

SPORTS AND CATHOLICS IN ITALY FROM THE MID- NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY¹

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Abstract

The relationship between sports and the Catholic world between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century is key to understanding the genesis and the development of sports in Italy. This article aims at studying the Catholic Church involvement in Italian sports through the analyses of the minutes of the first meeting of the Federazione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane and some issues of its newsletter, *Stadium*. The Catholic Church promptly paid attention to the international spotlight on sports with its own ecumenical interests. As a consequence, the institution was involved in subjects related to gender, physical education, military training and some of the most important secular organizations that dealt with sports, like the Federazione Ginnastica Italiana, contending with them to control Italian sports organization.

Keywords: sports; Catholic Church; Federazione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane; Italy.

Resumo

Esportes e católicos na Itália a partir de meados do século XIX ao início do século XX

A relação entre os esportes e a Igreja Católica, entre o final do século XIX e início do XX é uma chave para o entendimento do surgimento e desenvolvimento dos esportes na Itália. Neste artigo se estuda o envolvimento desta instituição nos esportes italianos através da análise da minuta do primeiro encontro da Federazione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane, bem como de seu boletim mensal, a revista *Stadium*. A Igreja Católica rapidamente prestou atenção para o destaque internacional

¹ Translated by Micaela Tirinzoni e David Murray.

dos esportes com seus próprios interesses ecumênicos. Como consequência, a instituição se envolveu em assuntos relacionados com gênero, educação física, treinamento militar e com as mais importantes organizações seculares que lidavam com os esportes, como a Federazione Ginnastica Italiana, disputando com estas a organização dos esportes na Itália.

Palavras-chave: esportes; Igreja Católica; Federazione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane; Itália.

Studying the first years of FASCI (Federazione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane) [Federation of Italian Catholic Sports Associations] and UIOCEP (Union Internationale des Oeuvres Catholiques d'Education Physique) [International Union of Catholic Institutions for Physical Education], the future FICEP (Fédération Internationale Catholique d'Education Physique) [Catholic International Federation of Physical Education], amounts to studying the way Italy came to play a primary role on the European sports scene, despite the well-known problems deriving from the still insufficient development of the economic and social situation at the beginning of the twentieth century. Catholic sports in Italy, their origins and evolution, have not yet been investigated exhaustively, since sports historiography is recent in Italy and has not been fully articulated.²

The one-hundredth anniversary of FICEP, which will be celebrated in 2011, offers an important occasion for us to gather scholars in the field around this theme, and this first Roman seminar is a good opportunity to present a research project in this direction.

The relationship between sports and the Catholic world between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century is a key to understanding the genesis and the development of sports in Italy. The position of the Church regarding this new social phenomenon, which took root all over Europe starting from the mid-nineteenth century, would prove significant for choices related to national sports policy, especially in a country like Italy, with such a marked Catholic heritage.

² Notwithstanding Fabrizio (1977, 2010) outlined the positive attitude of Catholics towards gymnastics as a precursor of sports, even in the midst of contrasts and debates, and Pivato (1996) subsequently devoted himself to the analysis of Catholic sports, especially in the fascist and postwar period. There were no subsequent organic studies on this subject in Italy, but only rapid outlines in some works. The writings by the young Ponzio (2005) are recent. We refer to some allusions to Catholic sports in Ferrara (1992), Pivato (1990) and Martini (1976).

The Church's anthropological position has always granted preference to the spiritual dimension rather than the body. But for the Church sports have never been—and never will be—a mere search for strength and physical power, an expression of elements of outward physicality, or idolatry of the body, and this has proved evident ever since the early approaches to gymnastics: “sound souls in sound bodies,” in the words of more than one of the “saintly educators.”

In more recent times, as the prominent historian Felice Fabrizio (2010) recalls, together with concepts like that of “gymnastic Christianity” or “Christianly and physically strong youngsters” the idea has appeared that a real Catholic sports model exists, an unequivocal style in which the “confirmation of being Catholic” is revealed, as Pope Pius XI told the gymnasts from Gand in 1922. Christian sports make human beings better because they help them to overcome the alienation of work, not plunging them into the instrumentality of military training, but recovering the ludic function while preserving the educational one, of course. In such a view, gymnastics and sports not only have always looked practicable by Catholics, but devoting themselves to such activities has always been desirable to enhance the body as a completion of the intellectual and moral development of each person. Gymnastics and sports are, above all, a festival, the joy of life, as they appear in Coubertin and his pedagogical writings, for example.³

The Church promptly paid attention to the international spotlight on sports with its own ecumenical interest.

The first contacts of Catholics in sports are well known and can be traced back to the Barnabite Fr. Semeria and subsequently Don Bosco and the Salesian Fathers, and

³ Pierre de Coubertin wrote many pedagogical works. See the detailed bibliography edited by Susanna Barsotti in R. Frasca (2007).

their vision of sports as a tool to enliven the spirit and strengthen the soul and the body, while helping to keep a social balance. In such a perspective, gymnastics and then sports would be observed closely and encouraged by the Church, which saw in them a suitable means to prepare citizens to face any kind of adversity, especially spiritual, considering that the lifestyle proposed by the liberal government of the time was not regarded as suitable according to the dictates of Catholicism (PONZIO, 2001, p. 496).

Nevertheless, as time went by, a gap arose inside the Catholic sports movement between those who saw sports competition exclusively as a useful delight for the moral education of citizens and those who wanted to practice sports, instead, in terms of all their competitive components. It was the eternal dilemma regarding gymnastics, physical education, and sports, concerning which we know there is still a debate, since it has never really been resolved, especially in schools and among educators in general. But we will soon deal with this subject again after some quotations from the period.

I would like to start with FASCI's first years, studying the minutes of the first meetings preserved at the Paul VI Institute in Rome and some issues of FASCI's newsletter itself, *Stadium*, which was first published in July 1906 under the name of *Bollettino delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane* [*Bulletin of Italian Catholic Sports Associations*].⁴

The magazine, even more than the minutes, which appear sparing, is valuable for content on our history, and yet the minutes suggest how the Catholic sports movement at its start worked on organizational matters with the utmost engagement (the meetings of its Executive Council were held weekly, sometimes even late in the evenings) and paused to reflect, above all, about the new affiliated clubs and their

⁴ *Il Bollettino*, in its third issue in September, had already taken the name *Stadium*.

history, proving to be worried by the attacks launched by secular sportsmen.

Let us now consider the first problem that FASCI tried to solve from its outset: the difficult relationship with the Federazione Ginnastica Italiana [Italian Gymnastics Federation] (FGI), which tended to exclude it from the first gymnastics meeting—the articles of the statute specified that gymnasts could not have political or religious connotations—because it also feared that FASCI could take away a certain number of gymnasts. This actually occurred, for in 1910 the Catholic clubs numbered 204, with ten thousand members, compared to 195 regularly enrolled secular clubs (FABRIZIO, 2010, p. 40) in an astonishing progression which took FASCI to such figures, starting from fifteen clubs in 1906.⁵

They would increase again until they reached the number of 510 clubs in 1915, a really impressive figure when compared to the 244 clubs federated with FGI in August 1914 (BALLERINI, 1939, p. 304).

