

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE ATHLETES OF THE ITALIAN PARALYMPIC COMMITTEE

*Vatican's Paul VI Hall
Saturday, October 4th 2014*

Dear Athletes, Dear Friends, good morning!

I thank you for your presence -- so numerous and festive! --, and I thank the President of the Italian Paralympic Committee for his courteous words.

You have come from so many parts of the world, and each one of you bears in him/herself the experience of sport and, first of all, of man and of woman: you carry the victories, the goals reached with so much effort, also with the many difficulties you had to face. However, each one of you is a witness of how important it is to live these joys and efforts in your encounter with others, to be able to share your “course,” to find a group of friends who give you a hand and where you give a hand to others. And thus each one succeeds in giving the best of him/herself!

Sport promotes contacts and relations with persons who come from different cultures and environments. It helps us to live by accepting differences, to make of these a precious occasion of mutual enrichment and discovery. Above all, sport becomes a precious occasion to recognize one another as brothers and sisters on the way, to foster the culture of inclusion and to reject the disposable culture.

All this goes back in the main to your experience, because the disability you experience in some aspect of your physique, through the practice of sport and healthy competition, is transformed into a message of encouragement for all those who live situations similar to yours, and becomes an invitation to commit all one's energies to

do good things together, surmounting the barriers we might meet around us, and first of all those that are within us.

Your witness, dear athletes, is a great sign of hope. It is proof of the fact that in every person there are potentialities that at times they do not imagine, and which can be developed with confidence and solidarity. God the Father is the first to know this! God knows your hearts perfectly: He knows everything. He is the first to know this! He knows us better than anyone else, and He looks at us with confidence, He loves us as we are, but He makes us grow in keeping with what we can become. Thus, in your effort for sport without barriers, for a world without excluded persons, you are never alone! God Our Father is with you!

May sport, therefore, be for all a gymnasium in which to train daily in respect of yourselves and of others, a gymnasium that gives you the occasion to know new persons and environments and that helps you to feel yourselves an active part of society. May you be able to experience, also through the practice of sport, the closeness of God and the friendship of brothers and sisters.

I thank you for this meeting. I bless you all and your dear ones. And, please, remember to pray for me! Thank you!

Now I ask the Lord to bless you all, to bless your whole life, to bless your path, to bless your hearts.

FRANCIS PP.

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