

Football Fans in their own write...





Pope Francis

(San Lorenzo de Almagro FC)— Leader of the Roman Catholic Church

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected pope in 2013 after the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI. He took the name Francis in honour of Saint Francis of Assisi. His papacy marked several firsts. The first Jesuit to become pope, the first from the Southern Hemisphere and the first from the Americas.

He was born in 1936 and has Italian heritage on both his father and mother's side. His father's family were migrants from Italy—leaving in the late 1920s to escape the fascist rule of Mussolini.

After graduating from a technical secondary school, he worked as a laboratory technician chemist in the food section of a scientific research company. Here he worked alongside Esther Balestrino, a left-wing activist who was a leading figure in the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo movement.

He commenced studies at the seminary at the age of 19, entered the Society of Jesus at 21 and became a Jesuit officially at 23. After completing his studies at the seminary he taught literature and psychology in high schools. His theological studies commenced in 1967 when he was 31 and he was ordained to the priesthood just before his 33rd birthday. Following a distinguished career in various roles in the church he was created a cardinal

in 2001 by Pope John Paul II. As pope he chooses to live in the Saint Martha guesthouse rather than the papal apartments. It is a guesthouse for Vatican officials, distinguished guests, visiting clergy and lay people of all faiths.

As well as football Pope Francis had a keen interest in tango dancing as a young man. He is also a fan of Argentinian movies and music.

Pope Francis is a keen football fan and visiting heads of state find it easy to choose a suitable gift for him—he is reputed to have an extensive collection of personalised team jerseys. In *Football Fans* he tells how he has been a lifelong supporter of San Lorenzo de Almagro FC from his home neighbourhood in Buenos Aires. In addition, he discusses the wider benefits of sport—the spiritual and mental as well as the physical. In response to my invitation to contribute to *Football Fans* he suggested that I use what he calls his ‘Lay Encyclical’ on sports. It is in the form of an interview reported in the famous sports newspaper *La Gazzetta dello Sport*.⁵

Pope Francis’s Lay Encyclical on Sport

The original interview was conducted and reported by Pier Bergonzi, Deputy Director of *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. January 2, 2021—Milan

Pope Francis: “My sport is rag ball. Being a goalkeeper has been a school of life”

Holy Father, you said that as a child you went to the stadium with your parents to watch football matches.

“I remember very well and with pleasure when, as a child, I used to go to the stadium with my family, it was known as The Gasometer. I particularly remember the 1946 championship, the one that my San Lorenzo won. I remember those days spent watching the players play and the happiness of us children when we returned home: the joy, the happiness on our faces, the adrenaline in our blood.

⁵ The article was published in January 2021 and is reproduced by kind permission of La Gazzetta Dello Sport. It is translated from the original Italian.

Then I have another memory, that of the rag ball, (in Italian *pallone di stracci*; in Spanish *pelota de trapo*⁶). Leather was expensive and we were poor, and the rubber or plastic ball was not at all common, but a ball of rags was enough for us to have fun and almost work miracles playing in the little square near our house. As a child I liked football, but I wasn't among the best, on the contrary, I was the one who was, as we say in Argentina a *poto dura*, literally 'hard leg'. (Ed: Very honest appraisal by the Holy Father. In the modern vernacular I think we say: 'First touch? Hmmm—not so good'.) That's why they always made me play in goal. But being a goalkeeper was a great life school for me. The goalkeeper must be ready to respond to dangers that can come from anywhere. And I also played basketball, I liked basketball because my dad was a pillar of the San Lorenzo basketball team."

Sport is also a party and a celebration. A sort of liturgy, of rituals, of belonging. It's not for nothing that we talk about *sporting faith*.

"Sport is all of what we have said: effort, motivation, development of society, assimilation of the rules. And then it is fun: I am thinking of the choreographies in football stadiums, of the writing on the ground when the cyclists pass, to the banners of encouragement when a competition is taking place. Trumpets, rockets, drums, as if everything disappeared, the world hung on that instant. Sport, when lived well, gives one celebration: we meet, we rejoice, we cry, we feel we 'belong' to a team. 'Belonging' and admitting that being alone it is not so nice—better to live, rejoice and party together. And curious, then, that someone connects the memory of something with sport: 'The year in which the team won the Scudetto; the year in which the champion won the competition. The year of the Olympics, of the World Cup'. In some way people's experience of sport and their passions, marks the personal and collective memory. Perhaps it is precisely these elements that authorize us to speak of 'sporting faith'."

