

The Olympic Mission by *Frédéric Schlatter*, journalist, Lausanne

In the first place: the Olympic Games are events distinguishable from other world sports competitions by the ceremonies which mark the opening and the closing of these Games. Now, these two ceremonies call up emotions and reactions of various types. The Opening Ceremony is best described as an "Ode to Joy": under unfurled flags, a concourse of nations are assembled together moved by the same feeling of deep joy. Their presence confirms their adhesion

to the same faith which though of a profane nature, is nevertheless an ideal of mutual understanding, harmonious relationship or even unity. During this very moving performance, the athlete flagbearer marching ahead of his contingent appears as a true symbol of homage and adhesion of his country, and this in a much more realistic way than would the traditional olive branches and the dove of peace. Whereas sport in every country is the expression of the

most spontaneous outburst of the people's joy of living, the olive branch and the dove of peace often are mere metaphors imagined by politicians who are sometime far away, even, estranged, in some cases, of the deep feelings which their own people are experiencing.

For example, when the Russian contingent appeared for the first time in the arena at Helsinki then more recently at the Cortina Games, they were met by an ovation which expressed above all the joy and relief felt by everyone at seeing Sovietic athletes at last joining the great world gathering of sport, their absence from the Games having been deeply felt.

When relating his impressions on the occasion of the first Olympic Games of our era held in Athens in 1896, the journalist Charles Maurras in the "Gazette de France" declared that "this mingling of races threatened to fail to fulfill its object, namely the creation of an intelligent and reasonable federation of modern peoples, as it was likely to lead to confusion and disorder in a modern cosmopolitan society". Further, he went on to say that all this would not lead to quelling nationalistic feelings but, on the contrary, that it would inflame them.

It is not to be denied that Charles Maurras has taken a right view of the situation when he mentioned these fundamental truths as being beacons leading to the introduction of the modern history of sport. Numerous cases prove this, fraternization and mutual understanding have been prevailing throughout the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympic Games, yet they hardly succeed to prevent the violent outbursts of nationalistic pride from manifesting themselves on the very next day, whenever the competitions began. Of course, similar displays of excessive nationalism are to be seen in other fields of sporting activities where the white banners with the five interlaced rings do not appear.

Sixty years have gone by since the first Games of Athens and we can now view the situation in proper perspective, while admitting that Charles Maurras was in the right, we must now see that in some respects he was also in the wrong. His prophesy derives its value from the fact that it emanated from a man of letters who was not hampered by the conditions imposed on a sportsman. But Mr. Maurras made this remark at a time when, as he said himself, the people of the various nations did not intermingle much, thus one could foresee the outbreak of quarrels caused by compe-

titors wanting to outshine each other in the Stadium.

Nevertheless, sport perpetuates its miracle in spite of the passions it arises and of the sometime excessive display of nationalism it creates. Yet it would be asking too much of human nature and of sport that all its adepts should be one, but at least sport offers them one form of fraternization which they understand best of all. It is precisely on account of this that the closing Ceremony of the Olympic Games stirs the emotions of the people much more than the opening Ceremony.

At the Opening, it is the people that counts with the joys that the meeting of old friends entail. Whereas when the symbolical Flame is extinguished, everyone pledge himself for a period of at least four years or longer according to the occurrence of supplementary sports meetings which take place in the interim.

Tearing himself from the euphoria of the celebrations, the athlete feels that he is entering a new phase of his destiny when standing on the threshold of a new Olympiad. He reflects on what these years to come bear in store for him and his family as well as for his native land. While the flags which symbolize all these people who have become dear to him recede in the horizon, he becomes aware of how much he is going to miss this community which is disappearing, in the blurred vision of clouds of coming events gathering, as well as misunderstandings and even possible quarrels...

It is at that moment that we fully realize the meaning and the power of Olympism, and that the symbol of the five interlaced rings of its flag makes us perceive the message of union and love it brings us.

We also recollect that it has victoriously survived serious conflicts which, elsewhere, have caused the collapse of other conventional values. Better still, it has emerged from these conflicts with an ever growing prestige and more alive than ever. Evidently Olympism has survived these upheavals because it is incontestably a driving power among the youth of the world, also Sport, despite its shortcomings and its excesses is spreading irresistibly.

It is however a fact to be deplored that Olympism burdens itself with additional problems which bring it petty annoyances and stir more or less common-placed arguments : but nevermind, in spite of human errors, the Olympic Movement pursues its mission, it foments ties of unity between people and never ceases to sow the seed of a better future.