



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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Press Conference to present the International Conference on Sport and Spirituality – “Putting life into play”

At 11.30 this morning, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office to present the International Conference on Sport and Spirituality – “Putting life into play”, taking place from 16 to 18 May 2024.

The speakers were His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, Her Excellency Ms. Florence Mangin, ambassador of France to the Holy See, Dr. Emanuele Isidori, professor of philosophy of sport (University of Rome), and Dr. Arturo Mariani, Paralympic athlete.

Dr. Alessandro Tappa, board member of “Sport without Borders”, was present, and briefly presented the sporting event.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça

At first sight, observing a conference on sport organized by a Dicastery of the Holy See might seem a little strange. But starting from the words of Pope Francis, when he compares sport to holiness, we become aware of the many points of connection that exist between sport and spirituality. Pope Francis says as much in an interview granted in 2021 to two journalists from the *Gazzetta dello Sport*: “So, for me, to train – and even a Pope must always keep himself in training! – is to task God every day, ‘What do you want me to do, what do you want from my life?’ Asking Jesus, in exchange with Him as if He were a coach”.

The organization of this conference proposes to do just this: to observe sport today. To understand why it is so popular. To identify its risks. To assess its relevance for building a more fraternal, tolerant and equitable society. To discern how God manifests Himself in this cultural manifestation.

In substance, there are two fundamental questions we want to answer with this Conference: what does sport have to say to the Church? What does the Church have to say to sport? Hence, we can perhaps understand better the aim of the Conference through its title: we all want to “put life into play”.

If we look at the history of sport in parallel to the history of the Church, there have been many moments when sport has been an inspiration and a metaphor for the life of Christians, or Christianity has enriched sport with its humanistic outlook. Here is a brief example in this regard: this year we celebrate the centenary of the introduction of the Olympic motto *citius, altius, fortius*, (faster, higher, stronger) at the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924. A motto that had been conceived by an ecclesiastic, the Dominican friar Henri Didon, and proposed to Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games (Athens – 1896).

The example of Brother Henri Didon thus expresses the Church’s desire in relation to sport: the Church does not want to control sport or to create an alternative sport, but to humanize it through a Christian vision of sport. And for what reason? We have found the answer in Pope Saint John Paul II’s emblematic phrase, in the homily for the Jubilee of sportspeople in 2000 (29 October 2000): because Jesus is “the true athlete of God”:

It is true, the figure of Jesus, in His message and in His gestures, has much to offer to sport. Likewise, the Church has much to learn from the phenomenon of sport. This is essentially what we want to achieve with this international Conference, bringing here not only voices from within the Church, but also voices external to the Church, that will help us with their reflections. It is a beautiful exercise in “sporting synodality”. And it thus risks being a culture of encounter, as Pope Francis emphasizes.

In this regard, I would particularly like to thank Madame Florence Mangin, ambassador of France to the Holy See, for having agreed to organize this Conference together. It is the proof that sport also has diplomatic value in the service of peace. I hope that this Conference may be a contribution to international and, in particular, French society, which this year will host the biggest sporting event, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

Intervention of Her Excellency Mme. Florence Mangin

The French Embassy to the Holy See is honoured to join with the Dicastery for Culture and Education in this Olympic year. It is the first time and I am very proud. In the current context of the wars that rage throughout our world, Olympism is first and foremost a message of peace and the commitment of the universal Church, like that of France, is essential.

The role of the Church in the promotion of Olympism is well known. As revealed by Pierre de Coubertin, the motto of the games was conceived by a French Dominican brother, Father Henri Didon.

Since I am in the Holy See Press Office, I will permit myself to remind you that the Paris Games of 1924 opened, like their predecessors, with an Olympic Mass celebrated in the Notre-Dame Cathedral. In 2024, the Church of the Games will be that of the Madeleine in Paris, where the opening mass of the Olympic Truce will be celebrated from 19 July, while on 4 August an inter-religious event will take place on the parvis of the still closed Notre-Dame Cathedral.

