

Sporting activity in the thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI

Bishop Josef Clemens

More than thirty years ago on June 1, 1978, at the start of the World Cup that was being held in Argentina (June 1 – 25, 1978) and was marked by bitter defeat for the Germans, the fifty year old Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, already one year as Archbishop of Munich-Freising, explained the nucleus of his thought on soccer and sport in general in an interview on the Bavarian Radio program “*Zum Sonntag*”.¹

I. Philosophical foundations of the sporting phenomenon

I would like to use as a leitmotif of this investigation, this profound and original interview, in which the Cardinal and theologian offers a brief philosophical analysis of the modern phenomenon of sport and soccer in particular. This will help us to better understand the typically brief but numerous comments that Pope Benedict XVI has made about sport throughout his Pontificate.

[It does not seem that Cardinal Ratzinger as head of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1981-2005) dealt with the phenomenon of soccer or sport in general, but he did include this interview in an anthology of texts published in 1985 and also as Pope he permitted it to be included in a publication printed in 2005.² All of this indicates the perennial value of these fundamental reflections on the phenomenon of modern sport]

1. The attraction of the sports phenomenon

¹ This interview was first published in German in the Archdiocese of Munich-Freising Bulletin *Ordinariats-Korrespondenz* (ok 03 -15/78) n.19 of 3 June 1978; cf. P. Pfister, *Joseph Ratzinger und das Erzbistum München und Freising*, Dokumente und Bilder aus kirchlichen Archiven, Beiträgen und Erinnerungen, in the collection: *Schriften des Archivs des Erzbistums München und Freising*, vol. 10, Schnell & Steiner, Regensburg 2006, 313 s; Notice also its prompt publication in the Catholic Journal *Deutsche Tagespost*, June 7, 1978. A partial English translation is found in English in Joseph Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for everyday of the year*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1992, 262-263. A complete English translation is from Teresa Benedetta at <http://freeforumzone.leonardo.it/discussione.aspx?id=354533>.

² Cf. Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, *Suchen, was droben ist. Meditationen das Jahr hindurch*, Herder Press, Freiburg i.Br. 1985, 107-111; Benedikt XVI/Joseph Ratzinger, *Gottes Glanz in unserer Zeit. Meditationen zum Kirchenjahr*, Herder Press, Freiburg i.Br. 2005, 188-190; *Mitarbeiter der Wahrheit, Gedanken für jeden Tag*, I. Grassl (ed.), Naumann Press, Würzburg³1992, p. 266 s.; cf. also the general bibliography edited by his former students: Joseph Ratzinger/Papst Benedikt XVI, *Das Werk: Bibliographisches Hilfsmittel zur Erschließung des literarisch-theologischen Werkes von Joseph Ratzinger bis zur Papstwahl* as edited by V. Pfnür, Sankt Ulrich Press, Augsburg 2009, 191.

The first aspect that I would like to bring our attention to is that the Cardinal speaks of soccer as “a ‘global event’, that irrespective of boundaries, links humanity around the world in one and the same state of tension: in its hopes, its fears, its emotions and joys”³. This observation, made thirty years ago, is all the more valid today given the enormous expansion of soccer’s popularity around the world!

No other event on the planet is capable of involving so many people in a similar way than a professional sporting event and especially that of soccer. According to Cardinal Ratzinger, “this tells us that some primeval human instinct is at play here” and raises the question as to the source of the spell that this games exerts.

[Pope Benedict XVI will show his appreciation for this universal dimension of the sporting phenomena with its potential to peacefully unite diverse nations and races of the earth.]

2. *Sport as “play”*

The pessimist will respond to the question of why sport is a universal phenomenon by saying that it is the same as the case with the ancient Rome, where *panem et circenses*, - “bread and the circus games” -, constituted “the only meaning in life for a decadent society, which does not know any higher aspiration”⁴. But, even if we accept this explanation, we still would still remain with the question: “why is this game so fascinating that it remains equal with bread?”. To answer this, we might look again to the past and see that the cry for bread and games was in reality the expression of “a desire for the paradisaical life”- a life of saiety without effort, the fulfillment of freedom.”

