

## JUBILEE OF SPORTS PEOPLE

### *HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II*

*Sunday 29 October 2000*

1. *"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!" (1 Cor 9: 24).*

In Corinth, where Paul had brought the message of the Gospel, there was a very important stadium where the "Isthmian Games" were held. It was appropriate, then, for Paul to refer to athletic contests in order to spur the Christians of that city to push themselves to the utmost in the "race" of life. In the stadium races, he says, everyone runs, even if only one is the winner: you too run.... With this metaphor of healthy athletic competition, he highlights the value of life, comparing it to a race not only for an earthly, passing goal, but for an eternal one. A race in which not just one person, but everyone can be a winner.

Today we are listening to these words of the Apostle as we gather in Rome's Olympic Stadium, which once again is transformed into a great open-air church, as it was for the international Jubilee for the world of sport in 1984, the Holy Year of the Redemption. Then, as today, it is Christ, the only Redeemer of man, who welcomes us and illumines our way with his word of salvation.

I offer a warm greeting to all of you, dear athletes and sportsmen and women from every corner of the world, who are celebrating your Jubilee! My heartfelt "thanks" to the international and Italian authorities of sport institutions, and to everyone who helped to organize this extraordinary meeting with the world of sport and its various dimensions.

I thank Mr Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the International Olympic Committee, Mr Giovanni Petrucci, President of the Italian National Olympic Committee, and Mr Giovanni Rossi, a gold-medal winner at Sydney and Atlanta, for their addresses to me, expressing the sentiments of you all, dear athletes. As I look at all of you gathered in such orderly fashion in this stadium, many memories of sporting experiences in my life come to mind. Dear friends, thank you for your presence and thank you especially for the enthusiastic way you are observing this Jubilee event.

2. With this celebration the world of sport is joining in a great chorus, as it were, to express through prayer, song, play and movement a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. It is a fitting occasion to *give thanks to God for the gift of sport*, in which the human person exercises his body, intellect and will, recognizing these abilities as so many gifts of his Creator.

*Playing sports has become very important today*, since it can encourage young people to develop important values such as loyalty, perseverance, friendship, sharing and solidarity. Precisely for this reason, in recent years it has continued to grow even more as one of the characteristic phenomena of the modern era, almost a "sign of the times" capable of interpreting humanity's new needs and new expectations. Sports have spread to every corner of the world, transcending differences between cultures and nations.

Because of the global dimensions this activity has assumed, *those involved in sports throughout the world have a great responsibility*. They are called to make sports an opportunity for meeting and dialogue, over and above every barrier of language, race or culture. Sports, in fact, can make an effective contribution to peaceful understanding between peoples and to establishing the new civilization of love.

3. The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 invites each and every person to engage seriously in reflection and conversion. Can the world of sport excuse itself from this providential spiritual dynamism? No! On the contrary, the importance of sports today invites those who participate in them to take this opportunity for an *examination of conscience*. It is important to identify and promote the many positive aspects of sport, but it is only right also to recognize the various transgressions to which it can succumb.

The educational and spiritual potential of sport must make believers and people of good will *united and determined in challenging every distorted aspect* that can intrude, recognizing it as a phenomenon opposed to the full development of the individual and to his enjoyment of life. Every care must be taken to protect the human body from any attack on its integrity, from any exploitation and from any idolatry.

There must be a willingness to ask forgiveness for whatever has been done, or not done, in the world of sport that is in contrast to the commitments made at the last Jubilee. They will be reaffirmed in the "*Sport Manifesto*", which will be presented in a few moments. May this examination offer everyone - managers, technicians and athletes - an opportunity to find new creative and motivating zeal, so that sport, without losing its true nature, can answer the needs of our time: sport that protects the weak and excludes no one, that frees young people from the snares of apathy and indifference, and arouses a healthy sense of competition in them; sport that is a factor of emancipation for poorer countries and helps to eradicate intolerance and build a more fraternal and united world; sport which contributes to the love of life, teaches sacrifice, respect and responsibility, leading to the full development of every human person.

4. "*Those that sow in tears shall reap rejoicing*" (Ps 125: 5). The responsorial psalm reminded us that *persevering effort is needed to succeed in life*. Anyone who plays sports knows this very well: it is only at the cost of strenuous training that significant results are achieved. The athlete, therefore, agrees with the Psalmist when he says that the effort spent in sowing finds its reward in the joy of the harvest: "Although they go forth weeping, carrying the seed to be sown, they shall come back rejoicing, carrying their sheaves" (Ps 125: 6).

At the recent Olympic Games in Sydney we admired the feats of the great athletes, who sacrificed themselves for years, day after day, to achieve those results. This is *the logic of sport*, especially Olympic sports; it is also *the logic of life*: without sacrifices, important results are not obtained, or even genuine satisfaction.

Once again the Apostle Paul has reminded us of this: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 *Cor* 9: 25). Every Christian is called to become a strong *athlete of Christ*, that is, a faithful and courageous witness to his Gospel. But to succeed in this, he must persevere in prayer, be trained in virtue and follow the divine Master in everything.

*He, in fact, is God's true athlete*: Christ is the "more powerful" Man (cf. *Mk* 1: 7), who for our sake confronted and defeated the "opponent", Satan, by the power of the Holy Spirit, thus inaugurating the kingdom of God. He teaches us that, to enter into glory, we must undergo suffering (cf. *Lk* 24: 26,46); he has gone before us on this path, so that we might follow in his footsteps.

May the Great Jubilee help us to be strengthened and fortified to face the challenges that await us at this dawn of the third millennium.

5. "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" (*Mk* 10: 47).

These are the words of the blind man of Jericho in the Gospel episode proclaimed a few moments ago. They can also become our words: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!".

O Christ, we fix our gaze on you, who offer every person the fullness of life. Lord, you heal and strengthen those who, trusting in you, accept your will.

Today, during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, athletes throughout the world are gathered here in spirit, above all to renew their faith in you, man's only Saviour.

And those, like the athlete, who are at the peak of their strength recognize that *without you, O Christ, they are inwardly like the blind man*, incapable, that is, of seeing the full truth, of understanding the deep meaning of life, especially when faced with the darkness of evil and death.

Even the greatest champion finds himself defenceless before the fundamental questions of life and needs your light to overcome the demanding challenges that a human being is called to face.

Lord Jesus Christ, help these athletes to be your friends and witnesses to your love. Help them to put the same effort into personal asceticism that they do into sports; help them to achieve a harmonious and cohesive unity of body and soul.

May they be sound models to imitate for all who admire them. Help them always to be athletes of the spirit, to win your inestimable prize: an imperishable crown that lasts forever. Amen!