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# **Sport as a Path to Holiness, According to Pope Leo XIV**

In a recent letter titled “Life in Abundance,” the Holy Father presents sport as a “school of life” in which we “learn that abundance does not come from victory at any cost, but from sharing, from respecting others and from the joy of walking together.”

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Sport is often used as a metaphor for the spiritual life. Saint Paul the Apostle encouraged the first Christians to strive for holiness using this image: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? Run so that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one” (1 Cor 9:24–25).

This Lent, these words of Josemaría Escrivá are particularly relevant: “A good sportsman doesn’t fight to gain just one victory, and that at the first attempt. He has to build himself up for it, training over a long period of time, calmly and confidently. He keeps trying again and again, and if he doesn’t succeed at the first attempt, he keeps on trying with determination until the obstacle is overcome” (*The Forge*, no. 169).

On the occasion of the 2026 Winter Olympics and Paralympics in Italy, the Pope has written a letter that we share in full below. Drawing on the legacy of saints such as Thomas Aquinas and John Bosco, Pope Leo XIV presents sport as a path toward unity of life “that integrates our bodies, relationships, and interior lives.” The Pope reminds us that training our souls and bodies has the same goal: life in abundance.

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## **Life in Abundance**

### ***on the value of sport***

Dear brothers and sisters,

On the occasion of the celebration of the XXV Winter Olympic Games, which are being held in Milan and Cortina d’Ampezzo from 6 to 22 February, and of the XIV Paralympic

Games, which will be held in the same place from 6 to 15 March, I wish to address my greeting and good wishes to those who are directly involved, and at the same time, take this opportunity to offer a reflection for everyone. Sport, as we know, can be very professional in nature and highly specialized. As such, it is a calling for relatively few people, even though it elicits the admiration and heartfelt enthusiasm of many who identify with the victories or defeats of the athletes. But sport is also a shared activity, open to all and salutary for both body and spirit, even becoming a universal expression of our humanity.

### *Sport and the building of peace*

On the occasion of past Olympic Games, my predecessors have emphasized how sport can play an important role for the good of

humanity, especially in the promotion of peace. In 1984, for example, Saint John Paul II, speaking to young athletes from around the world, quoted the Olympic Charter, which regarded sport as an important factor of “better understanding between each other and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better and more peaceful world.”<sup>[1]</sup> He encouraged the participants with these words: “May your encounters be a symbolic sign for the whole of society and a prelude to that new era, in which people shall not lift up the sword against another (cf. *Is 2:4*).”<sup>[2]</sup>

It was in this spirit that the Olympic Truce emerged. In ancient Greece there was once an agreement to suspend hostilities before, during and after the Olympic Games, so that the athletes and spectators could freely travel and the competitions could be held without interruption.

The institution of the Truce stems from the conviction that participation in public games (*agones*) constitutes an individual and collective path toward virtue and excellence (*aretē*). When we engage in sport with this spirit and under these conditions, it promotes the growth of fraternal solidarity and the common good.

On the other hand, war results from a radicalization of conflict and a refusal to cooperate with each other. Thus, the adversary is considered a mortal enemy, to be isolated and, if possible, eliminated. The tragic evidence of this culture of death is before our eyes — lives broken, dreams shattered, survivors' trauma, cities destroyed — as if human coexistence were superficially reduced to a videogame scenario. Yet, one must never forget that aggression, violence and war are “always a defeat for humanity.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Fortunately, the Olympic Truce has been proposed anew in recent times by the International Olympic Committee and the General Assembly of the United Nations. In a world thirsting for peace, we need tools that can put an “end to the abuse of power, displays of force and indifference to the rule of law.”<sup>[4]</sup> On the occasion of the upcoming Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, I wholeheartedly encourage all Nations to rediscover and respect this instrument of hope that is the Olympic Truce, a symbol and promise of a reconciled world.