In this context, the Cardinal reveals the profound sense of play as an *activity that is totally free*, without limits or constrictions, and both engages and fulfills all the energy of man. Consequently, play could be interpreted as a sort of effort to *return to paradise*: as an escape from the “wearisome enslavement of daily life” (*aus dem versklavten Ernst des Alltags*) for the free seriousness (*freien Ernst*) of something that should not be so and therefore it is beautiful. In this way, sport, in a certain sense, overcomes (*überschreitet*) daily life.

Besides this capacity to overcome ordinary life, play possesses – as we can see in children- another characteristic: that of being a *school of life*. Play symbolizes life itself and anticipates it in a way that is characterized by a freeform manner.

³ Cf. English work cited above, Joseph Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for everyday of the year*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1992, pp. 262-263.

⁴ The expression «*panem et circenses*» was coined by the Roman poet *Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis* (cir. 55-127) in his work *Satire* (10, 81). The original meaning referred to the horse races held in the “circenses” or hippodrome.

3. *Sport as a “school of life”*

According to this very original reflection of Cardinal Ratzinger, the fascination for soccer consists in the fact that it unites these two following aspects in a persuasive manner. First of all, it “compels man to exercise self-discipline”, so that he may gain control over himself, and through this control, self mastery. In turn, this self mastery leads to freedom. Soccer can also teach a disciplined cooperation with others (*diszipliniertes Miteinander*). In team play, one learns to insert their individuality into the service of the entire group. Sport unites people in a common goal: the success and failure of each one lies in the success and failure of everyone.

Sport can also teach fair play as the rules of the game, which all mutually obey, bind and unite the competitors together. The freedom of play- when play is according to the rules- becomes serious competition that is only resolved into the freedom of a finished game.

In watching a game, the spectator identifies himself with the game and the players. In this way, he feels himself a part of both the team play and the competition, participating in the player’s seriousness and in their freedom of action. The players become a symbol of his own life; and that works vice versa. The players know that the spectators are seeing themselves represented in them, being affirmed by them.

4. *Threats and deviations to sporting activities*

At the end of this interview, rich and dense in content, Cardinal Ratzinger discussed the temptations and dangers that threaten the world of sport. The goodness of the game can easily be spoiled by commercialism, which casts the grim pall of money over everything, and changes sport into an industry which can produce an unreal world of horrifying dimensions.

But this illusory world cannot exist when sport is based on positive values: as a training for life (*Vorübung*) and as a stepping over (*Überschreitung*) from our daily life in the direction of our lost Paradise. Both cases however require finding a discipline for freedom in order to train oneself to follow the rules of teamwork (*Miteinander*), of competition (*Gegeneinander*) and of self-discipline (*Auskommen mit sich selbst*).

After considering all of this, we can conclude that through sport something new about *learning how to live* can be gained. This is because sport makes some fundamentals of life visible: man does not live by bread alone. Yes, the material world is only the preliminary stage (*Vorstufe*) for the truly human, the world of

freedom. But that freedom is based on rules, on the discipline of teamwork (*Miteinander*) and fair competition (*Gegeneinander*), independent of outward success or arbitrariness, and is thereby truly free. Sport as life...if we look at it more profoundly, the phenomenon of a football-crazy world can give us more than sheer entertainment.

II. Observations of Pope Benedict XVI regarding sport

We can now consider some observations that Pope Benedict XVI has made regarding soccer and sporting activity in a general way that have as their presupposition and foundation these reflections made thirty years earlier.

In addition to the numerous remarks about sport that the Holy Father has made in his greetings to pilgrims at the end of the Wednesday General Audiences and his Angelus messages, there are two speeches that he has delivered during two special audiences: one to the Austrian National Ski Team (October 6, 2007)⁵ and the other to the participants of the World Swimming Championship (August 1, 2009).⁶ As both speeches were addressed to the athletes themselves who were received by him, they offered the Holy Father the occasion to deal with the theme of sport more amply. To facilitate our analysis, I will subdivide his reflections into five points.

