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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 171013d

Friday 13.10.2017

Audience with the Special Olympic Athletes, participating in the “Unified Football” Tournament (13-15 October 2017)

At midday today, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Special Olympic Athletes participating in the *Unified Football* Tournament (Rome, 13-15 October 2017), as part of the celebrations marking fifty years since the birth of the international sports association.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Holy Father

Dear friends,

I welcome you with pleasure on the occasion of the football tournament and the forum organised by the Special Olympics. I greet you all with affection and thank the President for his words, as well as the young people who spoke. You are a symbol of a sport that opens the eyes and heart to the value and dignity of individuals and people who otherwise would be the object of prejudice and exclusion.

In these days you will have the opportunity to reaffirm the importance of “unified” sport, through which athletes both with and without intellectual disabilities will play together. This beautiful activity, which you carry ahead with commitment and conviction, nourishes hope in a positive and fruitful future for sport, because it ensures that it becomes a true occasion for inclusion and involvement. Never tire of showing the world of sport your shared commitment to constructing more fraternal societies, in which people can grow and develop, and fully realise their own capacities. In this sense, sport is one of those universal languages that overcomes cultural, social, religious and physical differences, and succeeds in uniting people, making them participants in the same game and protagonists together in victories and defeats.

The Church, for her part, never fails to support and encourage these initiatives, linked to the world of sport, which favour the good of people and of communities. In effect, sport always has great stories to tell of people

whom it has helped emerge from conditions of marginalisation and poverty, wounds and misfortunes. These stories show us how the determination and character of some can be a reason for inspiration and encouragement for many people, in all aspects of their life.

I hope you will spend these days in joy and serenity. Along with enjoyment, cultivate friendship and solidarity. As I ask you to pray for me, I invoke the Lord's blessing upon you, your families and those who support you in your sporting activities.