The Conflicts with FGI

The need for a Catholic association appeared under Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) in order to prevent a monopoly of youngsters' physical education by liberal gymnastic associations, often including exponents of freemasonry. Military and educational gymnastics had already begun to take root in Italy, supported by the patriotic movement of those who saw gymnastics as a sort of useful training to better face the enemy, Austria in particular, with a view towards Italy's unification. At the same time, the idea that gymnastics could also make a contribution to the education of future healthy, disciplined, well-trained, and law-abiding citizens started to gain ground in the schools.

⁵ Mario di Carpegna. "Coraggio e avanti!" [Courage and Forward]. Stadium, a.I, December 1908, p. 1-2.

In such a climate, gymnastic clubs quickly took hold in Italy, too, even if they did not reach the same number of members as in other European countries—especially Germany, followed by France and the countries in Northern Europe, including Great Britain.

After the tensions between the Church and the State in 1870, sports were introduced as a useful means for Catholics to emerge from a sort of isolation to which they had been relegated by the anticlerical spirit, which in the meantime had been spreading in Italy. The Pope of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) had displayed clear foresight: a Catholic cooperative movement was needed within which sports could find a place as an expression of a new and modern social presence. On close examination, there was a chance a “parallel society” would be created, since resistance by secularists to Catholic teams and gyms was so strong. Moreover, many recreational instructors in Rome had a Masonic background in this period which was poles apart from the Church. After freemasonry was condemned by Leo XIII, who accused it of “religious indifferentism”, the contrast was even more evident in the Encyclical *Humanum Genus* in (1884).

On this occasion, we do not have time for closer study of the links among freemasonry, gymnastics, and sports. However, it is good to remember that gymnastic clubs—standing at the forefront as seedbeds for young combatants seeking Italian unification at the time of the so-called *Risorgimento*—initially welcomed members proceeding from Carbonarism, abounding in freemasons as well. When in 1869 FGI was established and Italy was by then unified, the Federation included some leading figures from both the university and the military world, where freemasons were

numerous.⁶ This was certainly one more barrier between the official world of gymnastics and sports and the rising Catholic one. This ought to be remembered in order to better decypher the antagonism which was expressed against Catholics by FGI. The opposition was rather harsh: in August 1911 FGI was referred to as “Masonic” by FASCI and referred to as the cause of the crisis that gymnastics was going through, since it had “corrupted” youngsters with sports.⁷

But the engagement of Catholics—at first, exclusively in favor of physical education and gymnastics and only subsequently open to sports—will be dealt with briefly below.

The push for gymnastics to be practiced by Catholics, too, was provided by Pope Pius X (1903-1914), who, thanks to his Venetian origins, had a different and more conscious gymnastic culture in his blood, owing to the fortune it had enjoyed in the eastern part of Italy from the beginning, in areas that had been under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and influenced by the German *Tureen*. Pope Pius X is an essential character in this history, bringing about the return of Catholics to manifestations of civil life that had long been prohibited for political reasons. But the return to the sports world was not an easy one, as already mentioned, because of both the rather numerous presence of Masons in the sports area—in Rome, too—and the dislike that FGI immediately showed towards Catholics, as we shall soon see.

In 1905, the Catholic gymnasts gathered in Rome, at the Vatican, for a majestic gymnastic event attracting 33 gymnastic clubs and 400 athletes and riders. The welcome by Pius X for a gymnastic festival at the Vatican, in the St. Damasus courtyard, marked

⁶ Ernesto Nathan, the Mayor of Rome when Coubertin came to verify the possibility of organizing the Olympic Games in the Eternal City, was the Grand Master of Freemasonry. As was soon evident, Coubertin encountered a refusal from the Mayor and the support of the Pope.

⁷ Panardo, “Circoli Sportivi” [Sports Circles]. Stadium, a.IV, August 1911, p. 4-6.

the transition to a different mentality, decisively more advanced than that of Leo XIII and his anti-modernism.

The initial input came from Fratel Biagio of the Christian Schools, who at the beginning of 1904 launched the idea of a first competition in Piedmont to gather together young Catholics, stimulating the creation of a first gymnastics team, the Excelsior (MARCHISONE, 1926, p. 6) composed of youngsters from Turin, at the core of the Italian gymnastics tradition, which, as far as we know, had its origins in Piedmont.⁸

It was September 8, 1904, and the procession opening the events in Turin “departed from the Sanctuary of the Consolata, preceded by a group of riders and teams of gymnasts in uniform,” (MARCHISONE, 1926, p. 6) to everybody’s astonishment. It was not exactly easy for Catholics to start a real gymnastics movement, apparently far from spiritual engagement. As Giuseppe Marchisone (1926) wrote, recalling those first steps of the Catholic gymnasts:

The rise of these young people, who fortified their limbs in the generous competitiveness of sports, was viewed negatively; we wanted the virile energies of our youngsters to remain ensconced in the sacristy and not emerge from it in order to show that real strength of character lies only in a Christian soul, in an intact and strong conscience. (p. 6)

The idea for a future FASCI arose two days later, at the foot of the Sanctuary of Oropa, “in a fervid and vivid conference of accord and enthusiasm.” (MARCHISONE, 1926, p. 7). To tell the truth, the Catholic clubs in northern Italy would have wanted FASCI’s headquarters to remain in their region, where the Catholic gymnastic movement was more deeply entrenched, committed to authentic competition, and not

⁸ For the history of the Turin Gymnastic Club see, after the outlines contained in Di Donato (1998), which opened the way to sports historiography in Italy, Ferrara (1992) and Gilodi (1978).

just a virtuous hobby, as the Vatican usually interpreted gymnastics at the time.

The subsequent step on this path was the above-mentioned competition in the St. Damasus courtyard on October 5, 1905, which made a concrete contribution to the construction of a Catholic Federation. Gymnasts, riders, and runners competed in Rome in the three disciplines which were the most popular and widespread in any social class at the time. The most striking aspect for the highest ecclesiastical circles must have been not only the large number of French gymnasts competing under the sign of Catholicism, but the fact that they were also autonomously organized in a moment of crisis between Church and State in France owing to the laws imposing their separation in this country, whose consequences they must have felt.

In 1906 Pope Pius X twice publicly dealt with the French problems of coexistence between secular society and the Catholic world. His encyclicals (*Vehementer Nos*, dated February 11, 1906 and *Gravissimo Officii*, dated August 10 of the same year) witness to the grief of the Holy Father in the face of the attempt at secularization by the French State.⁹

The situation was more serious in Italy. The damage connected with *Non expedit* in 1874¹⁰ had brought about a fracture between secularists and Catholics which only the *Concordato* of 1929 would partly resolve. The consequences were felt even in the sports domain in an often insurmountable opposition between the two worlds, a contrast which actually dates back to the decision of the Belgian Nicolas J. Cuperus, president of the European Gymnastics Federation, in 1897, not to include clubs having political or religious names.

⁹ Munoz (2006) includes interesting documents from the Vatican Secret Archive.

¹⁰ *Non expedit* ("It Is Not Appropriate") expressed the Church's attitude between 1871 and 1886, with a final pronouncement by Pope Leo XIII, in advising Catholics not to take part in political life, particularly political elections.

