
Maradona, a “working-class boy.” Msgr. Fernández: “He never disowned the faith of the simple”

He always remained "a working-class boy", he never denied his humble origins, including his popular faith. "One of us." For this reason, Argentina's entire population is grieving and mourning football legend Diego Armando Maradona, died yesterday at 60 from a heart attack in his home in Tigre. The government declared three days of national mourning amidst a plethora of responses, messages and prayers, as evidenced in statements gathered by SIR in the ecclesial context and in working-class neighbourhoods of the "bonaerense" suburbs, in the "villas", the shanty towns where *el pibe de oro* was raised, starting from Villa Fiorito, his native district. "It's a hard blow, a sad day", everyone says. **"He never lost popular faith."** From La Plata, where Maradona had recently undergone surgery and was hospitalized, the Archbishop, Msgr. Víctor Manuel Fernández, theologian and former assistant professor at the Catholic University of Argentina, paid his homage. "He was fondly appreciated especially by the underprivileged," the Archbishop told SIR, "for he embodied all those who struggle to make a name for themselves, and despite his achievements he never abandoned the popular culture he came from, nor did he turn away from his lifelong friends, or deny or hide his humble origins. He never lost the popular faith transmitted to him by his mother and never disowned the faith of the simple ones. That was the reason why he often made the sign of the cross, prayed to the Holy Virgin for help, spoke humbly about God." Indeed, as known, he was a man of greatness and fragility: "His greatness consisted in being able to put his body and soul into whatever he did. Football was his vocation, and he gave all of himself to it. In addition, he wasn't only motivated by economic gain, but by the passion to bring joy to people.



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We recognize his limitations, his weaknesses, frequently appealing to people at the centre of notoriety. But despite his limitations, he did not let himself be overwhelmed, over and again he tried, and yet again he moved forward."

The priest who baptized his nephew. "I had the opportunity to meet him and exchange a few words with him - Father **Fabian Báez**, parish priest of Maria Regina church in Buenos Aires, known for having been invited into the Popemobile by Pope Francis a few years ago, during an audience, told SIR -. It happened last year, I was asked to baptize his first nephew. The whole family was there, in a joyful atmosphere. I talked about football, of course. Like all my peers I grew up with the football legend Maradona. I gifted him with a crucifix, and he thanked me very much. I am confident that his was a simple but deep-rooted faith. I am very sad today, the whole of Argentina is in mourning. He was one of us." **The response of the "villas."** But a far worse grief yesterday befell the inhabitants of the *villas de emergencia*, in the suburban areas of the large metropolitan area "bonaerense." Starting from Villa Fiorito, situated south of Buenos Aires, in the diocese of Lomas de Zamora, the birthplace of the great footballer. "He was baptized here", Father **Víctor Gustavo Ariel Favero**, parish priest at the Holy Cross church, told SIR. "His family would gather in the Chapel of Our Lady

of Caacupé. I know some of his relatives, Diego Armando Maradona's grandmother was buried here. I have never met him in person, I became parish priest two years ago and it has been a long time since he came here. But

people are moved and sorrowful.

We are not celebrating Mass in the Diocese at this time due to Covid-19, but many people have gathered in prayer on the streets. We were all touched by his greatness, admittedly combined with certain problems, such as drug addiction. Not always is money good for people. But everyone remembers him as a gifted person." A heartfelt Mass was celebrated in the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires by Father **José Maria "Pepe" Di Paola**, coordinator of the *curas villeros*, the "street priests". He remembered Diego Armando Maradona with the following words: "It was a great blow for all the people, a symbol of Argentina. Although I never met him in person, I was touched. He was almost my age, and I followed him throughout his career.

He was a champion of the poor, of the suburban neighbourhoods, he could identify with ordinary people and this happened also in Italy, when he played with FC Napoli.

He was always a boy from the *villa miseria*, without a doubt, he loved the humblest."



, active in parish pastoral ministry, told us: "We feel great sorrow that only God can understand and the Blessed Virgin can accompany. We pray, we cry and gather in silence." Young footballers are among the saddest. The "club" is one of the three "C's" underlying the pastoral care in the *villas*, each one with its own football team and an amateur league. **Diego**, a young player in the team of *villa* José León Suárez, told us with a broken voice: "*My parents named me Diego as a tribute to the great Maradona. For us football players he meant more than just a symbol.*" He added: "*In these suburbs, football is important*". **The "Patria Grande" ideal.** Argentina wasn't the only setting of Diego Armando Maradona. He expressed his public commitment, markedly "unbalanced" to the left, in the all-Latin American perspective of the *Patria Grande* (Great Homeland). Cristiano Morsolin, human rights expert, commented from Bogotá: "I remember him here in Bogotá in 2015 at the Art and Peace Summit, promoted by Mayor Petro, motivating young people to engage politically, for the collective edification of peace, together with Argentinean representative of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Estela Carlotta. And especially at the world forum in Porto Alegre, when Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez recalled his close friendship with *el pibe de oro*, who accompanied him in electoral meetings and often travelled to Cuba, alongside Fidel Castro." (*) *Journalist at "Vita del popolo"*

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