### *The formative value of sport*

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). These words of Jesus help us to understand the Church’s interest in sport and the manner in which Christians approach it. Jesus always focused on people, cared for them and desired

the fullness of life for each of them. For this reason, Saint John Paul II affirmed that “man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission.”<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, according to the Christian perspective, the human person must always remain the focal point of sport in all its expressions, even those aiming for competitive and professional excellence.

Furthermore, a solid basis for this understanding can be found in the writings of Saint Paul, known as the Apostle to the Nations. At the time in which he wrote, the Greeks already had a long athletic tradition. For example, the city of Corinth sponsored the isthmus games every two years until the beginning of the sixth century B.C. For this reason, when writing to the Corinthians, Paul made reference to images of sport to introduce them to the Christian way of life. He says, “Do you not know

that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one” (1 Cor 9:24-25).

Following the Pauline tradition, many Christian authors use athletic imagery as a metaphor for describing the dynamics of the spiritual life; and even today this makes us reflect upon the profound unity between the different dimensions of human beings. While in past ages there were Christian writings — influenced by dualistic philosophies — that had a rather negative view of the body, mainstream Christian theology emphasized the goodness of the material world, affirming that the human person is a unity of spirit, soul and body. Indeed, ancient and medieval theology strongly rejected

gnostic and Manichean doctrines because the latter regarded the material world and the human body as intrinsically evil. According to their teachings, the scope of the spiritual life consisted in freeing oneself from the body and the world. In response, Christian theologians countered with the fundamental beliefs of our faith: the goodness of the world created by God, the fact that the Word became flesh and the resurrection of the person, restoring the harmony of body and soul.

This positive understanding of physical reality favored the development of a culture in which the body, united to the soul, was fully involved in religious practices: participation in pilgrimages, processions, sacred plays, the sacraments and prayer that makes use of images, statues and various figures.

With the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the sporting events typical of Roman culture — in particular the gladiatorial fights — progressively began to lose their social relevance. Nevertheless, the medieval age marked the emergence of a new type of sporting activity: the tournaments for knights. The Church also contributed to these games by reinterpreting them in a Christian light, as exemplified by the preaching of the abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.

During this same period, the Church recognized the formative value of sport, thanks to the contributions of figures like Hugh of Saint Victor and Saint Thomas Aquinas. In his work *Didascalicon*, Hugh stressed the importance of gymnastic activity in the curriculum of studies, thus contributing to the formation of the medieval educational system.<sup>[6]</sup>

Saint Thomas Aquinas' meditation on games and physical exercise gave primary importance to "moderation" as the fundamental measure of a virtuous life. According to Thomas, the virtuous life concerns not only work or serious responsibilities, but also time for games and rest. Aquinas writes: "Augustine says: 'I pray thee, spare thyself at times: for it becomes a wise man sometimes to relax the high pressure of his attention to work.' Now this relaxation of the mind from work consists in [diversions,] playful words or deeds. Therefore it becomes a wise and virtuous man to have recourse to such things at times."<sup>[7]</sup> Indeed, Thomas recognized that people play games because they are a source of pleasure and therefore they engage in them for their own sake. Responding to an objection, whether a virtuous act must be directed toward an end or goal, he observes, "Actions done for diversion are not

directed to any external end; but merely to the good of one who does them, in so far as they afford him pleasure or relaxation.”<sup>[8]</sup> This “ethic of play” elaborated by Thomas Aquinas had a remarkable influence on preaching and teaching.

*Sport, a school of life and contemporary forum*

The humanist Michel de Montaigne continued this long tradition when he wrote in an essay on education: “It is not a soul, it is not a body that is educated; it is a man: you must not divide him in two.”<sup>[9]</sup> This is the reason he gave to justify the addition of physical education and sport to the school day. These principles were applied in Jesuit schools, supported by the writings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, particularly from the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and the *Ratio Studiorum*.<sup>[10]</sup>