At this point, the establishment of an autonomous Federation of Catholic Sports was inevitable, and it came to light in 1906 after the Biella competition in August of that year. FGI prohibited its members from attending the event. *Il Ginnasta* wrote, “Since such a competition is called for by a federated association, the member clubs of the Gymnastics Federation are not allowed to participate”.¹¹ At the conclusion of the event, Romano Guerra added the following paragraph to his yearly Technical Report concerning the Biella competition and the participating clubs:

The group of these Clubs, slipping out of the federation orbit with the sole desire of making public religious or political statements, contradicting the principles of neutrality provided for by our Statutes, is following a course which is not very fruitful and does not make the contribution needed to develop Italian physical education.

If these new young forces, abandoning the limited field to which their administrators wanted to restrict them, joined our federation loyally and with no reserves, adopting the guidelines, which do not prohibit anyone from professing political or religious principles, but only ask them to refrain from collective manifestations and public assertions of political and religious principles, the core of the institutions that are resting upon the powerful federation trunk would become far more powerful and perhaps could overcome the really inexplicable reluctance of the Government to foster youngsters’ physical education.

Perhaps at this moment the achievement of such a result is rendered more difficult because the Catholic Clubs have been gathered into a Federation. In any event, it will not be useless for our Federation to assert once more that it does not exclude any Club, but certain clubs unfortunately bar their own way to entering the federation fold.¹²

The words seemed to be a sorrowful and also definitive appeal to Catholics. The two positions were too intransigent for the respective “opponents” to find reconciliation, and the result was a split.

One of FASCI’s features was intolerance towards conflicts among different disciplines, as actually happened in many other federations on the Italian sports scene at

¹¹ *Il Ginnasta* [The Gymnast], a.XVIII, June 15, 1906, n. 6, p. 92.

¹² Romano Guerra. *Il Ginnasta* [The Gymnast], a.XVIII, September 15, 1906, n. 9, p. 141.

the beginning of the twentieth century.¹³

FGI was increasingly losing its monopoly on sports in Italy, suffering from the hard blows of even the newly established INIEF (Istituto Nazionale per l'Incremento dell'Educazione Fisica – 1906) [National Institute for the Advancement of Physical Education – 1906], forerunner of the future CONI [Italian Olympic Committee]. Sports were imposing themselves on the Olympic stage, on the one hand, and the different federations were becoming more specialized, on the other. These two new contingencies created serious problems for FGI, attacked on all sides for its claim—not very understandable at that point—to have a monopoly on sports in Italy (TEJA, 1996, p. 22-26). We may thus grasp why at such a critical moment FGI nonetheless attempted to block the creation of another Federation which, moreover, had initially granted priority to the domain of physical education rather than that of sports.

A gesture towards the Catholics was made by INIEF in 1908 when Earl Carpegna, the president of FASCI, was invited to join the Coordination Commission as a participant in the first annual meeting of the Institute, which took place in Rome from May 28 to June 3,¹⁴ and the general Executive Commission at the second annual meeting of INIEF, also in Rome, June 8-11, 1909.¹⁵ The representatives of FASCI were invited to attend the meetings of INIEF's Executive, at first Giovanni Frattini and then Salvatore Parisi, who was also the secretary of FASCI. But in those cases, too, the agreement was an illusion since the frictions between the two Institutions persisted. Lucchini would have wanted to choose the representative of FASCI inside his Institute

¹³ “Generalizzare” [Generalizing]. Stadium, a.XII, May 18, 1919.

¹⁴ Atti della prima riunione annuale: maggio, 1908. *Istituto Nazionale per l'Incremento dell'educazione Fisica* [National Institute for the Advancement of Physical Education, Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting, Rome – May 1908]. Rome: Tip. I. Artero, 1909, p. 325.

¹⁵ Atti della seconda riunione annuale: giugno, 1909. *Istituto Nazionale per l'Incremento dell'Educazione Fisica* [National Institute for the Advancement of Physical Education, Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting, Rome – June 1908]. Rome: Tip. I. Artero, 1910, p. 207.

personally, and at the session of the Catholic Executive Council on June 30, 1909, Carpegna announced he would withdraw from INIEF in the event of opposition,¹⁶ as actually occurred after it became clear that the Institute did not want to welcome FASCI's representatives, even if no official assertion was made. It was December 1909, and the split with INIEF was unequivocal. Carpegna wrote Lucchini a letter which was published in *Stadium* and mentioned in the minutes of the meeting of FASCI's Executive Council:

The intolerance...whereby some councilors, led by you, wanted to deny, at any cost, the indisputable right of the Federation of Italian Catholic Sports Associations...to be represented in the Institute, now gives it a political and factious slant, which it had never had since it was established and which is regrettably altering its whole primitive, very praiseworthy program and making any further cooperation by me impossible.¹⁷

Stadium subsequently published the names of those who were the most hostile to FASCI,¹⁸ and among them we find Giusto Arbace Fioravanti of the Gymnastics Federation, Eugenio Tromfeo, delegate of the Municipality of Rome, Romano Guerra, director of the Institute for Teaching Physical Education in Rome and executive member of FGI, and Luigi Lucchini himself. This detail is recalled to show what means were available to those who made "war against all religious feeling". What is more, FGI was going through a chronic crisis by then, increasingly deprived of authority by INIEF, while Carpegna with his Federation was occupying the space that the major Federation was gradually leaving empty. The fights with FGI were hard and unavoidable. They started immediately. Only two years after the creation of the Catholic Federation,

¹⁶ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, "Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912", v.2. Meeting of June 30, 1909.

¹⁷ Mario di Carpegna. "Verbali" [Minutes]. *Stadium*, a.II, December 1909, p. 4.

¹⁸ "L'INEF e la FASCI" [INEF and FASCI] *Stadium*, a.III, January 1910, p. 1.

Carpegna had reacted against the “ban” of FGI towards those who had attended the international competition in Rome in 1908:

After less than two years we have obtained what was hardly obtained in ten years' work; and if we are able to benefit from the abundant forces available to us, we will soon surpass it numerically as well, despite the small wars and the rigor of the regulations with which the public authorities too often oppose our modest claims, without ever insistently appealing to it, in spite of the hefty aid which it obtains from public revenue and which we are honored not to request.... And the prospect of an international league is already coming into sight...and will give us that high rank which we, as educators, honorably possess in the civil world.

If this entire radiant program can come into being even relatively soon, it will be partly due to the providential blindness of FGI, without which we would have made up our mind to play the very modest role of Cinderella in physical education in Italy.¹⁹

In an article in March 1909, with the significant title “La politica dei muscoli, delle parallele e delle sbarre fisse” [The policy of muscles, parallel bars, and fixed bars],²⁰ Carpegna underlined that despite the fact that many deplored the intervention of politics in sports matters, those applying their opinions to the letter were few, indeed. “Black, white, or red” gyms were built because youngsters tended to gather and “to act on the impulse” of sympathies and opinions. The Association’s Statutes thus prohibited engaging in politics, but in practice they did nothing but politics and then, if some time remained at their disposal, they also did gymnastics. FGI was ready to disregard everything, technical and disciplinary irregularities, but not taking part in competition without being authorized. It was not like this in other countries, such as America, where sports clubs espousing beliefs were not prohibited. On the other hand, in Italy, Carpegna added ironically, it was like being in a “hen house” with many gymnasts around the

¹⁹Mario di Carpegna. “La proscrizione della FGI” [FGI’s Proscription]. *Stadium*, a.I, October 1908, p. 4. The irony with which the articles are often packed is striking on *Stadium*. They abound in cartoons and funny stories.

