

The Christian Roots of the Olympics

The ancient Olympics were pagan, but are the modern Olympics Christian?



Now that you're taking a break from perusing the crazy pictures coming out of Sochi, here's some trivia about the Christian roots of the modern Olympics.

The official motto of the Olympics is “Citius, Altius, Fortius”, or “Faster, Higher, Stronger.” It was chosen by Pierre de Coubertin when he founded the International Olympics Committee in 1894, but Coubertin was open about the fact that he got the motto from his friend Henri Didon, a Dominican priest.

Considered one of the best preachers of his day, Fr. Didon was also a big sports fan and had coined the slogan for a Paris youth gathering in 1891.

Another motto for the Olympics used by Coubertin but never made official is “The most important thing is not to win but to take part!” The source? According to an official fact sheet provided by the International Olympics Committee, Coubertin got it from the Anglican bishop of Pennsylvania, who

used it in a sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral on the first Sunday of the 1908 London Olympics.

Coubertin's relationship with the Church is unsurprising given that his family was devoutly Catholic and he attended a Jesuit boarding school growing up, though how committed he remained to the faith in his adulthood is unclear.

But it may have been his Catholic upbringing that inspired him to form the modern Olympics, nonetheless. From St. Paul onward, the Church has used the virtues of sports, including the Olympics specifically, as a way of teaching about the spiritual life. And though our current Catechism warns against "idolizing physical perfection and success at sports" as part of a pagan "cult of the body" (CCC 2289), the Second Vatican Council represents a part of the Catholic tradition in acknowledging the great benefits sports provide for community, including for international relations as the Olympics strives for: "[S]ports activity... helps to preserve equilibrium of spirit even in the community, and to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races." (Gaudium et spes, 61)

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