1. *Virtues and values inherent to sporting activity*

In wanting to consider the values inherent to sporting activity, the Holy Father's speech to the Austrian ski team offers us an excellent program. Pope Benedict XVI observes that sports can help to foster basic virtues and values and offers an exemplary list: "perseverance, determination, spirit of sacrifice, internal and external discipline, attention to others, team work, solidarity, justice, courtesy, and the recognition of one's own limits, and still others. These same virtues also come into play in a significant way in daily life and need to be continually exercised and practiced."⁷

⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Speech to the Austrian National Ski Team*, October 6, 2007. [Our English translation]. The original discourse, pronounced in German, can be found in *Insegnamenti di Benedict XVI*, vol. III/2, 422-23; There is no English translation of this speech in the weekly English edition of "L'Osservatore Romano".

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championship* as found in "L'Osservatore Romano", weekly English Edition n. 31, August 5, 2009, p.12, under the title "A spectacle of humanity and tenacity that teaches important lessons for life".

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Speech to the Austrian National Ski Team*, October 6, 2007; cf. also *Wednesday General Audience* of October 5, 2005 ("Insegnamenti" I, 2005, 636): where the Holy Father addressed these words to the "Festa dello sportivo" participants: "This manifestation raises up in you a great love for those values, such as a healthy practice of sport, that contribute to the construction of a society where mutual and fraternal acceptance reign"; *Greeting to representatives of the Venarotta Calcio Association*: "Dear Friends, you are messengers not only of the serene joy of play, but also that which comes from partaking in fraternity and solidarity." (found in "Insegnamenti" II, 2006/2, 624); cf. *greeting to participants in the third "Festa dello sportivo"*: "Dear young

While receiving the participants of the World Swimming Championship in August of 2009 in Rome, the Holy Father underlined again the potential values that are inherent to sporting efforts, this time enumerating a list from a complementary perspective:

“With your competitions you offer the world a fascinating spectacle of discipline and humanity, of artistic beauty and tenacious determination. You show what goals the vitality of youth can achieve when young people submit to the effort of a demanding training and are willing to accept numerous sacrifices and deprivations. All this is also an important lesson for life for your peers.... Sport, practised with enthusiasm and an acute ethical sense, especially for youth become a training ground of healthy competition and physical improvement, a school of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society”.⁸

2. *Athletes as “role model”*

Speaking to these top level Austrian skiers, the Holy Father touched upon the fact that they are role models for the young people especially. “In fact, you, dear athletes, shoulder the responsibility –not less significant – of bearing witness to these attitudes and convictions and of incarnating them beyond your sporting activity into the fabric of the family, culture, and religion. In doing so, you will be of great help for others, especially the youth, who are immersed in rapidly developing society where there is a widespread loss of values and growing disorientation”.⁹

And also in the above quoted speech to champion swimmers, he affirmed similarly: “Dear athletes, you are models for your peers, and your example can be crucial to them in building their future positively. So be champions in sports and in life!”¹⁰

people, ... may you always know how to unite sport, friendship, and the spiritual life” (found in “Insegnamenti” III, 2007/2, 426); cf. *Wednesday General Audience greeting* to the athletes of the *European Taekwondo*, April 9, 2008 (“Insegnamenti” IV, 2008/1, 546), where the Holy Father encouraged them to “promote respect for one another and fairness through the practice of this sports discipline”; cf. *Message with occasion of the Tour de France*, in *L’Osservatore Romano* daily Italian edition, n. 166, July 22, 2009, p.1.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championship* as found in “L’Osservatore Romano”, weekly English edition n. 31, August 5, 2009, p.12.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Speech to the Austrian National Ski Team*, October 6, 2007 in “Insegnamenti” III/2, 422.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championship* as found in “L’Osservatore Romano”, weekly English edition n. 31, August 5, 2009, p.12. At the end of his speech, he repeated a similar message in German: “Dear Friends, as sports competitors you offer performances of a very high-standard and are an example for many young people.”

The Holy Father reminds these athletes that their “role as a champion” goes beyond the confines of their sport because their sporting activity becomes for many youth a model of a life of achievement and success. This brings with it a great responsibility because it can be a determining factor in one’s entire life project. In a time when exemplary personalities who the youth respect are lacking, the champion athlete indirectly becomes an “educator” as the young people look to them for guidance. Because of this, sporting ideals must permeate not only sport but life itself in order to be authentic and credible.

