

*Message of His Holiness Pope Francis
to Participants in the International Conference on Sport and Spirituality
“Putting Life into Play”
Rome, 16-18 May 2024*

Dear brothers and sisters!

I offer a cordial greeting to all taking part in the International Conference on Sport and Spirituality *“Putting Life into Play”*, organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education and the Embassy of France to the Holy See.

The Apostle Paul more than once compared the spiritual life to an athletic competition and, specifically, to running a race (cf. *1 Cor* 9:24; *2 Tim* 4:7-8) whose prize is Christ himself. The discipline and self-control of athletes, as well as their spirit of healthy competition, have often served as images of the Christian life of virtue. Today too, this image can apply to all those who, in some way or another, strive in their daily lives to please God and to be his friends.

Sport plays an increasingly important role in our societies, shaping the daily lives and interests of many people. It is a way to use free time profitably, and it offers many opportunities to encounter others, to socialize, to build communities, to channel energies and to promote high ideals and aspirations, especially in the younger generation.

For this reason, the Church recognizes her need to be pastorally present in the world of sport and wishes to promote an education in the genuine values of athletic competition, purified of forms of egotism and purely material concerns. It is likewise important that the Church reflect upon the value of sport in relation to her own mission of proclaiming the Gospel and encouraging all those engaged in the world of sport to propose Jesus as “God’s true athlete” (SAINT JOHN PAUL II, *Homily at the Jubilee of Sports*, 29 October 2000). A number of statements by the Popes have enriched the Church’s reflection on sport, setting it on its broader human context, warning against the dangers of dehumanization and corruption, and encouraging athletic activity as a privileged place of encounter between people and fraternity among peoples.

In this spirit, the present Conference on Sport and Spirituality has chosen to focus on “sport beyond sport” and to explore the various ethical, social, cultural, political and spiritual values that it embodies. In offering you my best wishes for your discussions, I would like to leave you with a thought very close to my heart: namely, that you strive at every level never to lose the authentic spirit of “sportsmanship”. This will depend greatly on the quality of the spiritual life of all those engaged in this sector: owners and managers, coaches, technicians and athletes. Adults have a great responsibility in this regard: their conscientious example of fidelity to genuine human values is decisive for promoting healthy and formative sports environments, preventing misplaced approaches to competition and every form of abuse, especially those to the detriment of minors and the most vulnerable.

I thank you for your efforts and commitment, and I assure you of my prayers. Upon you and your respective activities, I invoke the Lord’s blessing.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 24 April 2024