

Coubertin and the Roman Church

In 1905, during his stay in Rome, de Coubertin had the honour to be received in a private audience by H.E. Cardinal del Val, State Secretary, and by His Holiness the Pope. It was no secret to anyone that, at that time, the Catholic sections of the community were the last to welcome sport and to encourage its practice. Their attitude was one of total indifference if not actual distrust. When in ancient times the Church anathematized the Olympiads of old, did it do so only on account of the pagan ceremonial they persisted in maintaining throughout their celebrations? One may question the fact, when one takes into consideration the austerity of the doctrines practised by ascetics who maintained that the preponderant rôle of the soul consists of stopping all manifestations of the senses with one exception that of suffering. There is a phrase in the Scriptures which could be interpreted as signing the doom of sport irretrievably. It refers to 'the pride of living' as one of the worst cause of sins and it clearly condemns it and points out this to its church followers filling them with distrust. What is the proper meaning of this phrase so picturesque and suggestive? Is it to be taken in the concrete or moral sense, physiologically or psychologically? This is the problem in a nutshell, said Coubertin when he wrote his *Twenty one years Campaign*. Physiologically the joy and exuberance of living is the very essence and

criterion of sport. There is no sportsman who has not felt this wonderful exhilaration and has not only one thought: to feel it again. If, on the other hand, one interprets it by 'Pride of living' not so much in the sense of seeking a strong physical sensation by a legitimate superabundant vitality, capable of increasing the mechanical forces of the individual as well as his impulses, but one supersedes this by a mad glory which can blind some men and lead them to an inordinate pride and vanity in their own personality, thus losing all senses of proportion to the extent of believing themselves the centre of the earth – then although there is no irreducible way of opposing religion to sport, these men remain solitary units, for sport is an avowed enemy of this type of pride. Sport is a school of modesty, fair-play and perseverance, it teaches the value of everyday comparison with oneself then with an opponent, sport compels the athlete to take a sane view of circumstances and to reprove all excess, sport adepts are used to the incessant striving for perfection, always in sight yet never quite attained. To what better aid to character building can religion aspire?

The Anglican Church clergy was the first to discover the pedagogic value of sport. Later on the Catholic Anglo-Saxon clergy followed the example set by the Anglican Church. A few colleges on the continent adopted the concept of sport as they realized its value.

So far there was no word nor gesture betraying a definite attitude of approval of sport by the Pope. Leo XIIIth, was absorbed so much by his political genius that he paid little heed to these things, and de Coubertin was soon convinced that Cardinal Rampolla was not interested in sport either. On the other hand, Pius Xth, while Archbishop of Venice, took real pleasure in encouraging the prowess of the skilful gondoliers; shortly after his appointment to the Holy See, he allowed a Roman gymnastic club to come and give a gymnastic display in the Vatican's gardens in His presence. H. E. Cardinal del Val, who reported this happening to Baron de Coubertin, reminded him of his own British upbringing which made him grasp the full significance of the pedagogic value of the practice of sport, and he referred to sport and talked about it with the wide experience and ease of a man of the world and of a true nobleman. Coubertin had a private audience with His Holiness the Pope who gave him a few words of cordial good wishes for the welfare of the renascent Olympic Movement. He even seemed to

take a keen interest in the forthcoming Olympiad which was to be celebrated in Rome in 1908. The success of a pilgrimage of athletes, who came to Rome from France, was so great, that in Vatican circles, one even envisaged an international reunion. This unusual project had the merit to reassure definitively the timid church-goers who still entertain feelings of suspicion and were afraid to meet renascent athleticism, as they asked themselves if the 'pride of living' referred to in the Bible concerned the mind or the physique! This was what de Coubertin wrote in 1908.

In 1960, His Holiness, Pope Jean XXIII received in a solemn ceremony held in St. Peter's Place, a crowd evaluated to one hundred thousand people among whom were the athletes and officials who participated in the Olympic Games. On the 24th of August, He delivered a pontifical message to the sportsmen of all nations, of all races and of all different religions. Later on His Holiness the Pope received the members of the International Committee in private audience in His residence of Castel Gandolfo.