Opinion
Guest Voices
Sweden's Gabriel Gudmundsson and Tunisia's Yan Valery interact during the FIFA World Cup 2

Sweden's Gabriel Gudmundsson and Tunisia's Yan Valery interact during the FIFA World Cup 2026 Group F Sweden vs. Tunisia at Estadio Monterrey, Monterrey, Mexico, June 14, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Raquel Cunha)



by Michael O'Connell

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On the eve of the 2026 World Cup, Pope Leo posted on X:

> The World Cup begins tomorrow, and many will watch the matches. Soccer reminds us of something we must not forget: life is not a race to show off on our own, but a path we learn to walk together. Anyone who does not know how to pass the ball, even if they have talent, has not yet understood the game. Anyone who does not know how to live with and for others has not yet understood life. #ApostolicJourney

Besides showing his American roots by referring to "soccer" rather than the more globally recognized "football," the pope drew a connection between the game and our own spiritual journeys. Leo then replied to his own tweet: "Christians must be compassionate, love selflessly, and seek the good of others, knowing that in every brother and sister who suffers it is the Lord Himself who asks and receives, who is

welcomed or rejected, loved, or despised."

This addition might seem disconnected from the original post, but it's possible that it was a subtle rebuke of — and call to repentance from — FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), the event governing body marred by a history of corruption. To love the World Cup is to hold the truth about FIFA in one hand and the joy and solidarity of global fandom in the other.

I'm going to be covering the World Cup for NCR over the next five weeks so that we, as Catholics and as citizens of one of this year's host countries, review together the most spectacular moments, players and fan bases without overlooking the suffering and injustices also present.

In the runup to the start of the June 11-July 19 tournament, examples of xenophobia in the U.S. government were rampant. There was the Somali referee voted best in Africa who was not allowed into the country; the vice captain of the Iraqi national team who was detained and questioned for seven hours before being allowed to join his team; the many members of the Iranian team staff who were denied visas; and the many fans denied entry, particularly ones coming from Africa and the Middle East. The World Cup is supposed to bring the world together, but the cost of tickets and transportation are outrageous and prohibitive. All this is true and undeniable.

But there have also already been heartwarming stories of visitors experiencing North America for the first time: Scottish fans playing the bagpipes in Boston; Netherlands fans descending on a Buc-ee's in Texas; and the city of Lawrence, Kansas, adopting the Algerian National Team. Pope Leo's June prayer for "The Values of Sports" describes "a space of encounter, not exclusion, a path of peace, not violence," and moments like these remind us that it's possible.

People gather outside Mexico City Stadium to celebrate Mexico's victory in the opening match

People gather outside Mexico City Stadium to celebrate Mexico's victory in the opening match of the 2026 FIFA World Cup June 11, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Fred Ramos)

And then, of course, there's the soccer itself.

This is the largest World Cup in history: 48 teams split into 12 groups of four. Each team plays the other three teams in their group, and the top two teams from each

group advance to the single game elimination knockout round (along with eight of the 12 third-place teams). So for the first few weeks of the tournament, winning any single game is good but not necessarily required to advance.

The U.S. Men's National Team is in a group with three equally "good but not great" teams. In their June 12 opener against Paraguay, they played an almost flawless game. Face of the program Christian Pulisic set up two goals, new striker Folarin Balogun scored twice, and the game ended with a 26 pass sequence leading to an absolute stunner of a goal by Gio Reyna. It was the kind of performance that has fans dreaming of making a run to the semifinals.

Even if you don't normally follow soccer, having this tournament take place across 16 cities in North America means we are going to be in the middle of the world's biggest party for the next five weeks. Enjoy the spectacle! Root for the hosts: Mexico (which won its opener vs. South Africa), Canada (which tied Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the USA. But since those are unlikely to win it all, it also makes sense to pick one of the favorites: Spain or France are the two most talented teams, but the field is wide open; Argentina, Brazil, England, Portugal, Germany and Morocco could also win.

It can also be a real joy to cheer on a team making its World Cup debut, like Cape Verde or Curaçao, or an underdog like Haiti, Scotland or Egypt. Find some connection, real or imagined, to a squad and dive in. Get out to a game watch party and take in the spectacle of "the beautiful game" alongside a crowd of strangers. Seize the opportunity to be part of the largest shared experience on earth. You won't regret it.

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