The work of great educators, from Saint Philip Neri to Saint John Bosco, also fits into this context. The latter, through the promotion of oratories, established a privileged bridge between the Church and the younger generations, also making sport a field of evangelization.<sup>[11]</sup> In this vein, we can also recall Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which stimulated the birth of numerous Catholic sports associations, thus responding on a pastoral level to the changing needs of modern life and emerging new trends. Here I think of the conditions of workers after the industrial revolution.<sup>[12]</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sport became a mass phenomenon. Further, the modern Olympic Games were born in 1896. Lay people and pastors devoted more careful and systematic attention to this reality. Beginning with the pontificate of Saint Pius X

(1903-1914), there was a growing interest in sport, demonstrated by numerous papal pronouncements. Through the voice of the popes, the Catholic Church proposed a vision of sport centered on the dignity of the human person, on his or her integral development, on education and on relationships with others, highlighting its universal value as a means of promoting values such as fraternity, solidarity and peace. The question posed by Venerable Pius XII in a speech addressed to Italian athletes in 1945 is emblematic: “How could the Church not be interested [in sport]?”<sup>[13]</sup>

The Second Vatican Council placed its positive assessment of sport in the broader context of culture, recommending that “leisure time be used to relax the mind and strengthen the health of the soul and body... also through exercise and sporting events, which help to

maintain the balance of the spirit and offer an aid to establishing fraternal relations between people of all conditions, nations and races.”<sup>[14]</sup>

By reading the signs of the times, the Church’s awareness of the importance of sport has grown. The Council represented a flourishing in this field: reflections on sport in relation to the life of faith developed, and a multiplicity of pastoral experiences in the field of sport revealed their generative power in the following decades. The Dicasteries of the Holy See have also promoted valuable initiatives in dialogue with this human endeavor.  
[15]

Two Jubilees of sport celebrated by Saint John Paul II were highly significant: the first on 12 April 1984, in the Year of Redemption; the second on 29 October 2000, at the Olympic Stadium in Rome. The Jubilee of 2025 followed the same

pattern, explicitly emphasizing the cultural, educational and symbolic value of sport as a universal human language of encounter and hope.

This perspective motivated the decision to welcome the *Giro d'Italia* to the Vatican. This great cycling competition is a sporting event, but also a popular phenomenon capable of transcending boundaries, generations and social differences, reaching to the heart of the human community on its journey.

At the same time, it is clear that sport was widely present in cultures beyond those of the oldest Christian tradition. Even those with only an oral tradition have left traces of playing fields, athletic equipment, as well as images or sculptures related to their sporting practices. Moreover, there is much to be learned from the sporting traditions of indigenous cultures, African and Asian

countries, the Americas and other regions of the world.

Even today, sport continues to play a significant role in most cultures. It offers a privileged space for relationship and dialogue with our brothers and sisters belonging to other religious traditions, as well as with those who do not identify with any religious tradition.

### *Sport and personal development*

Some social science scholars can help us better understand the human and cultural significance of sport and, consequently, its spiritual significance. A relevant example is research on the so-called “flow experience” in sport and other areas of culture.<sup>[16]</sup> This experience typically occurs among people engaged in an activity that requires concentration and skill, when the level of challenge matches or slightly exceeds their already acquired level. Consider, for

example, a prolonged rally in tennis: the reason this is one of the most enjoyable parts of a match is that each player pushes the other to the limit of his or her skill level. The experience is exhilarating, and the two players challenge each other to improve; this is as true for two ten-year-olds as it is for two professional champions.

Numerous studies have recognized that people are not only motivated by money or fame, but can also experience joy and rewards intrinsic to the activities they perform, namely by accomplishing them and appreciating them for their own sake. In particular, it has been observed that people experience joy when they give themselves fully to an activity or relationship, progressing beyond where they were. Such dynamics promote the growth of the person as a whole.