⁶ The notable award-winning feature film *Pelota de Trapo* was released in Argentina in 1948.

Is there a sports page, or an event, that you remember with pleasure?

“I don’t have such great knowledge on the subject, but I can tell you that I follow all of them with interest. Sports stories that are not ends in themselves, but of people who try to leave the world a little better than when they found it. When, during an apostolic journey, I went to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, I remember that I was told about Gino Bartali, the legendary Italian cyclist who, recruited by Cardinal Elia Dalla Costa, and appearing to be on a training run on his bike, he left Florence for Assisi and returned with dozens of false documents hidden in the frame of the bicycle. These were used by Jews thus enabling them to flee and be saved. He cycled hundreds of kilometres every day knowing that, if he was stopped, it would be the end of him. His actions offered a new life to entire families persecuted by the Nazis, even hiding some of them at his house. It is said that he helped save about 800 Jews and their families during the barbarism to which they were subjected. He said that good is done and not said, otherwise what good does it do? Yad Vashem considers him ‘Righteous Among the Nations’, recognizing his commitment. Here is the story of a sportsman who left the world a little better than he found it.”

Defeat and victory are part of sporting dynamics, like the fact of living.

“Winning and losing are two verbs that seem to oppose each other: everyone likes to win and nobody likes to lose. Victory contains a thrill that is even difficult to describe but defeat also has something wonderful. For those who are used to winning, the temptation to feel invincible and strong: victory, sometimes, can make you arrogant and lead to think you have made it. Defeat, on the other hand, favours meditation: wondering why you have lost is an examination of conscience, the work done is analysed. That is why, from certain defeats, beautiful victories are born: because, once the mistake has been identified, the thirst for redemption is ignited. I would say that those who win do not know what they lose. It’s not just a play on words: ask the poor.”

Behind every great champion there is a coach. Coaching is a bit like educating?

“In some ways yes. When an athlete wins, their coach is almost never seen: he doesn’t go up on the podium, he doesn’t wear the medal, the cameras rarely frame him. And yet, without a coach, a champion is not born: you need someone who ‘bets’ on him, who invests time, who knows how to glimpse possibilities that not even the athlete would imagine. That is a bit visionary, I dare say. Forgiveness, it’s not enough to train your body: you need to know how to speak to the heart, to motivate, to correct without humiliating. The more brilliant the athlete, the more delicate they are to handle: the true coach, the true educator, knows how to speak to the heart of those who are born champions. Then, in the moment of the competition, they know how to step aside: they accept that they must depend on the athlete. The athlete will come back in case of defeat to face up to it.”

Can a healthy competitive spirit also help the spirit to mature?

“Two passages written by Saint Paul in his letters come to mind. The first: ‘Don’t you know that, in races in the stadium, everyone runs, but only one wins the prize? Run yourselves too in order to win it’ (1 Corinthians 9:24). It is a beautiful invitation to get involved, so as not to look at the world from the window. The second passage that I would like to recall is when Paul, speaking to his friend Philemon, gives as if confiding his secret to him: ‘I run because I want to reach the prize’ (Philippians 3:12). No athlete runs just to run: There is always some beauty which, like a magnet, draws one who undertakes a challenge to himself. It begins always because there is something that fascinates us.”

The heart is at the centre of sporting activity as well as religious experience. Keeping it ‘trained’ is the secret to not losing talent?

“Keeping the heart in order is the secret for any victory, not just for sports: the psalmist, in fact, asks God: ‘Let my heart be whole’ (Psalm 119.80). If we look at the history of talent, we realize that so many talented people got lost precisely

because of disorder. An orderly heart gives a happy heart, a state of grace, ready for the challenge. I think that if we asked any athlete the ultimate secret of their victories, more than anyone would tell us, is that they win because they are happy. Happiness, therefore, is the consequence of an orderly heart. A happiness to share because if I keep it to myself, it remains a seed, if instead I share it, it can become a flower.”

Many champions tell of having begun their sporting adventure in the shadow of a bell tower, in the ‘field of the oratory’ of a church in the city centre or in the extreme suburbs.

“The Church has always had a great interest in the world of sport. We can say that in sport the Christian communities have identified one of the most understandable grammars to speak to young people.

Let us think of Don Bosco and the Salesian oratories but let us think of all the parishes in the world, including especially the poorest, in which there is always a field available to play and play sports. Through the practice of sport, a young person is encouraged to give the best of himself, to set himself a goal to achieve, not to be discouraged, to collaborate in a group. And a wonderful opportunity to share the pleasure of victory, the bitterness of a defeat, to get together and give the best of oneself.”

