

THIRTY YEARS AGO...

Speech of Cardinal Mercier to the athletes of the VIIIth. Olympiad at the Cathedral of Antwerp.

Antwerp, August 14th, 1920.

Dear Gentlemen,

Before going in for these Olympic Games, the splendour of which will mark a date in the history of your Institution, you have, with ennobling humility, sought an inspiration from the religion of Christ.

And this, because, to your minds, the exercises in the Stadium are not a mere barren and vainglorious game.—They are a school.

Before 1914, they were a preparation for war, and events have proved the accuracy of their founder's foresight; to-day, they are a preparation for peace and... for the awful possibilities which are still lowering on the horizon.

Indeed, unless Athleticism is to be nought else than the brutal pride-ridden Nietzschean conception of life, it must be,—you desire, you must will it to be,—a means of social education for civilized nations.

We, thank God, are not savages: we pride ourselves on civilizing those who have remained so.

In the state of nature, the brute beasts face and challenge one another, each setting its egoism over against the other: the stronger fells, plunders, devours the weaker one.

In the community, the reasonable animals *co-operate* towards a higher weal than their individual well-being, towards the common good.

Now, as soon as two men *co-operate* towards a common goal, they must of need agree on the end they aim at, and on the means of attaining it.

And when the co-operators to one common goal are more than two in number, if there are three of them, it becomes necessary that in case of disagreement between the two first, a third should step in to adjust the dispute and reestablish the unity of action; this maker of unity becomes a head to whom they obey.

The free acceptance of a common line of action is called *discipline*; the head, guarantee of the unity and continuity of such a discipline, is called authority.

The *first law* of Athleticism, as you understand it, dear Gentlemen, is the law of *moral discipline* and obedience to *authority*.

And because you brook no flaw in your work and go in for it with heart and soul, you see to it that there be no hitch between your gesture and the impulse which moves it; therefore the *second law* of the sportsman's code, a corollary to the first, is *loyalty*.

A *third* is necessary. The being whole-hearted in the giving of self, the putting of

all one's strength and muscle into an attempt, is fraught with danger: in such a flush of energy, there must be neither excess nor shortcoming, *measure*, proportion is needed.

The law of measure makes the *beauty* of your sports.

We are about to see you at work, Gentlemen, subject to this moral discipline of unity, of loyalty, of proportion: we will bless you, we will look on you, we will admire you.

Then, when you go home, and when you stop to think,—for man is not made to be always doing and always spending his strength; the moral life, even as the heart, is subject to a rhythm of dilatation and contraction,—you will ponder over the meaning of your physical exercises.

You will import into your everyday life that spirit of discipline, of loyalty, of measure in your dealing with your brethren.

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Whosoever has read, or perused even, the letters of saint Paul, the mightiest maker of our Christian Civilization, cannot have failed to be impressed with the kindly interest the apostle feels for the games of Greece, the races, the wrestling, the striving.

Therein he finds an argument to teach his hearers this grave lesson which I make mine own and with which I end: You run, you wrestle, you strive: It is good, it is beautiful, I praise you, I bless and admire you; but be sure there is a better thing than this athleticism; rise higher! Your games will earn for you, *if* you win, a crown of glory that withers away; be self-disciplined, bridle your instincts, conquer in yourself the human beast, and your virtue will earn for you with certainty, a crown of glory which will never wither, because it is made of our union to the glory of our God Himself.