Furthermore, while engaging in sport, people often focus their attention completely on what they are doing. There is a fusion between action and awareness, to the point that there is no room for explicit attention to oneself. In this sense, the experience reduces the tendency towards egocentricity. At the same time, people describe a sense of union with their surroundings. In team sport, this is usually experienced as a bond or unity with teammates. The players are no longer focused on themselves because they are part of a group working towards a common goal. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasized this aspect when encouraging young athletes to be mindful of their teammates. For example, he said: “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.”<sup>[17]</sup>

When team sports are not polluted by the worship of profit, young people “put themselves on the line” in relation to something that is very important to them. This is a tremendous educational opportunity. It is not always easy to recognize one’s own abilities or understand how they can be useful to the team. Moreover, working together with peers sometimes involves dealing with conflicts and managing frustrations and failures. They even have to learn to forgive (cf. *Mt* 18:21-22). In this way, fundamental personal, Christian and civic virtues take shape.

Coaches play a fundamental role in creating an environment in which these dynamics can be experienced, accompanying the players through them. Given the human complexity

involved, it is a great help when a coach is guided by spiritual values. There are many coaches of this kind in Christian communities and other educational settings as well as at the competitive and professional elite levels. They often describe the team culture as one based on love, which respects and supports each person, encouraging individuals to do one's best for the good of the group. When a young person is part of such a team, they learn something essential about what it means to be human and to grow. In fact, "it is only together that we can become our authentic selves. Only through love does our inner life become profound and our identity strong."<sup>[18]</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to remember that, precisely because sport is a source of joy and promotes personal development and social relationships, it should be accessible to all who wish to participate. In

some societies that consider themselves advanced, where sports are organized according to the principle of “pay to play,” children from poorer families and communities are excluded because they cannot afford the participation fees. In other societies, girls and women are not allowed to participate in sports. Sometimes, in religious formation, especially of women, there is a mistrust and fear of physical activity and sport. Therefore, we must strive to make sport accessible to everyone. This is very important for human development. The moving testimonies of the members of the Refugee Olympic Team, or the participants in the Paralympics, the Special Olympics and the Homeless World Cup have confirmed this for me. As we have seen, the authentic values of sport naturally open up to solidarity and diversity.

## *Risks that threaten sporting values*

Having considered how sport contributes to personal development and serves the common good, we must now draw attention to the dynamics that can undermine these benefits. This occurs primarily through a form of “corruption” that is plain for all to see. In many societies, sport is closely linked to economics and financial interests. It is clear that money is necessary to support the sporting activities promoted by public institutions, other civic bodies and educational institutions, as well as private competitive and professional sports. Problems arise when business becomes the primary or sole motivation. When this happens, decisions are no longer based on human dignity or the best interests of the athletes, their integral development and that of the community.

When the objective is to maximize profit, what can be measured or quantified is overvalued to the detriment of the incalculable and important human dimensions: “it only counts if it can be counted.” This mentality creeps into sport when attention is obsessively focused on results and the monetary rewards that winning can bring. In many cases, even at the amateur level, commercial demands and values have come to overshadow the human values of sport that ought to be safeguarded.

Pope Francis stressed the negative effects that such dynamics can have on athletes, stating: “When sport is considered only within economic parameters or for the sake of victory at any cost, one runs the risk of reducing athletes to mere merchandise for the increasing of profit. The athletes themselves enter into a system that sweeps them away,

they lose the true meaning of their activity, the joy of playing that attracted them as children and that inspired them to make many real sacrifices and become champions. Sport is harmony, but if the excessive quest for money and success prevails, that harmony is broken.”<sup>[19]</sup>

When economic interests become the primary or exclusive focus, even professional and elite athletes risk focusing their attention on themselves and their performance, neglecting the community aspect of the game and betraying its social and civic value. Sport, on one hand, is an activity whose values benefit all those who take part and has the power to humanize interpersonal relationships, even in difficult situations. On the other hand, a disproportionate focus on money draws attention back to oneself in an explicit and reductive way. Here too,

we can apply the words of Jesus: “No one can serve two masters” (*Mt 6:24*).