²⁰ Mario di Carpegna. “La politica dei muscoli, delle parallele e delle sbarre fisse” [The Policy of Muscles, Parallel Bars, and Fixed Bars]. *Stadium*, a.II, March 1909, p. 2.

same dining table contending for food like hens.²¹ This statement revealed the crisis of FGI, which was running out of members and worried about losing them to Catholic teams.

One more, even if minor, episode that well highlights the marked conflict of FASCI with institutions, still not very favorable towards the Catholic world—also because Pope Pius X had toned down the terms of *Non expedit* for the elections in 1904, as a result of which the tensions with the secularists became more intense—occurred in September 1911, when the Ministry of Public Education did not award any prizes at the competition of the Catholics in Saronno, declaring that only FGI and INIEF were recognized. The Minister was the freemason Casati, a radical, probably against the enlargement of the Catholic sports movement. The latter experienced a special period of growth in those years, however, and the magazine *Stadium* indulged in the definition of the technical terminology of the gymnasts' world between 1911 and 1912, as if it wanted to testify to the need for its own totally autonomous life.

“The sect [the FGI] does not want pious souls in Italy to use an agile, strong body, hardened by work, as an obedient instrument, to defend their own mentality and resist and reject, if needed, provocations and arrogance, even with force,” wrote *Stadium*.²²

It was almost a war cry and became even more thoroughly manifest with the refusal to participate in the competition in Turin to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Italy's unification.

For Gymnastics and Against Sports

²¹ Ibid.

²² Orobico. “Refused sì... tollerati mai!” [Refused—Yes; Tolerated—Never!]. *Stadium*, a.VI, n.2, February 1911, p. 7-8.

The original position of FASCI and its independence were also seen in its siding at first against sports in favor of gymnastics. The explanations were diverse. The main reason was the opinion that sports did not belong to Latin culture. This is an important point to analyze, because it represents one of the causes of sports' lagging behind in Italy. In a Catholic country, as we see, FASCI became immediately influential (quickly overtaking FGI in the number of competitors in its events and in early attention to international exchanges and partnerships) and the idea that sports had Protestant roots and thus followed the "inhuman instincts of the masses," almost as a resurgent paganism, which was a "deplorable degeneration" of true physical education, a threat to "rational, beneficial development,"²³ lingered among its gymnasts for a long time. It was Carpegna himself who railed at INIEF—though not mentioning its name—considering it the "seedbed of modern gladiators, money grubbers, and purveyors of unwholesome emotions".²⁴

In August 1908, *Stadium* wrote:

[...] Christianity is the religion of weak people, but at the same time it is the cult of strength; of fortitude, i.e., of justice; of physical strength, i.e., of toughness placed at the service of the spirit. There is a sport fought by Christianity: it is the sport of idleness, the sport of those who have the ideal of making digestions easier, the body shape more elegant, and Christianity struggles against the abuse of force, i.e., violence.²⁵

Shortly afterwards, sports were defined as a means, and not as an end, to be used to educate young people in Christian principles, to keep holy the Lord's Day, to increase piety, the "life of the soul," the same way gymnastic exercises strengthen the body.²⁶ At

²³ Mario di Carpegna. "Amici e nemici dell'educazione Fisica. I" [Friends and Foes of Physical Education. I]. *Stadium*, a.VII, n.3, March, 1912, p. 3.

²⁴ Mario di Carpegna. "Amici e nemici dell'educazione Fisica. II" [Friends and Foes of Physical Education. II]. *Stadium*, a.VII, n.4, April, 1912, p. 1.

²⁵ P.S.S. "Sport cristiano" [Christian Sports]. *Stadium*, a.I, n.8, August, 1908, p. 4.

²⁶ Fratel Biagio. "A proposito di sport" [About Sports]. *Stadium*, a.I, n.8, August 1908, p. 5.

first the Catholic world offered resistance to the indiscriminate advent of sports in a more and more evident trend. Probably they sensed its possible exploitation for purposes linked to human physicality. There were some additional factors in this initial Catholic hostility to sports, for instance, the harmfulness of prizes in competitions, “a serious menace to the federation’s harmony and fraternity,” not least because there might be mistakes in the award process, thus causing discontent and disaffection. Hence the right value had to be attached to results and satisfaction sought in training excellent—but, above all, religious and morally good—gymnasts.²⁷

We cannot fail to mention the danger of the excessive impact of the audience’s preferences on the organization of gymnastics competition, which risked becoming a mere show. *Stadium* wrote about actual aberrations, hinting at “the corruption of Mr. Audience’s [author’s note: in italics in the text] taste,” since the public tended to be thrilled at “insane sports competition”, which only helped administrators earn large amounts of money. Therefore, the article concludes, “Sport must not be separated from physical education.”²⁸

To exaggerate the dangerousness of sports, Catholics resorted, in an often ironic style, even to cartoons in their magazine, such as the one published in the issue of January 1913 with the caption “A returnee...from the excesses of sport,” depicting a man weakened by intense cold with a pair of skis on his shoulder. Skiing had just arrived in Italy and at first, in some environments, was pointed to as an extremely tiring kind of activity and anything but beneficial for the body.²⁹ Or they used “incisive” terms, such as when the organizers of bicycle races were referred to as “vampires prowling for their prey disguised as ‘sportsmen,’” while cyclists were “men bent over

²⁷ Mario di Carpegna. “Coraggio e avanti” [Courage and Forward]. *Stadium*, a.I, December 1908, p. 1-2.

²⁸ G. Torella. “Aberrazioni sportive” [Sports Aberrations]. *Stadium*, a.II, February 1909, p. 5.

²⁹ *Stadium*, a.VIII, n.3, February 1913, p. 1.

the handlebars of small fast vehicles strenuously going round and round, driven by a mad gold-fever, intoxicated by alcohol and shouting, and going around till the last bead of sweat, till the last burst of their nervous tension.”³⁰ It was the year 1913, on the eve of the First World War. Bicycle racing presented itself as a sport of fatigue and excesses and was already very popular.

In these first years of the twentieth century, the Catholic sports movement also sided against rugby and boxing, both considered to be combat sports and therefore opposed to Christian morality.³¹ Rugby was defined as a “degeneration of sports” to be fought against, since the “exotic” styles coming from beyond the Alps, which were often considered as “bad,” nonetheless became popular among young people. The striking feature of rugby was its “savage and typical” violence, its “fierce, difficult, and dangerous” fighting, so that special wear was designed in order to manage to extricate oneself from the “dramatic human tangles.” Therefore, it seemed logical to oppose a game having “no educational principles” in itself, but arousing “the unwholesome desire for a victory won through the awakening of the most violent and cruel atavistic instincts” among young people.³²

Even football was defined as “butchery,” where players were seen as “beings with a sole purpose: winning at all costs, and they therefore use all the means at their disposal.” The match of Pro-Vercelli on the last Sunday of March 1913, for example, was referred to as a terrible and inhuman match, and FASCI’s magazine recommended that players be provided with leg pads and steel boots for the game “to protect

³⁰ G.M. Putignani. “Anche in Italia!” [In Italy, Too!]. *Stadium*, a.VI, March 13, 1913, p. 1. The title of the article shows that, in the Italian environment, a danger was perceived of sports entering the country as practiced elsewhere, with all the excesses involved.