These considerations cause us to examine more closely an very important aspect for the Pontiff: the educational potential of sport and how it can contribute in confronting the growing “educational emergency” that is witnessed more in more in our time.¹¹

3. Sport as a response to the “educational emergency”

In a Wednesday General Audience on January 9, 2008, the Holy Father greeted the directors and athletes of the level D Italian soccer league with these words: “May the game of soccer always be more of a means of teaching the values of honesty, solidarity and fraternity, especially among the younger generations”.¹²

I would like to recall another quote from the Holy Father which were directed to soccer students at a training club that forms part of the young scholastic sector of the Italian Soccer Federation “Gioco Calcio” (FIGC). At the end of the Sunday Angelus, Pope Benedict XVI made this appeal: “May sport be a gymnasium of true preparation for life”.¹³

¹¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Diocese of Rome*, January 21, 2008 as found in “L’Osservatore Romano” weekly English edition, n. 6, February 6, 2008, p. 10: “Educating, however, has never been an easy task and today it seems to be becoming ever more difficult. ... It then becomes difficult to pass on from one generation to the next something that is valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build life itself. ... In fact, none of these difficulties is insurmountable. They are, as it were, the other side of the coin of that great and precious gift which is our freedom, with the responsibility that rightly goes with it. ... Not even the greatest values of the past can be simply inherited; they must be claimed by us and renewed through an often anguishing personal option”; cf. also *Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishops Conference*, May 29, 2008 in: “L’Osservatore Romano” weekly English edition, n.23, June 4, 2008, p.5: “When, in fact, in a society and in a culture marked by a pervasive relativism and not rarely by aggressiveness, fundamental certainties, the values and the hopes that give life meaning seem to weaken, the temptation is easily spread among parents as well as teachers to renounce their own duty, and even preceded by the risk of not clearly understanding their own role and mission”

¹² Cf. Benedict XVI, *Greeting, Wednesday General Audience*, January 9, 2008, in “Insegnamenti” IV, 2008/1, 48.

¹³ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Greeting, Angelus*, December 18, 2005 in: “Insegnamenti” I, 2005, 1004; Cf. *Greeting to professional soccer referees at Wednesday General Audience*, January 25, 2006, in “Insegnamenti” I, 2006, 105: “Dear friends, to a necessary technical and athletic preparation add an adequate human and spiritual formation that will make you ever more mature and responsible persons”.

In occasion of the Pontifical Council for the Laity's most recent sport seminar ("*Sport, education, faith: towards a new season for Catholic sport associations*" 6-7 November 6-7,2009), the Holy Father strongly accentuated in his message the educative value of sporting activity: "Sports have considerable educational potential in the context of youth and, for this reason, great importance not only in the use of leisure time but also in the formation of the person."¹⁴

In the actual educational emergency, provoked by a unilateral and exaggerated demand for personal freedom, sport can assume an important role as a means to educate many young people. Sport can demonstrate- by means of its rules and team effort- that there is an undeniable need for discipline and a shared responsibility.

In this regard, the Holy Father, in his letter to the diocese of Rome on the theme of education recalled that: "If no standard of behavior and rule of life is applied even in small daily matters, the character is not formed and the person will not be ready to face the trials that will come in the future. The educational relationship, however, is first of all the encounter of two kinds of freedom, and successful education means teaching the correct use of freedom."¹⁵

Sport represents an appropriate field for finding the right balance between freedom and discipline, which is perhaps the most delicate point in the task of education today. Many young people consider sport as a positive phenomenon in their life and easily undergo the rigor and fatigue that it implies as well as its rules. Especially in the case of soccer, we see how team work groups together the freedom of each individual and the need of respecting the rules for the benefit of the "common good".

