



“Sport at the Service of Humanity”

Address of Greeting by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi

Opening Ceremony, 5 October 2016 – Aula Paolo VI

Your Holiness, before you, called together by the Pontifical Council for Culture, is a small world that embraces a planetary horizon. This occurs not just because in a short while, after my own, authoritative and important voices will be raised from society, politics, sport and the international economy, united in a common project, but also because the theme of this meeting involves the whole of humanity.

In fact, sport is the living and dynamic expression of a fundamental category of the human person, play, that is the free expression of one’s own creativity, fantasy and potential both physical and spiritual. Indeed, authentic sporting activity weaves together in harmony diverse realities such as the body and the spirit, force and beauty, physical exercise and intelligence, passion and will, immediate intuition and spontaneous habit.

This is why we can consider sport – like art and music – as a universal language shared by peoples that unites diversities in harmony, that passes over ethnic and national identities, that generates a true culture of encounter and dialogue, as we have all experienced intensely in the recent Olympics and Paralympics.

The multiple religions represented here also see in pure and creative sport a reflection of God whose creative cosmic wisdom is suggestively portrayed in the Bible (*Proverbs* 8:30-31) as a young woman playing, dancing and exercising on the face of the earth. The apostle Paul did not hide his passion for racing and boxing using them as metaphors for his spiritual task: “I run, but not as one who runs without a goal; I box, but not as one who hits the air” (*1 Corinthians* 9:26).

So you can see in athletes – free from the degeneration of corruption, from illicit prevarication, or manipulation – an emblem of the commitment of every person, especially the great crowd of boys and girls, youth and adults who not only follow athletic endeavours but also dedicate themselves to sporting activity. All those engaged in sports must become models to create bridges over the valleys of ethnic division, of socio-cultural separation, of ideological opposition. Their mission could be portrayed with a suggestive Muslim tradition: it imagines that God created angels so that, spreading their wings, they become

a bridge between the banks of the rivers and the valleys which divide countries and peoples.

Today's event – which will spread out over the coming days with a busy programme of dialogue, research and study – seeks to be the first stage of a wider itinerary that should continue to constantly engage public, religious and sporting institutions.

Holy Father, we thank you for being here with us: the words you are about to speak to us will be a sort of guiding line for our future journey. As happens to athletes, this can sometimes be an arduous path, a painful race, a tiring course but certainly it might reach festive and joyous goals.