³¹ “Sport barbaro” [Barbarous Sports]. *Stadium*, a.II, March 1909, p. 6. Cesare Ossicini. “Degenerazione sportiva” [The Degeneration of Sports]. *Stadium*, a.XII, March 27, 1919, p. 3-4.

³² Cesare Ossicini. “Degenerazione sportiva” [The Degeneration of Sports]. *Stadium*, a.XII, March 27, 1919, p. 3-4.

themselves from kicks.”³³

However, this attitude was destined to change soon afterwards, when Catholics also accepted sports and their specialties and created sports clubs, combining them with gymnastics and physical education, particularly after the First World War. Accordingly, football became “very useful” for young people, even from the standpoint of spreading Christian principles. As a matter of fact, Catholic teams distinguished themselves for their game style. With the change in generations and the spreading of internationalism in sports, the Catholic world also changed its position of hostility towards sports, though we know that fascism blocked the rise of FASCI and led it to self-dissolution in 1927.

In the early twentieth century, another significant peculiarity in the Catholic movement was the interest always shown by FASCI in the South, almost going against the mainstream as compared to the trend of secular gymnastics clubs, which were mainly located in the North and in the Center. Felice Fabrizio (2010), who is carrying out a meticulous research study on the figures and geographic distribution of these clubs, helps us to formulate a new outline for our history. First of all, the idea that the sports phenomenon was linked merely to towns and to the increasing urbanization of the early twentieth century at its outset should be refuted. As a matter of fact, many of these 510 associations were scattered around Italy, where FGI’s institutional apparatus had not arrived yet. FGI had been a nonprofit institution since September 1896, financed by the State and acting in an official capacity. FASCI was supported by its members and by the Church; however, it was present in 140 districts where secular organisms were absent. Glancing through the minutes of FASCI, we may notice the increasing number of southern Catholic clubs, mainly in Sicily—though in the population hubs in this

³³ “Il Macello” [Butchery]. Stadium, a.VI, March 27, 1913, p. 3.

case—even if the center of gravity was located in the central western regions. In Latium, Catholic clubs were twice as numerous as secular associations, and it is easy to guess the reason. Rome had 43 Catholic gymnastic clubs; Milan, 37; Turin, 25; Bergamo, 23 (the most in Italy in terms of the ratio of inhabitants to clubs); Genoa, 15; Naples, 11; Florence, 10; and Monza and Venice, 8. The rest of the Catholic clubs were scattered even in very small villages, not to mention the country, where a bell-tower is somehow always present. 21% of these clubs were located in villages with fewer than three thousand inhabitants.

Therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, sports abandoned their original elitist character, with which they had also appeared in Italy, displaying their social values, instead, offered to all classes, especially to the most destitute, and the Church played a leading role in this process. We need only consider the work of the Salesians, the Brothers of the Christian Churches, the Barnabites, and the religious institutions that set the tone for FASCI. Gymnastics and then sports represented the real expression of support which was offered to everybody.

Perhaps the multiplication of Catholic clubs in the South shows, on the one hand, how FASCI filled in the gaps left by FGI; on the other, it probably reveals a stronger rootedness of Catholicism in the South of Italy as compared to the rest of the country. The Church was evidently in favor of the neediest and looked after young people living in the most destitute social situations. We know that the Southern question appeared immediately after Italy's unification, as an important question requiring solutions that the liberal government was not always able to provide. The sports domain proved to be among those with greatest deficiencies in facilities and specialized staff who could take care of the young groups of gymnasts. It is probably for this reason that

the vast organization of the Church managed to furnish assistance in particularly uncomfortable situations, in relation to physical education as well.

This is our assumption when considering the frequent references to FASCI's prolific activity in the South of Italy. One of the most striking cases in this connection was the Messina earthquake in 1908. On that occasion, more than one club in the Sicilian town and in Reggio, as well as the whole surrounding area, suffered from heavy losses, not only economically speaking, but also as regards the lives of their members. It was on December 28, 1908, and it was a real catastrophe, as *Stadium* headlined. "Pro Zanclea", "Vigor", "Cassibile" and "Scoppa" in Messina, as well as "Fortitudo" in Reggio, were among the most severely affected clubs and displayed the mourning banner for a long time.³⁴ The attention of FASCI to this area of Italy was providential, and as early as September 1909 "Pro Zanclea" from Messina could inaugurate a new gym received as a "gift of the Pope".³⁵

Another important subject in Catholics' reflection on the role of physical education for youth was military training. This is a recurrent subject in the pages of *Stadium* and deserves deeper analysis. On this occasion, I shall confine myself to recalling that FASCI made a stand for the defense of the country in the early twentieth century, with the increase of tensions in Europe that led to the First World War, the time limit of my research. Catholics had always proved to be conscious of the importance of physical education among young people, the future of nations, for both health and military purposes. A great deal has been written on military gymnastics in Italy (TEJA, 1996; DI DONATO, 1987; ULZEGA and TEJA, 1993) but not on the gymnastics

³⁴ "Un'ecatombe!" [A Hecatomb!]. *Stadium*, a.II, January 1909, p. 1.

³⁵ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, "Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912", v.2. Meeting of September 27, 1909.

pursued by the Catholic movement in particular, while there is a lot of material on the military field in *Stadium* which has not been studied yet. I would like to recall a comment—once again ironic—by Carpegna: the Army “daily extols the superlative mobility of the Arabian-Turkish ‘squads’ from Libya; but it seems to ignore that if it had valued running among our young people, the Bersaglieri, the members of the Alpine troops, and the rifleman of Italy would also move quickly!”³⁶

Gymnastic Outfits and Women in Sports: Two Thorny Subjects

One more domain that led Catholics to oppose sports was the topic of gymnastic clothing. In the minutes of the Executive of May 17, 1910, P. Vitale dwelt on the description of knitted trousers that some clubs had adopted for their members. He considered that costume to be unhygienic and “hampering the gymnast, basically having harmful effects on decency and morality necessary” for the aims that FASCI set for itself, and, therefore, he invited it to take appropriate measures.³⁷ The controversy was not published in *Stadium*, and he thus did not want make it common knowledge, according to the typical Catholic approach to this kind of matter. The subject of gymnastic wear was broached once more in the same Council on May 31, when for the first time there was a hint of women’s teams, another taboo topic for Catholics which hardly ever appeared on the pages of its federal journal.

In a part of the minutes referred to as “politics and morality,” there is no real statement on the knitted costume for gymnasts, even if the hostility of the Council,

³⁶ Mario di Carpegna. “Amici e nemici dell’educazione Fisica. III”. *Stadium*, a.VII, n.5, May 1912, p. 1.

³⁷ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of May 17, 1910.

which wanted it to be “totally prohibited” was evident.³⁸ And here is the connection to the other taboo subject of female teams, about which FASCI states: “As regards the establishment of female teams in the bosom of federated Clubs: the Council declares it is absolutely uninterested in it, leaving Clubs free to establish such teams, which should be totally and forever out of the Federation”.³⁹ As is clear, these are very harsh words, which do not seem to accept women on Catholic teams. It is obvious that such an intolerant attitude towards them could only cause big delays in the process of women’s emancipation through sports in Italy and generally in Catholic Mediterranean countries, in contrast to what happened in Protestant northern Europe.

