

Pontifical Council for the Laity

**International Seminar of Study
«Coaches: educating people»**

Rome, May 14th-15th 2015

Chapel of «*Villa Aurelia*»

May 15th 2015, 6.30pm

Homily

**«*In search against the current,
below an open sky*»**

Your Eminence, Excellencies,
Dear brothers in the ministry, Deacons, Priests and Bishops,
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

Considering the *program* of this second day of our Seminar and meditating on the *first reading* of this Eucharistic Celebration taken from the Acts of the Apostles (*Act. 18:9-18*), a piece of poetry has come spontaneously to my mind, composed by Saint John Paul II (1978-2005), the founder of our Section *Church and Sport*, instituted within the Pontifical Council for the Laity in 2004.

Pope Wojtyła was a man with many gifts, a sportsman with a great appreciation of the many values of sports, but also aware of its limits. In the year 2003 he published three meditations titled “*Trittico Romano*” (*Roman Triptych*), the first of which contains the poem “*La sorgente*” (*The Spring*).

It seems to me that this piece of poetry could introduce us very well into this second day of our work and that it could also serve as a valuable help for the interpretation of today’s first reading. The eighteen verses can be divided into three parts that I would like to present one by one for our meditation.

I have titled the first part:

1. *The laborious but firm search for the Spring*

**“The undulating wood slopes down
to the rhythm of mountain streams....
If you want to find the source,
you have to go up, against the current,
tear through, seek, don't give up,
you know it must be somewhere here.
Where are you, source? ... Where are you, source?”**

The meditation of the Pope is inspired by someone who is *in search*, who wants to find the *origin* of the beauty of creation, of the mountains, with their peaks and valleys. In this search, he is helped by a stranger who knows his intentions and gives him this suggestion: “*If you want to find the source, you have to go up, against the current.*”

This means that one cannot receive simple and banal answers to the great questions of life that inevitably we are confronted with. The answers are not given to us at the same level of the external phenomena, therefore a “*going up*” is needed, a going “*against the current*”, even if the course of the creek in the woods, flowing down, points to the opposite direction. And this “going up” is often impeded by obstacles that persuade us to abandon the path and push us to go back toward the valley. But the hiker of the poem doesn’t let himself being affected and does not break off his hard climbing because he is sustained by the certainty that this spring does exist and can be found. It is only a matter of time, effort and patience in order to find it.

In this effort, I think that some important analogies with sporting activities can be highlighted, and, in particular way, analogies with the task of a coach. Every coach has a clear idea of what he wants to achieve, even if it is hard, and he has to go against the current. In his commitment, he often comes across with many difficulties and “headwinds”. Ever new shortcuts are frequently offered to him, persuading him that an alternate route is easier, so that he can spare and reduce the labor. Some people will say: “by now, the shortcut has become the rule, everybody does it!”. In the second part of the poem the search and the questions of the walking man continue, I have titled this part:

2. *The hidden mystery of the beginning*

“Silence....

Stream, stream in the wood,

tell me the secret of your beginning!

(Silence—why are you silent?

How carefully you have hidden the secret of your beginning).”

John Paul II speaks about the silence of the wood and of the stream that flows down toward the valley. The searching man wants to discover the mystery of its origin, as it is said twice. On one hand, a stream in the wood is a very normal phenomenon in nature, but, on the other hand, this spectacle doesn't come out of nothing, its existence cannot be taken for granted. Therefore the questions must be asked: *Who* are you ? *Who* is your *origin*? *Who* created you? *Why* are you silent?

Behind these poetical verses lays the question about the ultimate origin and meaning of all that surrounds us, the living and inanimate nature, but also the question about the origin and the goal of our existence. And this origin is described by the Pope through the concept of *mystery*.

These thoughts of the Holy Pope correspond to our experience, in the very moment when life confronts us with the “great questions”. We often find ourselves caught in an embarrassing silence, that confuses and depresses us. A great patience, an attentive eye and an open ear are needed to be able to decipher and comprehend the mystery of the origin. This means, in the end, that by ourselves we are unable to give satisfactory answers to our major questions.

A Christian find this answer in the word and action of God, ultimately, in a Person: Jesus Christ. He is the answer and the very face of God for us! All who want to know what God answers to all our questions and doubts have to look at Jesus, He is God's countenance that faces towards us.

In the last part of his poem, Pope John Paul II tells us that after the search, the ascent and the exploration, a third step must follow, that it is to say an intense prayer.

3. *The refreshing and life-giving strength of the spring water*

**“Allow me to wet my lips
in spring water,
to feel its freshness,
reviving freshness.”**

This prayer is a supplication addressing the Creator and Lord of the springs and of all the waters: “Allow me to wet my lips in spring water, to feel its freshness, reviving freshness.” The meditation on the stream in the wood has led to the discovery of its *raison d'être*, which is that of containing and offering fresh water.

In this last stage, what is at stake, is the ultimate fulfilling of all the questions and researches. And this is asked in a very intense, and, at the same time, simple and humble prayer. The supplicant does not dare to ask a drink of water, but only prays to wet his lips to perceive a little bit of its freshness.

Dear brothers and sister in Christ,

in his poem, Pope John Paul II doesn't speak directly about God, but God, being omnipresent, is silently understood. Through fundamental existential experiences, such as the beauty of creation, the question of and the search for meaning, the Pope wants to lead man, in a gentle and discreet way, to a definitive answer, but without presupposing it from the outset or by simply imposing it. And in these fundamental experiences of man, is included also sport activity. In his hard work, in his defeats and in his victories, also the sportsman is reached by the ultimate search for meaning.

In the piece of poetry “The Spring”, one can note the rich pastoral experience of the priest, bishop and Pope who has accompanied so many people, in search and full of questions. At the same time, one can also note the gentle and noble character of the man Karol Wojtyła.

In today's first reading (cf. Act 18:9f) God himself, in a night vision, says to Paul – a man who knew and valued sporting activity – “*Do not be afraid. Go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you...*” God himself encourages

Paul to not abandon the right path and to go against the current in his apostolic activity. God himself continually assists him in this task.

Let us not forget that, even outside of Paul's apostolic work, does not exist at all any "neutral" human activity, all human actions presuppose an horizon of values and virtues. Every man needs a "reference system", an answer to his quest for an ultimate meaning.

The sporting activity – like the encounter with nature – is a strong experience of beauty and an occasion for practicing multiple human virtues. And in this experience, the coach plays a decisive role because he has to keep "the sky open", beyond the purely technical/physical practice of athletic training. This commitment translates into respect and appreciation, closeness and patience, into a sense of moderation and of realism for what is feasible, in a word: in educating people to "fair play" towards oneself and the others, not only to make efforts to win at all cost!

As a man of God Pope John Paul II has managed to "keep the sky open" in front of the beauty, but also in front of the questions and mysteries of nature and man. Let us follow the great examples that are given to us today – Saint Paul and the holy Pope John Paul II and let us walk on the right path, if necessary, even against the current, like the man searching for the spring, always keeping "the sky open" above us, in the athletic training also.

Amen

*α Mons. Josef Clemens,
Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity,
Vatican City*