



The Popes on Sport as a Tool for the promotion of Peace and Development (20th–21st centuries)

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INTRODUCTION

On the basis of archival sources, published contemporary sources and available literature, we can state that the attitude of popes Pius X (1903/14), Pius XI (1922/39) and Pius XII (1939/58) toward modern sport was far from being negative or dismissive. On the contrary, it can be said from the many messages, writings, audiences and initiatives of these popes that there was indeed a muscular Catholicism parallel to the muscular Christianity of the Protestants and Anglicans. The attitude of successive popes towards sport and physical culture has always been one of constant interest, openness and appreciation of its many potentialities, even in times when it was being exploited by ideologies. The fact that the muscular Catholicism supported by the popes until the 1960s of the 20th century focused almost exclusively on boys and men must be seen in a wider contemporary ecclesiastical and social context. Whereas the vision of Pope John XXIII (1958/63) still was very parallel to his predecessors, Vatican II and especially the Constitution ‘*Gaudium et Spes*’ about the Church in the modern world, would approach in its article 61 sport as an autonomous part of culture that could make an excellent contribution to spiritual balance, both in individual and in community life, and to the establishment of peace and development, fraternal contacts of all classes, peoples or races. Paul VI (1963/1978) would implement these visions. Besides in the 1960’s, the theological anthropology changed under the influence of existential phenomenology to a holistic view, in which man was seen as an incarnated spirit. These visions would be very obvious since the magisterium of John Paul II (1978/2005), followed by his successors Benedict XVI (2005/13) and Francis (2013-). In this contribution we will focus especially on those popes who elaborated the vision of Sport as a Tool for the promotion of Peace and Development, to know from Pope Paul VI onwards. A good guide to this research is *Giving the best of yourself: A document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person*, that was published by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life in 2018.¹

GIVING THE BEST OF YOURSELF: A DOCUMENT ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON SPORT AND THE HUMAN PERSON (2018)

Scrolling through the ever first official total document on sport, to know “Giving the best of yourself: A document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person”, that was published by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life in 2018, we get direct inside to those popes who elaborated the vision of Sport as a Tool for the promotion of Peace and Development, to know from Pope Paul VI onwards. The Document elaborates the theme of Sport as a tool for the promotion of Peace and Development on several places.

EQUALITY AND RESPECT (CHAPTER 3.8.)

Each human being is created in God’s image and likeness and has the right to lead their life with dignity and to be treated with respect. Everyone has the same right to experience and be fulfilled in the multiple dimensions of culture and sport. Everyone has the same right to promote their individual capabilities as well as respect for their individual limitations. This equality of rights for every individual does not mean, however, uniformity or similarity. On the contrary, because it also means respect for the multiplicity and diversity of human life with respect to sex, age, cultural backgrounds or traditions. This applies equally to the sports sector. It is understandable that there are specific differences of age in sports

¹ See <http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/en/documenti/dare-il-meglio-di-se.html> [accessed on February 4, 2022].

performance categories or that in most sports disciplines men and women do not compete against each other. People whose basic physical abilities deviate notably from the average expected ability, for example due to impairment, may be judged and evaluated differently. With all the attention on the multiplicity of conditions, talents and abilities, different categories of performance must not lead to hidden ranks or hierarchy of classifications or even to the airtight delimitation between different human groups. This destroys the feeling of the primary unity of the human family. What the Apostle Paul asks for the Christian community as a reflection of the body of Jesus Christ should be experienced in sport: "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you", or the head to the feet, "I don't need you". On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are in fact indispensable [...] If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is praised, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" [1Cor 12:21-27].

Sport is an activity that can and should promote the equality of human beings: "The Church considers sports as an instrument of education when they foster high human and spiritual ideals and when they form young people in an integral way to develop in such values as loyalty, perseverance, friendship, solidarity and peace".²

Sport is an area of our society that promotes the meeting of all humanity, and it can overcome socio-economic, racial, cultural and religious barriers. All people are equal because of their dignity as created in the image and likeness of God. We are all brothers and sisters who come from the same Creator. But our world still faces deeply rooted inequalities, and it is the task of Christians to address this reality. Sport is a space where Christians can seek to promote equality, because "without equal opportunities the different forms of aggression and conflict will find a fertile terrain for growth and eventually explode".³

There are many examples of how sport produces unity in society and equality between people. Many popular sports have campaigned against racism and have promoted peace, solidarity and inclusion. "Sports can bring us together in the spirit of fellowship between peoples and cultures. Sports are indeed a sign that peace is possible".⁴

SOLIDARITY (CHAPTER 3.9.)