A more explicit reference to the gymnastic outfit appeared during the meeting on June 6, 1911, in regard to the “indecent use of knitted trousers,” while “the main aim of [...] FASCI is to combine the physical education of youth with religious and moral education.” It is specified that “[...] unfortunately [...] it is common practice to wear either skin-tight knitted trousers in gymnastic exercises or rather similar pants in athletic or running exercises, so that body shapes are too markedly outlined, thus causing a real scandal”.⁴⁰ The suggestion is not to ban them, but to explain how to use such clothes—a position witnessing to the certainly not progressive climate of the Catholic world of that period. Probably behind the tensions with FGI there was also this kind of moral limit, since it was intuited that Catholics could not keep pace with the other European

³⁸ At the session of June 14, the Council, “coming back to the subject of the use of knitted trousers, decided to consider them as indecent [underlined in the text] and recommended, as the case may be, long trousers or canvas shorts.” Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of June 14, 1910.

³⁹ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of May 31, 1910.

⁴⁰ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of June 6, 1911.

countries, especially in regard to women.

Female sports are only sporadically hinted at in *Stadium*, at least until the years I have taken into consideration, namely until 1914. We know the importance of the World War as a watershed in the history of women's emancipation—in which sports certainly played a leading role (TERRET, 1996, 2005; TEJA, 1995, 2005) —but it is also true that in a generalized delay of female sports in Europe, Catholic countries always revealed themselves to be the most backward. A “feminine” piece of news leaked out in *Stadium* in 1907: a fighting competition among women disputed at a theatre in Monte Carlo in June of that year. The fight was coldly reported, with no particular comments, a fact which is in some ways amazing.⁴¹ It was, however, really a show and not a sports event. In 1907 as well, the same publication reported, with a certain irony, about the granting of a driver's license to a woman in Paris, who thus became a rival “in speed and audacity to her male wheel colleagues”.⁴² The woman was, therefore, always seen as an eccentric—if not as a freak—when she appeared in public.

Accordingly, people were certainly amazed by the position of a Belgian female gymnast of “Gilde de métiers” from Bruges, who with her 13” in rope climbing at the International Competition, which took place in the Vatican in 1908, tied for third place with a man.⁴³

For several years thereafter, no female gymnasts and no female competitions were mentioned in *Stadium*, and this cannot fail to prove surprising, for, since the Obermann period in Turin, female gymnastics—despite the evident difficulties of that age—had started to become popular and had gradually advanced, also attracting women to sports (FABRIZIO, 1977; MARTINI, 1996; BONETTA, 1990; TEJA, 1995). Female

⁴¹ “Lotta” [Fight]. *Stadium*, a.II, n.6, June 1909, p. 6.

⁴² *Stadium*, a.II, n.11, November 1907, p. 6.

⁴³ See *Stadium's* supplement of September 1908.

gymnastics would impose itself from the early postwar period on, once again thanks to the initiative of the French sports environment.⁴⁴

The Catholic gap in female aspects of gymnastics was even more evident when in February 1913 *Stadium* announced the famous International Gymnastics Congress in Paris (March 17-20, 1913), with no reference to women's presence at all, though the latter was indeed remarkable, to such a degree that the Congress become a milestone in the world history of female physical education and sports (DI DONATO, 1998, p. 106; TEJA, 1995, pp. 36-41). In February 1913, too, the minutes of FASCI reported on a first concession to female gymnastics involving physical education handbooks to be prepared for seminaries and for "female students."⁴⁵ This was the first reference to women within a pedagogic subject, and the phrasing attached a certain importance to it. There are no other records regarding the female gymnastics movement in the minutes of FASCI in those years. When in May 1917, in the middle of the war, the Council returned to the thorny subject of gymnastic wear,⁴⁶ there was only a passing reference to the male outfit, which was proposed as "uniform" ("white outfit with long trousers for the parade, a grey one with shorts for the exertion"). No attention was paid to female gymnasts.

The subjects of clothing and female sports restricted the Catholic sports movement to backward positions when compared to the secular one. But there are other elements to notice in this account which balance the situation. The first concerns the

⁴⁴ Milliat and her impressive movement of sportswomen in the early twentieth century belonged to this environment. Among the various writings about Milliat, see in particular Drevon (2005).

⁴⁵ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, "Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912", v.2. Meeting of February 18, 1913. A picture portraying some girls from the primary schools in Civitavecchia dressed in perfect sailor style, during the feast of Saint Marinella, appeared in *Stadium*, a.III, n.4, April 10, 1913, but it is basically the only one.

⁴⁶ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, "Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912", v.2. Meeting of May 15, 1917. The outfits of the gymnasts are described as "not very sober."

accident insurance which the Valdocco Club in Turin took out with the Limited liability Insurance Company “L’Italia.” That was in 1908, and it took another quarter century for the Italian sports movement to consider insurance systems for athletes. The Social Security Fund dates back to 1934, and the National Working Men’s Club, which awarded some benefits to workers engaged in sports, dates back to 1925.

The other subject in which Italian Catholics took a lead was physical exercise for the disabled. In terms of solidarity and charity, an interesting piece of news certainly emerged at the International Competition at the Vatican in 1908. Two special teams performed there: a team composed of blind people from the St. Alessio Institute in Rome and another composed of deaf-mutes from the “Mutus Loquens” Institute in Turin. This was one of the first experiments in competition for disabled people appearing in the history of Italian sports, including even difficult exercises (leaps, landings, Jaegers on bars) performed to the astonishment of the enthusiastic audience, with as many as twelve thousand people crowding around the Belvedere court.⁴⁷

Finally, we cannot ignore the far-sightedness of Catholics, who exploited the media, especially newspapers, to the full in order to shape trends and opinions. When compared to the various other sports publications at that time, *Stadium* had a good circulation, and in 1914 the Executive of FASCI considered the idea of tuning it into a national newspaper. The importance of communication in sports was fully understood, and this realization conferred upon the Catholic sports organization a high level of modernity which only war managed to limit.

Consequently, if we give weight to the advanced traits of the Catholic sports movement at the beginning of the century—internationalism, support for the

⁴⁷ M.Jerace. “La ginnastica in Vaticano” [Gymnastics at the Vatican]. *La Ginnastica*, a.XX, n.8, October 1908, pp. 113-114.

educational dimension of sports, accident insurance, special activities for the disabled, the enhancement of communication in sports—they definitely surpass the more backward factors, such as disregard for women and a certain prudishness in the choice of gymnastic wear. Among all these aspects probably the most significant is attention to the international sphere, in the modern perspective suggested by Pius X, who, on several occasions, promoted the spreading of FASCI worldwide, according to the teaching of the Church, aimed at all nations.

The Creation of UIOCEP and Major International Gymnastic Events in Rome

An international view took root in the world of Catholic sports during the pontificate of Pius X. References to sports are not lacking in this Pope's bibliographies, testifying to his love for them. A sentence pronounced in August 1911 abundantly conveys this point: "May the Federation spread as far as the Church spreads," almost an allusion to the rise of an International Federation which would embrace all peoples, just as the Catholic Church addressed all nations.

