present you to Our gaze as you stand in this open space near the obelisk once erected in the center of Nero's Circus, where we know that St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles, bore testimony to his Faith.

In 1905, Our predecessor of immortal memory, St. Pius X, received the distinguished founder of the modern Olympic Games, Peter de Coubertin, and warmly encouraged the new enterprise. Moved by a similar feeling of good will towards you, We desire, first of all, to express Our deep joy at your coming. You have long been awaited, as We have previously remarked on other occasions in informal conversations, and We now bid you welcome. We were very glad today to come in from Castelgandolfo to convey Our greeting to your crowded and eager ranks in this place dedicated to St. Peter.

May this evening's happy occasion, which brings back so many memories, touch a chord deep in your hearts, so that, as a result, each one of you may have a higher appreciation of the dignity proper to an athlete and a truer perception of the underlying spiritual voice of Rome.

It is obvious that We cannot wish victory to every team or to each individual athlete. "May the best man win." But this is no obstacle to Our expressing the very strong desire that the contests of these days will benefit you all, and that from them, all, without exception, will be able to gain some advantage.

It is not the prize offered in the race but the correct exercising of the body that merits the higher esteem. Home life, indeed, and a proper tradition in the training and education of the young bid us be on our guard in athletic contests against giving exclusive attention to the body, as if to man's supreme good, and against a cult of gymnastics (such as sometimes happens) which can hinder the due carrying out of accepted

obligations. It is certain, however, that healthy bodily exercises and athletic contests of good repute should always be held in honor and strongly recommended. In fact, a number of qualities, which are endowments and distinctions of no little value, are fostered in man by means of athletics; with regard to the body, there are health, physical strength and agility, grace and beauty; with regard to the soul: perseverance, courage and the practice of self-denial.

Consequently, We are quite sure of this: During the Olympic Games you will give example of the kind of healthy rivalry which is a complete stranger to enmity and strife; in the contests you will display an enduring serenity and cheerfulness; you will be modest in victory, unruffled in defeat, resolute in difficult situations, and will show yourselves true athletes, giving to the great crowds of spectators further proof of the truth of the old saying: A healthy body possesses a healthy mind.

Moreover, before We send you away, We wish your thoughts to be directed towards the most splendid function which God has committed to Rome, whether in human affairs or in what concerns religion: for it came about in the admirable plan of Divine Providence that this city grew into the capital of that empire which strove to link together by the same civilization and the same bond of unity not only the Mediterranean people, but those also who possessed lands completely cut off from these shores.

This condition of things - particularly since it had introduced a wide network of communications and a common language - had, under God, this effect: The city of Rome was most appropriately established as the center of the Christian religion; and this same city, in keeping with such a lofty dignity, throughout the vicissitudes of history used all its strength and endeavors to bring to peoples all over the world the supreme benefits of the salvation of the Gospel charity and peace.

Anyone, therefore, who turns his gaze even briefly on Rome, is confronted by a number of ancient monuments and places which demonstrate the truth of this fact. Their message, lacking nothing of greatness, does not pass by men of true wisdom. That you may hearken readily to such a message is the earnest desire of the humble successor of Peter, who is now speaking to you.

Finally, reaching out with profound emotion to those of you, who, though divided by variety of race, are yet linked by the fraternal bond of your interest and purpose in the Games, We lovingly beg from Almighty God for yourselves and for your parents and those near to you a generous measure of heavenly gifts.

(Translation provided by NCWC News Service)