



Life in abundance

Letter of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV on the value of Sport

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10)

In an important letter published today to coincide with the opening of the winter Olympics, “Life in Abundance”, Pope Leo XIV celebrates the value of sport as a cultural reality which enriches the lives of participants and spectators and contributes to the well-being of society.

Starting with a reflection on the significance of the Olympic movement, the role of sport in the advancement of peace as expressed in the commitment of the Olympic charter to foster better understanding and friendship between people with a view to building ‘a better and more peaceful world’ is highlighted. In particular, all Nations are encouraged ‘to rediscover and respect this instrument of hope that is the Olympic Truce, a symbol and promise of a reconciled world’.

Pope Leo XIV then proceeds to explore the significance of sport for human development – its privileged role in adding to the fullness and abundance of life. Sport can be seen as a ‘school of life’ which teaches values and often serves as a metaphor for human existence.

The concept of sport as a “school of life” suggests that athletic activity is not merely a physical pursuit but a profound educational and spiritual journey that shapes the human person in their entirety. Within this framework, sport serves as a laboratory for developing virtues, social skills, and emotional maturity that extend far beyond the playing field.

Sport is described as a path toward goodness and excellence (aretē), where participants learn to strive for the highest levels of performance while maintaining self-control – it fuses passion and discipline. Through regular practice, athletes cultivate training, perseverance, and loyalty, recognizing that true success is the fruit of a long and patient journey rather than an instant result.

Sport instils a certain maturity in athletes – they learn to handle victory and defeat. Ideally, they learn to win without arrogance or humiliating the opponent, recognising the value of the shared commitment; and to lose without being defeated as individuals, treating failure as a lesson in truth and humility and involving an acceptance, with hope, of human fragility.

Sport acts as a powerful facilitator of social relationships, teaching individuals how to move from self-centeredness toward fraternal solidarity. Sport teaches the importance of teamwork – the sense of unity in pursuit of a shared goal. Team sport imparts lessons in how to appreciate the diversity of each other’s strengths and a tolerance of weaknesses. At a more global level, sport which is a type of universal language, can create privileged opportunity to bring together people of different cultures, religions and ethnicities in a common activity which highlights the essential unity of the human family.

Pope Leo XIV also underlines that sport also has much to teach fans and spectators. Sport is one of the most pervasive cultural phenomenon in contemporary society. It can promote a sense of belonging and identity which brings joy, and at times heartbreak, to those who follow their team. This becomes problematic when it becomes a type of fanaticism which leads to polarization and even confrontation and violence. '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'. When fanaticism takes over, sport loses its capacity to promote inclusion.

Sport has always been linked with education and Pope Leo gives particular emphasis to this reality. Following the humanist tradition, sport is seen as essential because it is the whole person—body, mind and soul together—that is educated. It restores the harmony between physical well-being and inner balance, preventing the "fragmentation" of the person. When experienced correctly, sport becomes a form of asceticism, where the effort of training serves as a practice that forms the interior life.

The Holy Father also acknowledges that the value of sport needs to be defended and identifies some dynamics that could undermine its capacity to contribute to the abundance of life. He warns that sport's intrinsic value and beauty is lost when it is reduced to a "mere spectacle or product". When the "dictatorship of performance" or the excessive quest for money and profit prevails, the harmony of sport is broken. In such cases, athletes risk being treated as "merchandise," and the joy of the game—which is the heart of its formative power—is diminished and, ultimately, the public becomes disenchanted.

One of the novelties of the letter is that it emphasises the importance of pastoral care in sport as a true 'opportunity for discernment and accompaniment'. The Holy Father instructs the Episcopal Conferences to establish commissions dedicated to sport, thus strengthening the network that develops and coordinates pastoral care in this area.

Sport as a school of life teaches that "abundance does not come from victory at any cost," but from the joy of walking together, respecting others, and sharing the journey.