In such an ecumenical perspective, when Pierre de Coubertin visited Rome in 1905 to determine if there were favorable conditions to play the Olympic Games in the Eternal City (MUNOZ, 2006; COUBERTIN, 1932), he was granted an audience by Pius X, who gave him his full sympathetic support. We know that the Games were not held in Rome in 1908 because of a set of special circumstances—economic circumstances in particular—but also in consideration of a lack of preparation among the exponents of Italian sports, which led the main promoters of sports in Italy at the time—first of all, Angelo Mosso—not to recommend the Olympic adventure (MOSSO, 1905; LOMBARDO, 1989; TOSCHI, 1988; GORI, 1996). It looks significant to us that the

Pope was in favor of their being held in the Eternal City, unlike the mayor, Nathan, almost as if the Church were in the know about international sports matters more than the secular world at that moment. It is certain that UIOCEP found the warmest welcome in Rome.

Pius X gave his support to an international gymnastics competition being organized in Rome in 1908, probably to satisfy as well the need for ecumenism which he had wanted to manifest in the city during the Olympic Games, which, as we have just mentioned, could not be held. The competition at the Vatican in 1908 represented a partial recovery of the international acceptance that gymnastics was enjoying by then, which the Church had sought to indicate as useful for the young population to the point that in 1905 it had already opened the doors of the Vatican to a similar experience. Pius X was said to have expressed “the deepest humanistic sense and the greatest political good sense” towards the new interest in sports emerging from the modern world.⁴⁸ The attention to gymnastics—preparing the ground for sports—had been evident, supporting an idea arising inside the school which had not been applied in Italy for various reasons, including economic limitations. Pius X was then defined as a “courageous and felicitous interpreter” of the great idea of Francesco de Sanctis, when the secular world had realized that this new spectacle was “also interesting and fascinating because of its

⁴⁸ M. Jerace, “Il convegno ginnastico in Vaticano” [The Gymnastic Meeting at the Vatican]. *La Ginnastica*, a. IX, n. 11-12, Sept.-Oct. 1905, pp. 85-88. The article includes the program, the jury, the competition, the award ceremony, and the complete speech of the Pope. The agenda of the meeting of Catholic Clubs was concluded by a paragraph that we consider useful to cite integrally since it anticipates the creation of FASCI: “The delegates of the Italian Catholic sports associations, members of the First National Conference, considering that the system of exclusion prevailing inside the presidency of the Italian Gymnastics Federation for some time prevented the clubs from joining the Federation itself, have decided to set up an executive center which, without opposing the federation a priori, serves as a fraternal bond among the Catholic sports associations, protects their interests efficiently, and endeavors to support their right to become members of the National Federation established to promote physical education, not by sections, but with the participation of all citizens, without exclusion of a political or religious nature. Signed by Verzichi” (p. 88).

essence and its social and political value”.⁴⁹

The competition in 1908 certainly brought about progress on an international level because it was the occasion for creating a permanent International Committee to make the founding of Catholic Federations easier in different countries. The number of participants tripled as compared to the event at the Vatican in 1905, and—with almost two thousand athletes—there were many foreign gymnasts representing twenty-five sports clubs with approximately a hundred participants. The French alone took part with fifteen teams, and there were four other nations present: Italy, Belgium, Canada, and Ireland.⁵⁰ This was the occasion to give form to the idea of an international Catholic League.

In view of the significant disparities in the degree of preparation between the Italian representatives and those from other countries, the final competition was attended by a noncompeting club, “Fides” from Rome, which obtained a special prize from the Pope. The Church had intuited the importance of sports, welcomed foreign protagonists in order to learn, and wanted to promote sports among the faithful in any way possible.

Independently of how marked the reaction of FGI might seem—it immediately expelled its members who attended the competition at the Vatican—the time was then ripe for awareness among Catholics—the Pope, first of all—that the Church could not continue to live apart from civil society, but should look for occasions and ways to reach out to people again, even through gymnastics and sports. We may say that the sports domain, and FASCI as well, made a contribution to this outreach with the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The competition is described in detail in Stadium, October 1908, a.I, n.9, Supplement.

Gentiloni Pact of 1913.⁵¹

In Italy its most explicit manifestation in the same year was the Second Catholic International Congress, as we shall observe. But the process was not simple and without shocks, and the Vatican had to face several diplomatically thorny questions, making use of these international sports events as well.

In the meantime, UIOCEP was created, starting from the foundation laid at the international competition in September 1908. After nine months, Simon, the secretary of the French Catholic Federation, came back to Rome asking for legitimate relationships between Italian and French Catholics, “keeping in mind that the federation’s center” should always be Rome, and to that end he worked on concrete proposals. On that occasion, Simon met the Pope and brought him a welcome address signed by eighty thousand French gymnasts.⁵² The date that would sanction UIOCEP’s establishment coincided with the international competition in Nancy in July 1911, when Simon asked FASCI to invite some leaders of foreign Federations and Rome was to be acknowledged as the center of the future International Federation, whose prospects were growing and to which people in different countries alluded more and more decisively. Simon, the secretary of FGSPF (Fédération Gymnastique et Sportive des Patronages de France) [Gymnastics and Sports Federation of Education Trusts in France], was the main actor in the process of establishing an International League among Catholic Federations in the various nations, and we find his name in FASCI’s minutes more than once. He had begun to undertake the project of this League already when he came to Rome to take the

⁵¹ With this Pact, an agreement desired by Giolitti and concluded with Ottorino Gentiloni, president of the Catholic electoral union, the Catholics went back to political voting after the long hiatus brought about by Pius IX’s *Non expedit* (1871).

⁵² Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of December 6 and 13, 1910.

French gymnasts to the international competition in 1905, as previously mentioned. After the event in Nancy (July 30-31, 1911),⁵³ where clubs from Alsace, Belgium, Canada, France, Ireland, Italy, Holland, and Switzerland—representing two thousand gym clubs with 150 thousand federated members—had competed and where we can realistically say that UIOCEP originated, its first Congress was scheduled for December 13-14, 1911, in Rome, which was considered to be the natural seat for a “permanent Commission of propaganda.”⁵⁴ Pius X received the representatives of the six nations attending the event in a private audience and wished the future Federation a “prosperous life and progressive success,” thus showing a groundbreaking attitude by the Church and also a clear concern for international political issues, as well as the ecumenical inspiration already expressed on other occasions.⁵⁵ FASCI hosted UIOCEP at its Roman headquarters on Via della Scrofa and Earl Mario di Carpegna was the first president. The Catholic sports movement was now launched, and the next outstanding event was the international competition in 1913.

Gymnasts rushed from a number of countries to a massive degree: reportedly

⁵³ It was actually a second event organized in Nancy, because the first, which should have taken place in 1909, was later cancelled because of the difficult political times both in France, where the issue of the relationship between Church and State became more and more complicated, and in Italy, for analogous reasons, made evident by the exclusion of Earl Carpegna from INIEF, as previously mentioned (MUNOZ, 2006).

⁵⁴ Cf. “Unione Internazionale delle Opere Cattoliche di Educazione Fisica (Congresso di Roma 13-14 dicembre 1911)” [International Union of Catholic Institutions for Physical Education (Congress of Rome, December 13-14, 1911)]. Stadium, a.IV, December 1911, p. 2-4, where the first Statute and the first regulation of UIOCEP are also reported. Representatives from Alsace, Belgium, France, Italy, Holland, and Switzerland were present. In contrast to the meeting in Nancy, Canada and Ireland are absent—but it is underlined that they are “excused”—while the forthcoming participation of the USA (through the good offices of the Archbishop of NY as well, cf. Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of November 28, 1911, Colombia, Luxemburg, Spain, Egypt, and Germany are planned on. The organization of the International Congress of 1912 in Spa, Belgium, was also decided upon in this meeting.