The message of the Church about solidarity shows us that there exists an intimate bond between solidarity and the common good, between solidarity and the universal destination of goods, between solidarity and equality among peoples, between solidarity and peace in the world.⁵ Solidarity within a sports team refers to the unity that can develop among teammates as they strive together for the same goal. Such an experience provides all the participants with the feeling of personal attention and esteem. Solidarity in the Christian sense, however, goes beyond the members of one's own team. It may even include an opponent when they are on the ground and are no longer able to get back up without help. Here support and solidarity is required that no longer asks if the defeat of the other is their own fault or the result of an unfortunate sequence of events. Athletes, especially those who are most renowned, have an unavoidable social responsibility. It is important that they have more and more awareness of their role with respect to solidarity and that this be noticed in society: "You, the players, are exponents of a sports activity, which every weekend brings together so many people in the stadiums and to which social media devotes large spaces. For that reason, you have a special responsibility".⁶ Pope Francis clearly invites athletes to "get involved with others and with God, giving the best of yourselves, spending your life for what really is worthwhile and lasts forever. Put your talents at the service of the encounter between persons, of friendship, of inclusion".⁷ John Paul II exhorts people linked to sport to "promote the building of a more fraternal and united world, thus helping to overcome situations of reciprocal misunderstanding between individuals and peoples".⁸ Sport must always go hand in hand with solidarity, because sporting activity is called upon to radiate the most sublime values throughout society, especially the promotion of the unity of peoples, races, religions and cultures, thus helping to overcome many divisions that our world still experiences today.⁹

2 John Paul II, Address to a delegation of "Real Madrid Club de Fútbol" soccer team, 16 September 2002.

3 Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 59.

4 Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 8 July 2007.

5 Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church, n. 194.

6 John Paul II, Address to a delegation of "Futbol Club Barcelona" soccer team, 14 May 1999.

7 Francis, Address to the Italian Tennis Federation, 8 May 2015.

8 John Paul II, Address to a delegation of "A.S. Roma" soccer team, 30 November 2000.

9 Francis, Address to members of the European Olympic Committee, 23 November 2013.

A HUMANE AND JUST SPORT: PROMOTION OF HUMAN VALUES IN SPORT (CHAPTER 4.1.)

We have already spoken about the meaning dimensions of sport as well as its place in the search for goodness and truth. Like any other human reality, however, sport can be turned against human dignity and against the rights of people. The Church therefore raises its voice when it sees human dignity and true happiness threatened.

Promotion of human values in sport

Current developments in sport must be judged according to whether they proceed from a recognition of the dignity of the person and show adequate respect for others, for all creatures and for the environment. Furthermore, the Church recognizes the importance of the joy of one's participation in sport and the loyal coexistence of human beings. When the rules of sport are agreed upon at an international level, athletes from different cultures, nations and religions are allowed to have a shared experience of fair competition and joy, which can help foster the unity of the human family. By participating in sports, people can experience their embodied existence in a simple and positive way. By playing on a team, athletes recognize that the most satisfying experiences occur when the players have a strong bond with one another and play well together.

Sport at the service of humanity

John Paul II pointed out the "Relativity of sport with respect to the primacy of the human person, so that the subsidiary value of sport is emphasized in God's creative project. Therefore, sport should also be seen in the dynamics of service, and not in that of profit. If one keeps present the humanization objectives, one cannot help but feel the indispensable task of transforming sport more and more into an instrument of human elevation toward the supernatural goal to which it is called".¹⁰ This means that a pastoral plan has to give primacy to the human person, who has an admirable unity of body, soul and spirit. Sport must be promoted and practiced with the highest respect for the person and oriented towards his or her integral development. The athlete cannot be reduced to a mere tool to be used to achieve sports results which today are at times associated with significant economic and political ends.

CONCLUSION

With Pope John Paul II we can state that "The Christian attitude towards sport as towards the other expressions of the person's natural faculties such as science, learning, work, art, love, and social and political commitment is not an attitude of rejection or flight, but one of respect, esteem, even though correcting and elevating them: in a word, an attitude of redemption".¹¹ An attitude of redemption is present in sport when the primacy of the dignity of the person is respected and sport serves the human person in his or her integral development. As Pope Francis put it: "The bond between the Church and the world of sports is a beautiful reality that has strengthened over time, for the Ecclesial Community sees in sports a powerful instrument for the integral growth of the human person. Engaging in sports, in fact, rouses us to go beyond ourselves and our own self interests in a healthy way; it trains the spirit in sacrifice and, if it is organized well, it fosters loyalty in interpersonal relations, friendship, and respect for rules".¹²

¹⁰ John Paul II, Address to the participants in the National Convention of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 25 November, 1989.

¹¹ John Paul II, Homily in the occasion of the Jubilee of the Redeemer, 12 April 1984.

¹² Francis, Address to members of the European Olympic Committee, 23 November 2013.