A particular risk arises when the financial benefits of success in sport are prioritized over the intrinsic value of participation. The dictatorship of performance can lead to the use of performance-enhancing substances and other forms of dishonesty, and can cause participants in sport to focus on their own financial well-being rather than on loyalty to their sport. When financial incentives become the sole criterion, individuals and teams may also fall prey to subjecting their performance to the corruption and influence of the gambling industry. Such dishonesty not only corrupts sporting activities themselves, but also demoralizes the general public and undermines the positive contribution of sport to society as a whole.

## *Competition and the culture of encounter*

On a broader scale, sporting competitions can also play an important role in fostering unity among people. It is interesting to note that the word competition is derived from two Latin words: *cum* meaning “together,” and *petere* meaning “to ask.” In a competition, therefore, it can be said that two people or two teams strive together for excellence. They are not mortal enemies. And in the time before or after the competition, there is usually an opportunity to meet and get to know one another.

For this very reason, authentic sporting competition presupposes a shared ethical accord: the sincere acceptance of the rules and respect for the integrity of the contest. Rejecting doping and all forms of corruption, for example, is not

merely a disciplinary issue, but one that touches the very heart of sport. Artificially altering one's performance or buying results breaks the essence of *cum-petere*, turning the shared pursuit of excellence into the subjugation of individuals or groups.

True sport, instead, fosters a peaceful relationship with limits and rules. Limits are boundaries to be respected: they give meaning to effort, making progress measurable and merit recognizable. Rules are the shared "grammar" that makes the game itself possible. Without them, there would be no competition or encounter, only chaos or violence. Accepting the limits of one's body, the limits of time and fatigue, and respecting the established rules means recognizing that success comes from discipline, perseverance and loyalty.

In this sense, sport offers valuable lessons that extend beyond the playing field. It teaches us that we can strive for the highest level without denying our own fragility; that we can win without humiliating others; and that we can lose without being defeated as individuals. Fair competition thus safeguards a deeply human and communal dimension. It does not divide, but brings people together; it does not focus solely on the result, but values the journey; it does not idolize performance, but recognizes the dignity of those who play.

Fair competition and a culture of encounter apply not only to players, but also to spectators and fans. For many fans, the sense of belonging to one's team can be a very important element of their identity: they share the joys and disappointments of their heroes and find a sense of community with other supporters.

This is typically a positive force within society, a source of friendly rivalry and playful banter, but it can become problematic if it turns into a source of polarization that leads to verbal and physical violence. In this case, instead of being an expression of support and participation, fandom becomes fanaticism, and the stadium becomes a place of confrontation rather than encounter. As a result, sport ends up as a source of division rather than unity, and a negative influence rather than a form of education, because it reduces personal identity to a blind and oppositional sense of belonging. It is particularly worrying when fandom is linked to other forms of political, social and religious discrimination and used indirectly to express deeper forms of resentment and hatred.

In particular, international competitions offer a privileged opportunity to experience our

shared humanity in all its rich diversity. Indeed, there is something deeply moving about the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games, when we see the athletes parade with their national flags and in the traditional garments of their countries. Experiences such as these can inspire us and remind us that we are called to form one human family. The values promoted by sport — such as loyalty, sharing, hospitality, dialogue, and trust in others — are common to every person, regardless of ethnic origin, culture, or religious belief.<sup>[20]</sup>

### *Sport, relationships and discernment*

Sport began as a relational experience, bringing individuals together and introducing them to the stories, differences and affiliations of others. Training together, competing fairly and sharing the effort and joy of the game promotes encounters

and builds bonds that overcome social, cultural and linguistic barriers. In this sense, sport is a powerful facilitator of social relationships; it creates communities, educates people to respect common rules and teaches that results are not the fruit of a solitary journey. However, precisely because it stimulates deep passions, sport also has its limitations.

The educational significance of sport is particularly evident in the relationship between victory and defeat. Winning is not simply outdoing others, but recognizing the value of the journey, of discipline and of shared commitment. Losing, in turn, does not entail personal failure, but can become a lesson in truth and humility. Sport thus teaches us a deeper understanding of life, in which success is never definitive and failure is never the last word. Learning to accept defeat

without despair and to welcome victory without arrogance enables athletes to face reality in a mature way, recognizing their own limits and possibilities.