⁵⁵ Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of December 19, 1911 and Stadium, a.IV, December 1911.

168 clubs, 123 of which were Italian, and four thousand gymnasts.⁵⁶ The event, September 6-8, took place at the National Stadium, which should have meant greater acceptance by the Italian Government and FGI of the Catholic movement and at the same time a public display outside of the Vatican of the Catholic sports enthusiasts who would compete precisely in the stadium which had been erected by their “most poisonous opponents.” This did not in fact happen, and the international competition in 1913, despite the circumspection with which it was publicized,⁵⁷ is remembered for the rough spots it had to face at some points, especially during the parade of the gymnasts from the Basilica of St. John to the Vatican. The parade was actually prohibited following the protest of anticlerical groups and nationalists, who were threatening scuffles to protest against the Austrian team’s coming to Rome; for that reason the gymnasts were forced to reach the Vatican in small groups after attending Mass at the Basilica of St. John. The division between secularists and Catholics was clear and led to real fighting, perhaps precisely as a consequence of the tensions aroused by the Gentiloni Pact, which forebode sharp changes on the Italian political scene with the introduction of the Catholic forces. The new climate of crisis in Europe that would shortly lead to the Great War also contributed to increasing tension among congress participants and dissidents. *Stadium*’s commentary reports:

[...]The teams were forced to go partly along the wide road at St. John’s, partly along Merulana Street, and partly through the open country [...] like cholera victims sent to the isolation ward for fear of hazardous contacts.

⁵⁶ Since it was a Jubilee Year, the Church allowed participants in competition coming to Rome to be considered as engaging in a Jubilee visit.

⁵⁷ The announcement of the competition in Stadium was delayed in FASCI’s minutes dated May and June 1913. It was actually presented in detail in the issue dated September 6. We must not exclude the possibility that a reaction by adversaries against conceding use of the National Stadium to a Catholic competition was feared. The Stadium was obtained after rather arduous bargaining, upon payment of “a small amount.” cf. Archivio Istituto Paolo VI, Serie III, Opere della Società della Gioventù Cattolica e della GIAC, 1919/1970, 878, “Registro dei verbali delle riunioni del Consiglio direttivo della FASCI, 1909/1912”, v.2. Meeting of March 11, 1913.

All roads in Rome lead to St. Peter's, and there the groups converged at intervals. But during their passage through the streets of Rome the incidents caused by the rabble inspired by Giordano Bruno's thought abounded, and bestial and uncivilized deeds were repeated.

Describing the whole painful odyssey which our youngsters had to go through on their way to St. Peter's is impossible. It is enough to say that they all left at 9:30 and reached their destination only at midday.⁵⁸

The choice of the National Stadium, reported FASCI, had not been made out of “boldness” or “a wish to face notable skirmishes,” but because of “mere, simple, absolute material need”—i.e., its lease cost little. Despite embarrassment over the choice of a venue—to mention the words of *Stadium*—“dedicated only to brute, atheistic, antireligious physical culture by its owners”, and despite attempts to impede the lease under various pretexts and the stadium's being opened on the day of the competition and every other form of “conspiracy,” the event took place in front of a numerous public—reportedly, ten thousand people plus the official representatives and the athletes.⁵⁹

Some sports newspapers with a national circulation, such as *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *Stampa sportiva*, published a report on the competition's technical results, because they were significant, but they explicitly avoided referring to the political issues which produced scuffles, especially the Giordano Bruno Association “for the freedom of thought,” an anticlerical club founded by freemasons which had been causing problems of law and order in the streets around the Vatican for a long time. This competition was not reported on by any magazine in the sector, such as *La Ginnastica* of Jerace, which had shown so much interest in the previous events at the Vatican dating back to 1905 and 1908. The split with FGI was clear-cut, and the wound would never

⁵⁸ “II Concorso Internazionale di Roma” [The International Competition in Rome]. *Stadium*, a.VI., September 25, 1913, p. 1-4.

⁵⁹ Mario di Carpegna. “Dopo il Concorso di Roma” [After the Competition in Rome]. *Stadium*, a.VI., October 23, 1913, p. 1-3.

close.

There were two events which interrupted the rise of FASCI: on the one hand, the death of Pius X on August 20, 1914, the Pope who more than any other spurred on the Catholic sports movement; and, on the other, the start of the First World War.

With the Olympic Committee already established in 1919, FASCI was not included in the selection of athletes for the Olympic Games in Antwerp because of very stiff opposition from Italian sports organizations to the Catholic movement.

Conclusions

We may conclude by saying that the beginnings of Catholic sports in Italy represent a milestone in the history of sports because of their characteristic influence. On the one hand, they simply followed the way of Italian sports—e.g., under their military and patriotic aspects—and, on the other, they strongly influenced them, sometimes restraining them. Catholic sports events were thus significant and did not go unnoticed on the scene of Italian history.

If we consider FASCI's initial attitude—clashing with some features of sports, but supporting physical education and gymnastics—which we dealt with briefly, we must regard such an attitude as an obstacle for the already conflict-ridden development of Italian sports. The difficulties it had to face on its way were numerous: a lack of financial resources and structures, the insufficient qualifications of trainers, cultural backwardness, and so on. The “pedagogic” dimension of FASCI—always considering sports as something useless for the instruction and education of good Christians because of certain Protestant roots in northern Europe—probably contributed to increasing such a delay, along with those Catholics who had rejected female participation in sports

activities for years. Moreover, the feeling of embarrassment in the Catholic world in facing particular subjects related to sports, such as scanty outfits—which were very unusual in the religious environment—was a further sign of backwardness.

These aspects, which never helped to support sports practices in Italy, are nevertheless seen to be less serious when viewed in the light of the great insights of the Church in the field of sports. Pope Pius X, for instance, displayed a prophetic openness, considering sports exercise as a useful instrument in international relations. The Church is far-reaching, universal, as FASCI must also be, he said, creating not only solid foundations for an International Federation, but also understanding how sports could become an instrument of international diplomacy.

Pius X used FASCI and sports as instruments to promote international relations, probably recalling the Olympic spirit of Coubertin (LOMBARDO, 2000; BONINI, 2007) who was going through the same process in understanding at the beginning of the century and was received for a private visit at the Vatican. Sports were destined to become the main instrument of international diplomacy at a moment when nations were expected to establish peaceful relationships with each other once again. Even if we agree that sports involve a sublimation of war, as Elias and Dunning remind us (ELIAS and DUNNING, 1989) they were indeed a joyful celebration of youth that had to be accepted and protected as such. This interpretation was perfectly suitable for Christian thought and was the reason why Catholics supported Italian gymnasts and athletes, promoting fertile ground for new seeds to take root which would prove fruitful after the end of the First World War, as regards women's participation in sports as well. All these aspects can be read as signs of a new phase for Catholic sports, which, despite an interruption during fascism, reappeared with authority and style after the Second World

War.

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