

## **WEBINAR**

### **“Sport: Re-thinking tomorrow” (1 October 2020)**

#### **INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS**

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Good morning – good afternoon from Vatican City. Greetings to all of you participants in this Webinar organised by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life in collaboration with the John Paul II Foundation for Sport. I particularly wish to thank all those who will enrich our conversation, with their personal experiences and animating our discussions. Among you there are sports managers, former professional athletes, people engaged in education or in the various institutions and organisations that promote sport. We are all involved in this common reflection on sport sponsored by our Dicastery at a time of great social and economic uncertainty, due to the global health emergency.

The title of the webinar is: "Sport: Re-thinking tomorrow", precisely because we need to rethink the future of sport together. The coronavirus pandemic has obliged entire sectors of society to grind to a stop. This long intermission has obliged us all to undo and reset our activities entailing social gatherings, including sports events. We are now at a time when we have to make a fresh start and reschedule our future. A new start can be an extraordinary opportunity of change for the better. We must reflect on "how" we can restart. Without serious reflection there can be no improvement, no innovation, we will all simply and mechanically pick up again from where we left off and run the risk of repeating the same old patterns, making the same mistakes and falling into the same mind-sets and habits that have proved wrong and are now outdated. This is why we must initiate a serious dialogue on the future of Sport in our world.

Interest in and closeness to the world of sport is part of the pastoral life of the Church. We know that the pandemic has affected the lives of many families and young people. Many households are facing financial difficulties and have been forced to cut back on expenses for their children's education, including sports activities. Many professional but above all amateur sports clubs have seen their financial resources drastically curtailed and are now

facing enormous planning problems. The present situation risks driving many people away from sport, especially young people, especially those living in the most disadvantaged countries and worst affected by the economic crisis. The educational value of sport cannot be neglected if we wish to create a better world for all. Giving young people the opportunity to practice sport on a regular basis means offering them an extraordinary path to further their formative and personal development. A general reduction in sports activities would mean a drastic reduction in the human, moral and spiritual formation of thousands of young people, in every corner of the planet. Young people would be deprived of the many opportunities for socialisation and collaboration that sport demands and promotes.

The Church is concerned about all this because, like a mother, she cares about the integral good of the human person and harmonious social coexistence. In a recent speech at the Italian Sports Centre, Pope Francis said:

«You may be asked how you can hope that sport may be used to solve many difficult problems and achieve a profound transformation of our society. We can answer that sport can do this because it improves people and can foster a culture of dialogue and respectful encounters. Sports events, at which rival athletes are pitched against each other, are called "matches" not "clashes", with a focus on equal competition because, ultimately, although it is better to win, to a certain extent both sides win". (*Speech at the Italian Sports Centre*, 11 May 2019).

At a time when the pandemic risks spreading fear and imposing a culture of isolation or even confrontation, sport instead promotes a culture of togetherness.

The present health crisis has revealed a great deal of inequalities: many people are excluded from the medical care needed to heal from the virus, many people have been left without a source of income, many young people are excluded from alternative forms of online learning that have become necessary since schools closed. Pope Francis, has emphasized the importance of a common commitment to overcome the difficult times we experience, by overcoming selfishness and inequality. In the first public audience after the lockdown he said: «The current pandemic has highlighted our interdependence: we are all connected to each other. To emerge from this crisis better than before, we have to do so together ... all of us, in solidarity» (*General Audience*, 2 September 2020).

Sport plays an important role in this respect and can be an example for other sectors of civil life because of its ability to create solidarity, its ability to create a sense of interdependence between people and its ability to overcome barriers and include everyone: people of different races and cultures or social and economic backgrounds, people with disabilities and those excluded from expensive schools which aren't accessible to all.

It is our desire to promote a "cross-cutting" reflection on sport, which can bring together believers and non-believers, pooling different experiences and points of view, of professionals and amateurs, of managers and athletes, of young people and adults, of the more advanced and the more disadvantaged countries. All these contributions are equally important.

My hope is that we may all leave this event enriched by the dialogue and common reflection on sport and together build a new enthusiasm to make sport a place of brotherhood and hope in these difficult times. I wish to conclude by quoting again the words of the Holy Father to a group of sports men and women: «I encourage you, dear friends and sportspeople, to increasingly live your passion as an experience of unity and solidarity. It is specifically the true values of sport that are particularly important in facing this period of the pandemic and, above all, the difficult aftermath. In this spirit I invite you to run, together, on the "track of life"» (Pope Francis, *Message to a delegation of participants at the International Athletics Meeting "We Run Together - Simul Currebant"*, 20 May 2020).