You, as a Jesuit, and spiritual and cultural son of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, ‘champion’ of the Exercises Spiritual. ‘Exercise’ is synonymous with training. Is there any relationship between sport and the exercises of St. Ignatius?

“When St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote the Spiritual Exercises, he did so by thinking back to his history as a soldier, made up of exercises, training, training. It senses that the spirit, like the body, must also be trained. Practicing, then, requires discipline: the exercises are good teachers. Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, a Belgian monk who lived in the twelfth century, says that ‘the will generates practice, practice generates exercise, and exercise

procures strength for any work.' The exercise of goodness, beauty, truth are occasions in which man can discover unexpected resources within himself. And then play with them."

What type of sportsman do you appreciate the most?

"Thank you for not letting me name your own: it is unpleasant to choose one at the expense of the other. I appreciate, however, those who are aware of the responsibility of their talent, whatever sport or discipline they belong to. The 'champion' becomes, inevitably, a model of inspiration for others, a sort of muse, a landmark. It is important that athletes and champions are aware of how much their words, their attitude, affects thousands of people. There are very beautiful aspects: I think, and I take this opportunity to thank them, of the boys of the Italian national football team who every year with their coach, go bed by bed, to visit the children in the pope's hospital (The Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital), first of all in the oncology ward. This also happens for other hospitals and in many countries. A way to realize the dreams of children who suffer. When, however, the champion forgets this dimension, he loses the beauty of being such, the opportunity to make sure that those who take them as a model can improve, grow, also become a champion too. I wish the champions to learn a precious virtue: temperance, the ability not to lose a sense of proportion. Only in this way will they be able to witness the great values such as honesty, fairness, dedication. These are not trivial things."

Football, or rather sport, has recently mourned the death of Maradona, considered by many to be the greatest footballer ever. What did he represent for your Argentina?

"I met Diego Armando Maradona during a match for Peace in 2014: I remember with pleasure everything Diego did for the Scholas Occurrentes, the Foundation that takes care of the needy all over the world. On the pitch he was a poet, a great champion who gave joy to millions of people, in

Argentina as in Naples. He was also a very fragile man. I have a personal memory linked to the 1986 World Cup, the one that Argentina won thanks to Maradona. I was in Frankfurt, it was a difficult time for me, I was studying the language and collecting material for my thesis. I had not been able to see the final of the World Cup and I only knew the day after the success of Argentina on Germany, when a Japanese girl wrote on the blackboard ‘Viva I’ Argentina’ during a German lesson. I remember it, personally, as the victory of solitude because I had no-one with whom to share the joy of that sporting victory: loneliness makes you feel alone, while what makes joy beautiful is being able to share it. When I was told of Maradona’s death, I prayed for him and sent the family a rosary with a few words of comfort.”

The Vatican City has its own athletics team. Then there is the ‘Clericus Cup’, a sort of championship for the students of the pontifical universities. It’s not just sports.

“Evangelising means witnessing, in personal and in community life, to the life of God in us, the one that was given to us in Baptism. There are no strategies, there is no sense in marketing faith: only when a man or a woman sees a man or a woman living like Jesus, then they can be fascinated and will be able to begin to take seriously the proposal of the Gospel. It is evangelised with the fascination of one’s own life that has the taste and taste of the Beatitudes. The athletics teams and the Clericus Cup find the meaning of their presence in the Vatican precisely to witness an evangelical style in sport. It is also a way to build community. I think of the variety of athletes who come from the administrations: Swiss Guards, gardeners, pharmacists, employees of the Vatican Museums, the Papal Villas, priests and perhaps even some monsignors. An outgoing Church ... on the sports fields!”

There is an Arabic proverb that says: “Don’t give up. You would risk doing it an hour before the miracle.” A proverb that faith and sport share.

“Your surrender is the dream of your opponent: surrender and let them

win. And always a risk: “What if I had resisted a moment longer?”, you will continue to tell yourself for who knows how many times seeing how it ended. Then it is also true that there are days when it is better to keep fighting, others when it is wiser to let it go.

Life is like a war: you can lose a battle, but not the war! A man does not die when he is defeated: he dies when he surrenders, when he ceases to fight. The poor, from this point of view, are a spectacular example of what it means not to give up. Not even in the face of the evidence of indifference: they continue to fight to defend their lives.”