The preamble of the Olympic Charter defines Olympism. I quote: “Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for internationally recognized human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles”. It is easy to approximate this definition to the broad outlines of *Fratelli tutti*.

The 2024 Paris Games will take up these broad guidelines, emphasizing sober installations, inclusivity, with a single team of French Olympic and Paralympic athletes, and with a special focus on the poorest. They will also

strive to be durable, with the promotion of sport in the daily lives of young people and as a means of social inclusion. Finally, they will be completely equal in terms of Olympic athletes, with as many female and male athletes.

The Conference *Putting life into play* will enable us to face some of the challenges of sporting practice in the twenty-first century. The afternoon of Thursday 16 May will be dedicated to the role of sport in the action of the Church, an ancient role in which patrons fulfilled, and continue to fulfil an important role in France. Then, on Friday 17 May, we will consider the implications of a certain technicalization of sport, brought about by the constant quest for performance if not the record. The dazzling progress of Paralympic athletes, who are increasingly better equipped, provides an exceptional insight into the becoming of the human body, which some already wish to increase.

Together with the Dicastery, we have invited the most important thinkers, associated with the National Institute of Sport and Physical Education (INSEP) which is already reflecting on this future, by bringing the philosophy of the living into play. In parallel with this meeting, the artist Jean-Charles de Quillacq (resident of the Villa Medici, another partner of these meetings) will propose a performance on the theme “between the performed body and the performing body”.

On Saturday 18 May we will move on to practice, experiencing an inclusive sports day, with a ‘Solidarity Relay Race’ organised at 5 p.m. on the Circus Maximus track. We will return to this event at a forthcoming press conference, so I will not say more at the moment.

Of course, you are all invited, and you are by the Apostle himself: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it”.

I would like to thank very sincerely the supporters of this project: the Dicastery for Culture and Education, the Department for Major Events, Sport, Tourism and Fashion of *Roma Capitale*, in the person of Councillor Alessandro Onorato, the Pious Establishments of France in Rome and Loreto, the French Institute *Centro San Luigi, Athletica Vaticana*, Sport without Borders, MG Sport, the National Institute for Sport and Physical Education, and Villa Medici.

Intervention of Dr. Emanuele Isidori

Based on a reworking of the concept expressed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, sport is configured as a practice that resembles a *pharmakon*: it is intrinsically neither good nor bad. This activity, intrinsic to human nature, makes it possible to define man as an *animal sportif*, highlighting his deep connection with society. Consequently, the humanization of sport requires a critical reflection on society and the institutions that use it to manifest its intrinsic benefits. Although sport embodies an intrinsically pedagogical DNA, it is crucial that the social and educational values, which are at its heart, are expressed concretely. This task falls to social agents, who must evolve into true educational agents, transcending mere socialization.

Therefore, to consider sport as a challenge for humanization is a conceptual error. It is not sport itself that needs to be humanized – it is already permeated with humanity – but society which needs to learn how to value and exploit the principles intrinsic to sport in a humanizing manner. Until society fully embraces the values of humanity, sport always risks being perceived in a dehumanizing light, becoming the bearer of what can be considered the supreme disvalue of sport: dehumanization. Many examples can be cited in this regard.

In this context, then, how can we guarantee a humanizing approach to sport, without falling into the trap of dehumanization and, paradoxically, being a source of spirituality?

The conference we have organized aims to reflect on this phenomenon from a telescopic and microscopic point

of view; in other words, to see sport beyond sport. More precisely, to understand its cultural roots, identify the risks, appreciate its importance in the construction of a more fraternal society, utilize its pedagogical potential and, above all, deepen its spiritual relevance.