As we have seen -in the context of this formative process- the Holy Father counts much upon sports men and women to be "credible witnesses" of its virtue and values. In this sense, speaking to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishop's Conference (May 29, 2008), where the Holy Father made explicit reference to the parish recreational centers, he noted: "... precisely the current educational emergency increases the demand for an education that truly is such: therefore, concretely speaking, educators who know how to be credible witnesses of these

¹⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message to Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, on occasion of the International Seminar of Study*: "Sport, education, faith: a new season for the Catholic sports movement", November 3, 2009, in: "L'Osservatore Romano" weekly English edition, n. 46, November 18, 2009, p.5; Cf. also *Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championship* as found in "L'Osservatore Romano", weekly English edition n. 31, August 5, 2009, p.12; Cf. also his *Address to civil and political authorities in Prague*, September 26, 2009, in: "L'Osservatore Romano" daily Italian edition, n. 224, September 18-29, 2009, p. 5: "In sports, the creative arts and academic pursuit, young people welcome the opportunity to excel. Is it not equally true that when presented with high ideals they will also aspire to moral virtue and a life of compassion and goodness? I warmly encourage parents and community leaders who expect authorities to promote the values which integrate the intellectual, human and spiritual dimensions of a sound education worthy of the aspirations of our young".

¹⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Diocese of Rome*, January 21, 2008 as cited in note 11.

realities and of these values upon which it is possible to build both one's personal existence and a common and shared project of life".¹⁶

4. The unifying and pacifying capacity of sport

A fourth aspect to consider is sport's capacity to unite people of different countries and races in friendly competition as is often attested with particular eloquence in the occasion of the Olympics or the World Cup.

At the end of a General Audience on September 22, 2005, the Holy Father spoke these words to a delegation of UEFA and the Italian Soccer Federation "Giuoco Calcio", with a numerous group of children in attendance from sixteen countries: "Dear friends, ... may today's manifestation be an occasion for you to renew your efforts so that sport can contribute to building a society that is distinguished by reciprocal respect, fairness in behavior, and solidarity among all races and cultures."¹⁷

Once more, after praying the Sunday Angelus on February 12, 2006, a few days before the winter Olympics in Turin, the Pope expressed his desire that "this great sports competition be imbued with the Olympic values of fairness, joy and fraternal relations and in doing so, contribute to fostering peace among peoples".¹⁸

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishop's Conference*, May 29, 2008 in: "L'Osservatore Romano" weekly English edition, n.23, June 4, 2008, p.5.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Greeting, Wednesday General Audience*, September 21, 2005 in: "Insegnamenti" I, 2005, 567.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Angelus Greeting*, February 12, 2006 in: "Insegnamenti" II, 2006/1, 180; cf. also *Angelus Greeting* of July 8, 2007 to the *Interammia World Cup* handball participants who gathered from more than a hundred different countries, some of which are in conflict with each other: "Yet this peaceful gathering of athletes is an example of how sports can bring us together in the spirit of fellowship between peoples and cultures. Sports are indeed a sign that peace is possible" ("Insegnamenti" III, 2007/2, 32); Cf. *Wednesday General Audience*, May 7, 2008, his words to the directors and players of Inter: "I take this occasion to underline once more the importance of the moral values of sport in educating the new generations" and his greeting to an Austrian delegation from "Österreichischer Fußballbund": "I also greet the delegation from the Austrian soccer federation. Today is a day for soccer, as we also are happy to have present with us, one of the top Italian soccer teams, Inter. May the Holy Spirit help you as Christians to give witness to others in doing good" ("Insegnamenti" IV, 2008/1, 732-734). Also significant are Pope Benedict XVI's words at the conclusion of the *Wednesday General Audience* of August 1, 2007, after Iraq's soccer victory in the Asian Cup final. The Iraqi team, which was made up of players from various religious confessions and ethnic backgrounds, played with a black band on their arms as a sign of mourning for those killed in a bombing days before. In the 71st minute of play, a header goal off a corner kick by team captain, Younis Mahmoud, gave Iraq an unexpected lead. When the final whistle blew, Iraqi players and fans exulted in joy at winning. The Holy Father commented on their victory with these words: "...I would like to record some good news about Iraq which has sparked an explosion of popular joy throughout the Country. I am referring to the victory of the Iraqi football team, which won the Asian Cup and for the first time has become the football champion of Asia. I was happily impressed by the enthusiasm that infected all the inhabitants, driving them out onto the streets to celebrate the event. Just as I have so often wept with the Iraqis, on this occasion I rejoice with them. This experience of joyful sharing shows a people's desire to have a normal, quiet life. I hope that the event may help in building in Iraq a future of authentic peace with the contribution of all, in freedom and reciprocal respect. Congratulations!" in "L'Osservatore Romano" weekly English edition, n.32/33 of August 8/15, 2007, p. 4