At the same time, it is not uncommon for sport to be invested with a quasi-religious dimension. Stadiums are perceived as secular cathedrals, matches as collective liturgies and athletes as saviors. This sacralization reveals an authentic need for meaning and communion, but risks stripping both sport and the spiritual dimension of their essence. When sport claims to replace religion, it loses its character as a game that benefits our lives, becoming instead aggrandized, all-encompassing and absolute.

In this context, there is also the danger of narcissism, which permeates the entire sporting culture today. Athletes can become obsessed

with their physical image and with their own success, measured by visibility and approval. The cult of image and performance, amplified by media and digital platforms, risks fragmenting the person, separating body from mind and spirit. There is an urgent need to reaffirm integral care of the human person; physical wellbeing cannot be separated from inner balance, ethical responsibility and openness to others. We need to rediscover those who have combined passion for sports, sensitivity to social issues and holiness. Among the many examples I could give, I would like to mention Saint Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925), a young man from Turin who perfectly combined faith, prayer, social commitment and sport. Pier Giorgio was passionate about mountaineering and often organized excursions with his friends. Going on hikes in the mountains and immersing himself in majestic landscapes allowed him to

contemplate the greatness of the Creator.

Yet another distortion of sport happens with the political exploitation of international sporting competitions. When sport succumbs to the mentality of power, propaganda or national supremacy, its universal vocation is betrayed. Major sporting events are meant to be places of encounter and mutual admiration, not stages for the affirmation of political or ideological interests.

Contemporary challenges are intensified by the impact of transhumanism and artificial intelligence on the world of sport. Technologies applied to performance risk introducing an artificial separation between body and mind, transforming the athlete into an optimized, controlled product, enhanced beyond natural limits.

When technology is no longer at the service of the person but claims to redefine it, sport loses its human and symbolic dimension, becoming a laboratory for disembodied experimentation.

Despite these dangers, sport possesses an extraordinary capacity for inclusion. When played correctly, it creates opportunities for participation for people of all ages, social conditions and abilities, thereby serving as an instrument for promoting integration and dignity.

Indeed, we see this realized in the experience of *Athletica Vaticana*. Created in 2018 as the official team of the Holy See and under the guidance of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, it bears witness to how sport can also be experienced as an ecclesial service, especially towards the poorest and most vulnerable. Here, sport is not about

putting on a show, but about closeness; it is not selection, but accompaniment; it is not exaggerated competition, but a shared journey.

Finally, we must question the growing assimilation of sport into the logic of video games. The extreme gamification of sport and the reduction of experience to scores, levels and replicable performance risk disconnecting sport from individuals and concrete relationships. The game, which always involves risk, unpredictability and presence, is replaced by a simulation that promises total control and instant gratification. Recovering the authentic value of sport therefore means restoring its incarnational, educational and relational dimension, so that it can continue to be a school of humanity and not simply a device for consumers.

## *A pastoral approach to sport for life in abundance*

An appropriate pastoral approach to sport stems from the awareness that sport is an activity that forms imaginations, shapes lifestyles and educates young generations. For this reason, it is necessary for particular Churches to recognize sport as an opportunity for discernment and accompaniment and to offer human and spiritual guidance. In this perspective, it seems appropriate that, within Episcopal Conferences, there should be offices or commissions dedicated to sport, where pastoral proposals can be developed and coordinated, bringing together the sporting, educational and social realities present in the various territories. Sport, in fact, unites parishes, schools, universities, oratories, associations and neighborhoods. By encouraging a shared vision, these offices can help

avoid fragmentation and enhance existing experiences.

