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Audience with members of the Italian Volleyball Federation

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the members of the Italian Volleyball Federation, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I thank the president for the words of greeting he addressed to me on behalf of the Federation and of all of you, athletes of the Italian national volleyball teams, male and female, adults and youth.

Together with the General Secretariat of the Italian Episcopal Conference, you are on a path to spread the educational values of sport throughout the country and in sports clubs, with an integral perspective that combines technique with the possibility of giving one's best, both in competitive activity and in life. Indeed, sport should always be at the service of the person and society, not the interests and logics of power.

I would therefore like to encourage you to continue on the journey you have undertaken, proposing some indications that I draw from the fundamental actions of your sport.

First of all, the *serve*, which is the first shot that starts the game. During the match, as in daily life, it is necessary to take the initiative, to assume responsibility, to get involved. Never stay still! Sport can help a great deal to overcome timidity and fragility, to mature one's awareness of being protagonists, without ever forgetting that "the dignity of the human being constitutes the purpose and measure of every sporting activity" (John Paul II, *Homily for the International Athletes' Jubilee*, 12 April 1984).

The serve is answered by *receiving* the ball. Just as one needs to be ready to receive the ball to send it to a determined area, it is important to be willing to accept suggestions and to listen, humbly and patiently. One does

not become a champion without a guide, without a coach willing to accompany, motivate, correct without humiliation, raising when one falls, and sharing the joy of victory. This takes people who are solid points of reference, capable of teaching how to “receive” well, identifying the talents of their athletes to enable them to bear fruit in the best possible way.

Then there is the *pass* towards the companion who has the task of completing the action. We are never alone; there is always someone to serve. There exists not only the individual dimension, but you are part of a group: each person is required to give their own contribution so that you can win together. Team players are like the members of a body: Saint Paul said that “If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honoured, all the parts share its joy” (*1 Cor 12:26*). In a world where we jostle to be seen and to emerge at all costs, where *I* comes before *we*, where the weak and unproductive are discarded, sport can be a convincing sign of unity, of integration, and can send out a strong message of peace and friendship.

The action of *attacking* is certainly decisive; it enables you to score points and to build victory. Sport must promote a healthy competitiveness, without giving in to the temptation to win by flouting the rules. Sacrifice, training, and rigour are indispensable elements of sport, whereas the practice of doping, besides being dangerous, is a deception, a deception that takes away the beauty and enjoyment of the game, tainting it with falsity and making it unclean.

To oppose the attack, you form a *wall*. This word makes us think of the walls present in various parts of the world, a sign of division and closure, of people’s incapacity to engage in dialogue, of the presumption of those who think they can save themselves alone. Instead, in volleyball, when you form a wall, you jump high to face the dunk of the adversary: this gesture helps us to think of the word in a positive light. Jumping up high means detaching oneself from the ground, from materialism and therefore from all the logic of business that undermines the spirit of sport. Money and success should never detract from the component of play, of fun. And this is why I strongly advise: never neglect the amatorial element of sport. Sport is either amatorial or it is not sport. This must be preserved very well, because in this way you preserve your pure heart.

Dear friends, thank you for this visit, and I urge you always to be witnesses of correctness and loyalty. Many young people look to you and support you: you are models for them, do not disappoint them! I hope you will play well while having fun, spreading the values of friendship, solidarity and peace both on and off the field. I heartily bless you and your loved ones. And please, I ask you to pray for me. Thank you!