Also in his greeting to the participants in the 29th edition of the Summer Olympics in Beijing, the Holy Father placed the accentuation on the pacifying dimension of sport: "... I am following with deep interest this great sports event - the most important and anticipated in the world - and I warmly hope that it will offer the international community an effective example of coexistence among people of the most different provenances, with respect for their common dignity. May sports once again be a pledge of brotherhood and peace among peoples!"¹⁹

These considerations of the Holy Father want to recall that an excessive nationalism and racism are contrary to the ideals of sport ("Olympic values") as they destroy this unifying and pacifying capacity. Especially the Olympic Games and the other global sporting events can easily miss this opportunity and become the occasion, as has happened in the past, for a display of power and superiority of one nation's political system over another's. In these cases, sport is not an occasion for uniting, but is in opposition to the entire peoples as well as to the single individual.

The Holy Father does not only ask this from "others", but he also directs this appeal in a particular way to groups within the Church, especially Catholic sport associations. Benedict XVI asks them to be active in promoting a balanced appreciation of sporting activity in conformance with the sporting ideal and a Christian vision of the human person.

5. The contribution of the Church and Catholic athletes

The greatest asset the Church has to offer to the world of sport is her own insights regarding the overall phenomenon of sport that is enriched by a vision of the human person rooted in Christian anthropology and also in the light of the faith.²⁰

For the Pope, sport is not simply the exercise of one's physical qualities but rather something that regards the entire person. Along these same lines, in his speech to the Austrian skiers already quoted above, he affirms: "Body, spirit and soul form a single unity and each component must be in harmony with the other. You know how necessary this interior harmony is in order to reach sporting goals at the highest levels. Consequently, even the most demanding sports must be rooted in a holistic view of the human person, recognizing his profound dignity and favouring an overall development and full maturity of the person. Otherwise, if sport is only focused on mere material performance, it will fall short of

¹⁹ Benedict, *Angelus, greeting with occasion of the forthcoming Olympic Games in Beijing*, August 3, 2008 in: "L'Osservatore Romano" weekly English edition, n.32 of August 6, 2008, p. 1.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Message to Cardinal Severino Poletto, Archbishop of Turin in occasion of the upcoming Winter Olympic Games*, November 29, 2005, in: "L'Osservatore Romano" weekly English edition, n.6 of February 8, 2006, p. 2.: "For Christians, reference made to light points out the Incarnate Word, Light of the world that illumines man in all his dimensions, including sports. There is nothing human - except sin - that the Son of God by becoming man did not give worth to. ... Among the various human activities is sport, itself awaiting to be illumined by God through Christ so that the values it expresses are purified and elevated both at the individual and collective level".

realizing its necessary social dimension. In the end, sporting activity must help one to recognize their own talents and capacities, their very efforts and their own very life as gifts that come from God. For this reason, sport should always have God our Creator as its ultimate point of reference. It is in this sense that the Apostle makes reference to sports competition in order to recall man's highest calling: "Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one" (1Cor. 9: 24-25).²¹

Speaking to the participant of the swimming championship, the Holy Father included in his speech a reflection on the transcendent dimension of the human person, bringing out the loftier aspects of our creaturely status and concluding with what could almost be considered a prayer of thanksgiving to God: "Watching these swimming championships and admiring the results achieved make it easy to understand the great potential with which God has endowed the human body and the interesting objectives of perfection it is able to achieve. One then thinks of the Psalmist's wonder who in contemplating the universe, praises the glory of God and the greatness of man: "when I behold your heavens", we read in Psalm 8, "the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place what is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?" (vv. 3-4). Then, how can one fail to thank the Lord for having endowed the human body with such perfection; for having enriched it with a beauty and harmony that can be expressed in so many ways?"²²

With respect to the many time quoted educational emergency, the Holy Father has pointed out those task that belong to the Church, especially to her pastors and the educational institutions and sport associations. It is significant that Pope Benedict XVI , during a meeting with the clergy of Rome, regarding the theme of the parish recreational center, had this to say: "Of course, an after-school centre where only games were played and refreshments provided would be absolutely superfluous. The point of an after-school catechetical and recreation centre must be cultural, human and Christian formation for a mature personality. ... I would say that this is precisely the role of such a centre, that one not only finds possibilities there for one's leisure time but above all for an integral human formation that completes the personality. Therefore, of course, the priest as an educator must himself have received a good training and must fit into today's culture, and be deeply cultured if he is to help young people to enter a culture in-

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Speech to the Austrian National Ski Team*, October 6, 2007.

