

Speech by the Pope John XXIII

*to the Athletes taking part
in the Olympic Games at St. Peter's Place*

24 August 1960

This message is to express Our affection for you, the athletes taking part in the Olympic Games at Rome.

The colonnade of Bernini, holding you within its outstretched arms, seems to present you to Our gaze as you stand in this open space near the obelisk once erected in the centre of Nero's Circus, where we know that St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles, bore testimony to his faith.

In 1905, Our predecessor of immortal memory, St. Pius X, received the distinguished founder of the modern Olympic Games, Peter de Coubertin, and warmly encouraged the new enterprise. Moved by a similar feeling of goodwill towards you, We desire, first of all, to express Our deep joy at your coming. You have long been awaited, as We have previously remarked on other occasions in informal conversations, and We now bid you welcome. We were very glad today to come in from Castel Gandolfo to convey Our greeting to your crowded and eager ranks in this place dedicated to St. Peter.

May this evening's happy occasion, which brings back so many memories, touch a chord deep in your hearts, so that, as a result, each one of you may have a higher appreciation of the dignity proper to an athlete and a truer perception of the underlying spiritual voice of Rome.

It is obvious that We cannot wish victory to every team or to each individual athlete; 'may the best man win'. But this is no obstacle to Our expressing the very strong desire that the contests of these days will benefit you all, and that from them, all without exception will be able to gain some advantage.

It is not the prize offered in the race but the correct exercising of the body that merits the higher esteem. Home life, indeed, and

a proper tradition in the training and education of the young bid us be on our guard, in athletic contests, against giving exclusive attention to the body as if to man's supreme good, and against a cult of gymnastics (such as sometimes happens) which can hinder the due carrying out of accepted obligations. It is certain, however, that healthy bodily exercises and athletic contests of good repute should always be held in honour and strongly recommended. In fact, a number of qualities, which are endowments and distinctions of no little value, are fostered in man by means of athletics; with regard to the body, there are health, physical strength and agility, grace and beauty; with regard to the soul: perseverance, courage and the practice of self-denial.

Consequently, We are quite sure of this: during the Olympic Games you will give example of the kind of healthy rivalry which is a complete stranger to enmity and strife; in the contests, you will display an enduring serenity and cheerfulness; you will be modest in victory, unruffled in defeat, resolute in difficult situations, and will show yourselves true athletes, giving to the great crowds of spectators further proof of the truth of the old saying: 'a healthy body possesses a healthy mind'.

Moreover, before We send you away, We wish your thoughts to be directed towards the most splendid function which God has committed to Rome, whether in human affairs or in what concerns religion: for it came about in the admirable plan of Divine Providence that this city grew into the capital of that Empire which strove to link together by the same civilization and the same bond of unity not only the Mediterranean peoples, but those also who possessed lands completely cut off from these shores.

This condition of things — particularly since it had introduced a wide network of communications and a common language —

had, under God, this effect: the city of Rome was most appropriately established as the centre of the Christian religion; and this same city, in keeping with such a lofty dignity, throughout the vicissitudes of history used all its strength and endeavours to bring to peoples all over the world the supreme benefits of the salvation of the Gospel, charity and peace.

Anyone, therefore, who turns his gaze even briefly on Rome, is confronted by a number of ancient monuments and places which demonstrate the truth of this fact. Their

message, lacking nothing of greatness, does not pass by men of true wisdom. That you may hearken readily to such a message is the earnest desire of the humble successor of Peter, who is now speaking to you.

Finally, reaching out with profound emotion to those of you, who, though divided by variety of race, are yet linked by the fraternal bond of your interest and purpose in the Games, We lovingly beg from Almighty God for yourselves and for your parents and those near to you, a generous measure of heavenly gifts.