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The Pope receives the Villarreal football team: when you play, you also educate and transmit values

“Football, like other sports, is an image of life and society”, said Pope Francis this morning as he received in audience, in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace, the footballers, coaches and managers of the Argentine “Villarreal CF” team, scheduled to play a European League match in Rome this afternoon.

“In the field, you need each other”, said the Pope to the footballers. “Each player brings his professionalism and skill for the benefit of a common ideal, which is to play well in order to win. To achieve this affinity, much training is needed; but it is also important to invest time and effort in strengthening team spirit, to create that connection of movements: a simple look, a small gesture, or an expression communicate so many things on the field. This is possible if you play in the spirit of fellowship, setting aside individualism or personal aspirations. If you play for the good of the group, then it is easier to win. Instead, when one thinks of himself and forgets others, in Argentina we say that he likes to ‘eat the ball’ by himself”.

“On the other hand, when you play football you are at the same time educating and transmitting values. Many people, especially the young, admire and observe you. They want to be like you. Through your professionalism, you are communicating a way of being to those who follow you, especially the new generations. This is a responsibility, and should motivate you to give the best of yourselves, so as to exercise those values that in football must be palpable: companionship, personal commitment, the beauty of the game, team spirit”.

“One of the characteristics of the good sportsman is gratitude”, remarked the Pope. “If we think of our own life, we can call to memory the many people who have helped us, and without whom we would not be here. We can recall those we played with as children, our first teammates, coaches, helpers, and even the supporters whose presence encouraged us in every game. This memory is good for us, so that we do not feel superior but instead become aware of being part of a large team that has been forming for some time. This helps us grow as people, because our ‘game’ is not merely our own, but also that of others, who in some way form part of our lives. And this also strengthens the spirit of amateur sport, and must never be lost; it must be recovered every day, so that you can maintain this freshness, with this greatness of soul”.

Francis concluded by encouraging those present “to continue to play, giving the best of yourselves so that others

can benefit from these pleasant moments, which make the day different. I join with you, I pray with you, and I raise my prayers to God, imploring the protection of Our Lady of Grace and the intercession of St. Pascual Baylón, patron of the city of Villarreal, so that you may be sustained in your lives and be instruments to bear God's joy and peace to those who follow and support you".

He added, "It helps me a lot to think about football as I like it, and it helps me. But when I do so, I usually think of the goalkeeper. Why? Because he has to catch the ball from wherever they kick it, and he does not know where it will come from. And life is like that. You have to take things from where they come, and how they come. When I find myself facing situations I did not expect, which need to be resolved, that come from one place when I expected them from another, I think of the goalkeeper, and keep him in mind. Thank you".