²² Benedict XVI, *Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championship* as found in "L'Osservatore Romano", weekly English edition n. 31, August 5, 2009, p.12.

spired by faith. I would naturally add that in the end, the central point of orientation in every culture is God, God present in Christ.”²³

Along this very same line of thinking, in his message to our recent seminar of study (nov 6-7 2009), he underlined this point: “Through sports, the ecclesial community contributes to the formation of youth, providing a suitable environment for their human and spiritual growth. In fact, when sports initiatives aim at the integral development of the person and are managed by qualified and competent personnel, they provide a useful opportunity for priests, religious and lay people to become true and proper educators and teachers of life for the young. In our time when an urgent need to educate the new generations is evident it is therefore necessary for the Church to continue to support sports for youth, making the most of their positive aspects also at competitive levels such as their capacity for stimulating competitiveness, courage and tenacity in pursuing goals. However, it is necessary to avoid every trend that perverts the nature of sports by recourse to practices that can even damage the body, such as doping. As part of a coordinated, formative effort, Catholic directors, staff and workers must consider themselves expert guides for youth, helping each of them to develop their athletic potential without obscuring those human qualities and Christian virtues that make for a fully mature person.”²⁴

While acknowledging that not all athletes share the same vision of the human person down to its last detail, the Church would like to offer her assistance in furthering a more profound and integral vision of the sporting phenomenon, in order to avoid the error of valuing this beautiful, but penultimate, reality as the ultimate end supreme activity of man. This service could help to reduce the temptation to use inappropriate ways («unfair play», corruption) or means («doping») that contradict the very essence of the nature of sport.

Perhaps, someone might be surprised to find these words of the Holy Father regarding sport, as their first impression might be that of considering Pope Benedict XVI distant from the world of sport, especially if we consider his lack of participation in sport during his youth.²⁵

However, as we have been able to see, already as the young Archbishop of Munich he dedicated himself to this theme with a philosophically profound reflection, pointing out the potentiality of sport for the integral development of the

²³ Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Clergy of Rome*, February 29, 2009 in “L’Osservatore Romano”, weekly English edition n. 10, March 11, 2009, p.4.

²⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message to Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, on occasion of the International Seminar of Study*: “Sport, education, faith: a new season for the Catholic sports movement”, November 3, 2009, in: “L’Osservatore Romano” weekly English edition, n. 46, November 18, 2009, p.5.

²⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1998, p. 25-26.

person on the individual level and its capacities on the national and global levels.

Cardinal Ratzinger – and also as Pope Benedict XVI -, inserting sporting activity into a broader anthropological context, sought to bring these debate out of a dead end path of pure entertainment or sterile self autonomy. I myself was surprised to find that the Holy Father, in the first two and a half years of his pontificate (2005-2008) touched upon the theme of sport in various ways no less than fifty occasions.²⁶

Nor is it purely a coincidence that it is during the Pontificate of Benedict XVI, that a delegation of the Holy See participates in an Olympic Congress- that of Copenhagen last October 3-5, 2009, with a reflection on the theme of «Olympic values». For, as we recalled elsewhere, the Servant of God, John Paul II in the beginning of the year 2004, instituted the section “Church and sport” to insure a more direct and systematic attention to the vast world of sport on the part of the Holy See. And as we have seen from the above reflections, during the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, the interest and concern of the Universal Church to the vast world of sport continues as it seeks to dialogue with the renown sports institutions at the international level while fostering a renewal of pastoral work in and through sports at the level of the particular church.

²⁶ Cf. the index of themes as found in the seven volumes that have been published to date (2005-2008) of “Insegnamenti di Benedict XVI”.