In this regard, the conference proposes to offer a multi-faceted analysis of sport in the space of three days. The first day (16 May) will address the relationship between “Church and Sport”, through the sharing of testimonies of high-level athletes and some concrete pastoral experiences that place sport at the service of the Gospel, and the Gospel at the service of sport. In truth, the relationship between Church and sport is not recent, but ancient: from the letters of Saint Paul, to the writings of the Fathers of the Church; from the decrees of the medieval councils to modern papal pronouncements, the Church has always kept abreast of this cultural phenomenon.

The second day (17 May) will focus on the relationship between “Man and Sport”, through the reflection of a group of highly qualified speakers from Italian and French universities, who will discuss sport in terms of pedagogical, philosophical, sociological and theological relevance. Because sport, besides being a practice, is also a theory, as we all know.

The third day (18 May) will have a more practical dimension, and will involve the organization of a solidarity-based sports event (the fraternity relay race) to show to civil society the social relevance of sport itself.

With the programme we are presenting today, therefore, we intend to offer an updated reflection on sport, showing how it is, in fact, a mirror of the society we all want to build.

Intervention of Dr. Arturo Mariani

1. Introduction: The gift of life

We are used to thinking of sport as a physical exercise or a form of competition, but I think it can (and should) be much more.

In my life it has been a journey of personal discovery, realization and connection with the divine.

My story begins even before my birth, when my parents received the news that I would come into the world with just one leg, and possibly other malformations. Their decision to welcome my life as it was, without reserve or regret, laid the foundations of my relationship with reliance on and trust in a higher plan. This act of faith and acceptance formed my approach to life, and therefore to sport, teaching me that any challenge can be transformed into an opportunity to grow and overcome one's own limits.

2. Changing the paradigm through language

Much has to do with the perception that we have of what we do, or with the understanding we have of ourselves. It is clear: as long as we approach sport as a physical activity, made up of tendons and muscles, what it will produce in us will be sterile and material. But we are not just matter: we are not merely identity; we are not our diagnosis.

Indeed, over time I have often asked myself if I were merely “Arturo, the one without a leg”, “Arturo, the disabled man”, and how my condition therefore limited my possibilities: in sport, and therefore in life. This taught me to pay attention to the language we use.

I do not think it is by chance that John begins his Gospel by telling us that “In the beginning there was the Word” – for me, that word has always been the idea of our being, our substance: the idea that we can exist only at the

moment we understand who we are. On the playing field and beyond.

And in this way, with trust and total acceptance, I was able to understand in time, thanks to faith, that language could be at the basis of my sporting and life journey.

Today I am “Arturo with a leg”, not without, and I have proposed the word Pro-ability to change people’s perception regarding the concept of disability. “Pro”, and therefore in favour of the unique abilities of the person, and not “dis”, which brings with it distinction, separation and exclusion.

Pro-ability is a concept that belongs to everyone, a mentality that opens up to a real knowledge of our person as a spiritual entity, that through sport, through sacrifice, the “sacro-fare”, enters into connection with oneself and others.

I am pleased that today this concept has become real with the *Pro-able Academy*: a happy haven where everyone can express themselves through sport, on the basis of their psychophysical condition, where they can encounter the other as a teammate, as an adversary, but above all as a unique person and part of a community, of a greater whole.

3. Sport as spiritual expansion

If sport helps us to understand who we are, to play and to train can become a form of prayer; in the moment in which it allows us to express ourselves with simplicity and uniqueness you can express yourself without filters, with enjoyment, with devotion, as one does in play, with rules and values.

It is in this way that I have achieved my impossible dream of playing football, becoming part of the Italian National Team of Amputee Football, competing in a World and a European championship. And now I tour the world – in schools and parishes, among young people and adults, to inspire others to live a full life, with joy and faith, also through sport.

4. Conclusion

When I was on the football pitch, I was not only a player, but part of a cosmic dance in which every step, every dribble, every goal, was a greater connection. In those moments of complete harmony with the present, I experienced a profound connection with creation, feeling that I was an integral part of a plan greater than myself: an entirely unparalleled sensation.
