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Audience with the “Athletica Vaticana” Sports Association

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the “Athletica Vaticana” Sports Association, to whom he addressed the following greeting:

Greeting of the Holy Father

Your Eminence, Your Excellency,

Dear friends of *Athletica Vaticana*,

Good morning and welcome, also with your families! It is good to be with families, with children too.

I greet Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, who, with the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, I have asked to take care of the dialogue with sports enthusiasts so that they too “may know and feel recognized by the Church as people at the service of a sincere search for the true, the good and the beautiful” (154). I express my joy at the presence of *Athletica Vaticana* on the streets, the tracks and playing fields, and for your Christian witness in the great world of sport, which today represents the most widespread cultural expression, provided that the amateur dimension that safeguards sport is always maintained.

My grateful greeting also goes to the international and Italian sporting authorities who, with their presence, bear witness to the liveliness of the dialogue and collaboration with the Holy See.

It is significant that this meeting of ours takes place in the first days of 2024, which is the Olympic and Paralympic year. Thinking back to the value of the “Olympic truce”, my hope is that, in the particularly dark historical moment we are living, sport can build bridges, break down barriers, and foster peaceful relations.

With a style marked by simplicity, for exactly five years, *Athletica Vaticana* has been committed to promoting fraternity, inclusion and solidarity, bearing witness to the Christian faith among sportsmen and women, amateurs and professionals.

Dear friends, it is very significant that you try to do all this by sharing the lives of other sportsmen and women, running or cycling or playing together with them. The initiatives of *Athletica Vaticana* - from the simplest and most spontaneous ones to participation in international sporting events - acquire their full meaning as the expression of a community made up of women and men who, bound by common service to the Holy See, live their sporting passion as an experience of evangelization.

This is why, in addition to sporting activity, your association also proposes moments of prayer and service to those most in need. It is an integral part of your mission to be close – a key word - to the most fragile: I am thinking of initiatives with young people with physical or intellectual disabilities, with prisoners and detainees, with migrants, with the poorest families. And it is good that everyone participates in these meetings with the same dignity, including Olympic and Paralympic champions, diplomats and members of the Curia. I repeat the word “closeness”, a closeness that becomes tender with sport. Like God with us: God is close and tender, and therefore compassionate. *Closeness and tenderness*.

Sport is a means to express one's talents, but also to build society. Sport teaches us the value of *fraternity*. We are not islands: on the pitch, it does not matter where a person comes from, what language or culture they speak. What counts is the commitment and the common goal. This unity in sport is a powerful metaphor for our lives. It reminds us that despite our differences, we are all members of the same human family. Sport has the power to unite people, regardless of their physical, economic or social abilities. It is an instrument of inclusion that breaks down barriers and celebrates diversity. Even the Second Vatican Council emphasized that can help “to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races” (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 61).

Games then consist of *rules* to be respected. Winning with humility and accepting defeat with dignity are values that sport teaches, and which must be practiced in everyday life in order to build a more just and fraternal society. As the Venerable Pius XII said, “Sport is a school of loyalty, courage, endurance, resolve, universal brotherhood, all the natural virtues, but which provide a solid foundation to the supernatural virtues” (*To Italian sportspeople*, 25 May 1945).

Sport also shows us that we can confront our limits with patience and determination. Every athlete, through discipline and commitment, teaches us that with faith and perseverance, we can achieve goals we never thought possible. This message of hope and courage is crucial, especially for the young.

I encourage every one of you to see sport as a path of life that may help you to build a more united community and to promote the values of Christian life: loyalty, sacrifice, team spirit, commitment, inclusion, asceticism, redemption. Keep going, dear friends of *Athletica Vaticana*! And do not forget amateurism, which is the lifeblood of sporting activity. Always give the best of yourselves! I bless you from my heart. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!
