

"Sport and Peace" International UN Forum
March 20, 2010, Salone del Palazzo regionale di Aosta

“Wars break out because nations misunderstand each other” said Pierre de Coubertin. “We shall not have peace- he says- until the prejudices which now separate the different races be overcome. What better means to attain this end than to bring the youth of all countries periodically together for friendly trials of muscular strength and agility?”^a

The founder of Fifa, Jules Rimet, also believed that sport could channel and mellow the fierce nationalism of his time. Yet, unlike Baron Coubertin, Rimet, as the son of a poor Catholic grocer, considered that peace through sport would **only be possible if sport reached out to all social classes**. His sports club in Paris was open to all social groups and even though the polite French high society of his time looked down on football as a game for thugs, Rimet adopted the game within his club and pushed for the creation of Fifa.

Then came the war... [All of you men and women in our audience who serve your countries within the military should know that Rimet fought as an officer in the first world war and earned the “Croix de Guerre” medal!]. Paradoxically, the war proved that football had already become a world game as British and German soldiers played football in No Man's Land at Christmas in 1914! Here we find a precursor to the CISM military games!

Rimet's dream that through football people from different nations “will be able to meet in confidence without hatred in their hearts and without insult on their lips” is still underway but how many will be united around the TV for this year's world cup in Africa!

Allow me to quote you another phrase. This time, from the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*. Article 61 states: “Sport helps to establish fraternal relations among people of all conditions, nations and races”. In fact, many popes have shared in this conviction of Coubertin, Rimet, and members of CISM that “sport can help to foster peace”^b.

“On various occasions –stated the Pope and sportsman, John Paul II- I have spoken publicly about sport as a real instrument of reconciliation in the world. Your presence here, from many countries (he is referring to the 43rd International Italian Tennis Open), is an eloquent symbol of the power of sport to unite. It brings people together. Competition between athletes is a universal language which immediately goes beyond the frontiers of nation, race or political persuasion..”^c

^a COUBERTIN, P. DE: “The Olympic games of 1896”. in: Müller, N.(ed.): *Pierre de Coubertin. Olympism*. Lausanne, IOC, 2000, p.360.

^b SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* n. 61.

^c JOHN PAUL II, *Speech to participants in the 43rd Italian International Tennis Championship in Rome*, May 15, 1986, in “Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II”, Vol IX, 2 (1986) p. 1438.

Regarding the recent Winter Olympics and Paralympics in Vancouver, Pope Benedict XVI had this to say: “Such an important occurrence for both athletes and spectators allows me to recall how sport ‘can make an effective contribution to peaceful understanding between peoples and to establishing the new civilization of love’. In this light, may sport always be a valued building block of peace and friendship between peoples and nations.”^d

Of course, we know that this capacity for peace is never automatically guaranteed. Global sporting events can easily come and go without the athletes or spectators having a moment to stop and reflect on their “peace building” opportunities. Thus, today’s Sport and Peace Forum is a very welcomed and needed initiative and I am grateful to CISM for their invitation to the Holy See to participate in this panel.

In fact, perhaps John Paul II himself expressed best CISM’s unique mission in his address to its members with occasion of the first Military games held in Rome in 1995: “The participation of over 4,000 young military athletes from more than 100 countries on every continent gives this event **a meaning which exceeds by far sporting competition itself** and becomes an encounter of peoples who, through sport, desire to send a powerful message of peace to the world... Your sporting events are a new form of dialogue between the world’s servicemen (and) a pedagogy that creates a culture of peace.”^e

This dialogue is at the heart of today’s Forum. While attending the sport and peace conference in Magglingen during the UN’s “Year of sport and education” in 2005 I learned about many concrete peace initiatives within CISM and within the United Nations family. (And it was also there where I met General Gola who has been instrumental in bringing many of us here today!) As we were asked to share some concrete initiatives or actions that can facilitate peace through sport, allow me to make three simply remarks.

The first regards the concept of peace itself. **What is peace?** The Vatican II document quoted above helps us to enrich our idea of this concept. “Peace is not merely the absence of war;” -I quote- “nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is ... an enterprise of justice.” *Gaudium et spes* goes on to say that “A firm determination to respect others and their dignity, as well as the **studied practice of brotherhood** are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide.”^f

For, in a similar way, sport too goes beyond what mere justice can provide. Sport is not simply an equal exchange of goods- (I serve you the tennis ball and you return it to me.) No! Sport is an encounter between human persons. It is not mutual exchange of things but rather a mutual experience that is shared and can enrich both competitors, both sides of the playing field. In this regard, these winter military games can play a key role as a concrete exercise in the “practice of brotherhood”.

^d BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to the Most Reverend Michael Miller, Archbishop of Vancouver*, in L’Osservatore Romano Italian Ed. N. 29, 5 February 2010, p.8.

^e JOHN PAUL II, *Speech to participants of the First World Military Games*, 7 September 1995, in L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Eng. Ed., n.40, 4 October 1995, p. 4.

^f SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*.n.78.

This brings us to a second point: the quality of our sportsmanship and sports-womanship -that is, our fair play- also determines its peace building potential. As John Paul II stated: “All of this (rests) on the condition that the men and women who engage in sport, especially on the international level, foster its inherent positive values, without allowing it to degenerate through excessive concern for merely material advantages or through undue subordination to partisan ideologies.”^g

Finally, let me share with you a concrete peace initiative that the Vatican’s “Church and Sport” office has been directly involved in since 2005. I refer to the “John Paul II Marathon for peace” that is held every year in the Holy Land. The marathon is actually a 10km run that is organized by the *Centro Sportivo Italiano* with the Vatican’s pilgrimage office. It starts in the town square of Bethlehem and –after passing through the checkpoint between the Palestinian and Israeli border whose gates are freely opened for the race – continues up hill and ends within the walls of Jerusalem at the heart of the city! What began during the period of the “antifada” as a act of solidarity with Christians is now in its sixth year and hope to include inhabitants of Gaza this year.

I participated in 2006 and what an unforgettable experience: running side by side and conversing along the way with Palestinian youth, Israelis, and Italians. (I suppose I was the only American that year). For some Palestinian youth, this might be the only day that have to freely enter Jerusalem and walk its streets. Yet, for all of us, it was a concrete way in which sport placed us side by side, people of different races and faiths, competing together for the goal of peace. There, one Israeli runner told me: “Reverend, when it comes to peace, we are not divided into two groups: Jews and Palestinians; Rather, between those who want peace and those who don’t want it!” When diplomacy comes to a standstill, sport seeks to continue this dialogue.

I will be running again this year and I invite you to join me in this race for peace. This year there will also be a friendly volleyball match at the checkpoint; a bike race from Nazareth to Galilee; and a swimming competition (all this, with the patronage of the corresponding Italian sports federations). If anyone is interested in helping to bring hope to this very sensitive part of the world by participating - where I believe CISM is not yet present- the marathon will be held on Sunday April 25th.

In conclusion, it is my hope that today’s Sport and Peace forum as well as the winter games that follow contribute to this precious work of offering the world this “new form of dialogue” that might enable us to overcome any prejudices that now separate us and in this way be an effective method of promoting peace, mutually understanding, and respect for one another.

^g JOHN PAUL II, *Speech to participants in the 43rd Italian International Tennis Championship in Rome* on May 15, 1986, in “Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II”, Vol IX, 2 (1986) p. 1439.