At the local level, appointing a diocesan representative and pastoral workers for sport responds to the same need for proximity and continuity. Pastoral accompaniment of sport is not limited to moments of celebration, but takes place over time through sharing the efforts, expectations, disappointments and hopes of those who play daily on the field, in the gym or on the street. This accompaniment concerns both the phenomenon of sport as a whole, with its cultural and economic transformations, and the real people who are engaged in it. The Church is called to be close to the world of sport when it is played professionally, as an elite competition, or as an opportunity for success or media exposure, but also through a particular concern for grassroots sport, which often has a

scarcity of resources but is rich in relationships.

A good pastoral approach to sport can contribute significantly to reflection on its ethical dimension. It is not a question of imposing rules from outside, but of illuminating the meaning of sporting activity from within, showing how the pursuit of results can coexist with respect for others, for rules and for oneself. In particular, the harmony between physical and spiritual development should be considered a constitutive dimension of an integral vision of the human person. Sport thus becomes a place for athletes to learn to take care of themselves without falling prey to vanity, to push themselves to their limits without harming themselves and to compete without losing sight of fraternity.

Another decisive task is reflecting and implementing sporting practices

as open and inclusive instruments for communion. Sport can and must be a welcoming space, capable of involving people from different social, cultural and physical backgrounds. The joy of being together, which comes from shared play, common training and mutual support, is one of the simplest and most profound expressions of a reconciled humanity.

In this context, those who play must be recognized and accompanied. Their daily experience speaks of asceticism and sobriety, of patient efforts to improve, of balance between discipline and freedom and of respect for the rhythms of the body and mind. These qualities can illuminate one's entire social life. The spiritual life, in turn, offers them a perspective that goes beyond performance and results. It introduces the sense of exercise as a practice that forms the interior life. It

helps to give meaning to effort and to experience defeat without despair and success without presumption, transforming training into human formation.

All this finds its ultimate meaning in the biblical promise that gives this letter its title: life in abundance. This is not an accumulation of successes or performances, but a fullness of life that integrates our bodies, relationships and interior lives. In cultural terms, life in abundance invites us to liberate sport from reductive mentalities that would transform it into a mere spectacle or product. In pastoral terms, it urges the Church to be present and to offer accompaniment, discernment and hope. In this way, sport can truly become a school of life, where all can learn that abundance does not come from victory at any cost, but from sharing, from respecting others and from the joy of walking together.

*From the Vatican, 6 February 2026*

LEO PP. XIV

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[1] International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter 1984* (Lausanne, 1983), p. 6.

[2] John Paul II, *Homily*, Mass for the Jubilee of Sport (Rome, Olympic Stadium, 12 April 1984), 3.

[3] John Paul II, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps* (13 January 2003), 4.

[4] *International Meeting for Peace. Religion and Culture in Dialogue* (Rome, Colosseum, 28 October 2025).

[5] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), 14.

[6] Cf. Hugh of Saint Victor, *Didascalicon*, II, XXVII: ed. C.H. Buttner, Washington, 1939, 44.

[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 168, art. 2.

[8] *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 1, art 6, ad 1.

[9] M. de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, I, 25: ed. J. Balsamo et al., Paris 2007, 171.

[10] Cf. M. Kelly, *Catholics and Sport: A Historical and Theological Overview and Contemporary*

*Implications*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2014 IV, 567-568.

[11] Cf. A. Stelitano, A. M. Dieguez, Q. Bortolato, *The Popes and Sport*, Vatican City, 2015.

[12] Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (15 May 1891), 36.

[13] Pius XII, *Address to Italian Athletes* (20 May 1945).

[14] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 61.

[15] Cf. Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Oneself. Document on the Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person* (1 June 2018).

[16] Cf. M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety. The Experience of Play in Work and Games*. San Francisco, 1975.

[17] Francis, *Address to Members of the Sports Associations for the 70th Anniversary of the Foundation of the CSI* (7 June 2014).

[18] *Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps* (Ankara, Turkey, 27 November 2025).

[19] Francis, *Address to Members of the European Olympic Committee* (23 November 2013).

[20] Cf. Francis, *Address to Soccer Players and Promoters of the Interreligious Match for Peace* (1 September 2014).

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