

S E R M O N

preached by' His Eminence Cardinal Griffin in Westminster Cathedral to catholic delegates to the Olympic Games, 1st. august 1948

I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have redeemed my pledge; I look forward to the prize. I have earned. The Lord, the judge whose award never goes amiss, will grant it to me when that day comes; to me, yes, and all those who have learned to welcome his appearing. 2. Tim. IV. 7-8.

If is with the greatest pleasure that I welcome you to this Cathedral today. If is surely a marvellous sight to see such a gathering of fine young athletes, both men and women, from so many nations of the world. You have come as ambassadors of your own countries. You have come here as members of the Catholic Church to profess your loyalty to Christ. In these dark and difficult days it is a great experience for us to see before our eyes such a stirring reminder of the universality of the Church. Whilst professing your loyalty and patriotism to your own native land you do not neglect your wider loyalty to God and His church.

If gives me even greater delight to see such a gathering of the youth of the Church, a gathering of young men and women with sound minds and healthy bodies, upon whose efforts so much of the future of the world will depend. Dedicate your youthful vigour and activity to Christ.

Finally if gives me great pleasure to welcome you as athletes who are determined to live your lives as true Christians and bring both the power and the principles of Christ into your sport and recreation.

For indeed the Church is very interested in sport. She realises that man is made of body and soul and that the body needs to be trained and to play its part in the worship of the Creator. As the Holy Father has said: « Sport is one form of education which is closely bound up with morality... The task and purpose of sport, from a Christian point of view, is to cultivate the dignity and harmony of the human body and to develop its health, vigour, agility and gracefulness. » In other words, the first object of sport is an educational one, namely the training of the body; to make it healthy, alert and strong under the discipline of a healthy mind. In fine, to make it a worthy temple of the Holy Ghost.

Here we can recall the words of St. Paul who turns naturally to the athlete in order to explain the need for training on the part of all Christians. For, you see, the temperance which the training of an athlete demands is very much akin to the cardinal virtue of temperance which every Christian soul must cultivate. No athlete can hope to rise to great heights until he has learned truly and by the hard way to subject his body to the commands of his mind and will.

But the parallel between the athlete and the Christian soul does not end here. The athlete's temperance and self-denial is a means by which he trains his body to resist pain and fatigue and which enables him to keep going until he has reached the tape. The secret of the athlete's success is sustained effort: sustained effort in the actual running of the race, the determination of the will to see it through and conquer. But more important still, the sustained effort in training. If is very often by painfully slow improvement that the odd split-second is « knoc-

ked off » his time, lifting the athlete from the average into the class of world fame. And so it is with the Christian life. For it is that extra effort and continual response to God's grace which lifts the saint from the realm of the common man to the heights of heroic sanctity.

But now we can explore still further the thought of St. Paul. Important as is the winning of victory, the true sportsman is always careful of the means he adopts to achieve victory. True sportsman-ship is synonymous with fair play. It is fair play which gives the real tone to sport and makes it worth while. Happily with most people it is this spirit of sportsmanship rather than the mere breaking of records which they love and appreciate. It is this same spirit of sportsmanship which so closely corresponds to the Christian virtue of justice. For by justice a Christian will render to each his due and recognise the dignity of his fellow man.

So far if might appear that there is no great difference between this approach to sport and the approach say of pagan Rome. But it is here that the Christian virtue of prudence, the first of the cardinal virtues, has its part, to play even in the realm of sport. Let me quote Pope Pius XII « Sport », he says: « Is not an end but a means; and as such it must be and remain bound up with the end which aims at the formation and perfect education of the human being. » For sport like every other good wholesome thing, can become perverted and dangerous, can threaten the life of the individual soul undermine the morale of nations. Sport must never be allowed to absorb the entire interests of the athlete as it sometimes does under modern conditions. The game should be a useful and noble pleasure, a part of life, even a field of apostolate. It should never become the whole of life. Some of you may recall how the modern apostle of youth, St. John Bosco, used his prowess in gymnastics and sport to win the boys of his day to Christ. Let him be your model.

I repeat again that sport is an education and education is a preparation and a training for life. What purpose has physical courage and moral strength if Christians use them only for worldly interests ?

If this spirit of Christian sportsmanship permeates the Olympic Games this year, a tremendous contribution will have been made towards the settlement of the present world discontent. There is no body better qualified than you who represent Catholic athletes from all corners, of the earth to bear aloft the torch of divine charity and so enkindle the souls of man and women of every nation.

St. Paul speaks of the Games without even a suspicion of criticism or disapproval. He sees in them beyond their immediate utility a great symbol of the whole of Christian life and thereby immeasurably ennobles their conception. While, therefore, wishing you every success in these Olympic Games where unfortunately you cannot all win, I should remind you of the great and important race in life where it is possible for everyone of us to succeed. « I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I look forward to the prize; I have earned. The Lord will grant it to me when the day comes. »