

A FAMILIAR PLACE

During an official visit to IOC Headquarters, His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios delivered the following speech

This meeting with you, the President and officials of the International Olympic Committee, gives me a feeling of joy and a sense of God's presence, for as Ecu-

menology, it was the first king of Elis, Aethlios, son of Zeus, who founded the Olympic Games; hence the words "athletics" and "athlete". Consequently, athletics as exercise was conceived and performed as something sacred, both in origin and purpose. It is an expression of respect for divine harmony and order, which are man's ideal: "*kalos kagathos*", good and beautiful.



menical Patriarch, I feel that I am in **a familiar place and environment**. With you, I am among those who are responsible for bringing to life the international idea of the Olympic spirit, a spirit of mutual understanding, reconciliation and peaceful co-existence among men and among peoples, a spirit of harmony and balance between soundness of body and mind, according to the Latin adage "*mens sana in corpore sano*".

These are commonly accepted values and aspirations, the practice of which is edifying both for individuals and for mankind as a whole. The divine dimension of physical exercise as conceived by the ancient Greeks, who were the creators of the Olympic Games, is in itself meaningful. For them, the Games were not simply a form of sport and competition for the body, but an activity whose significance and origin were holy.

Thus, as physical exercise, the Olympic Games also had a religious significance. They took place under divine protection. They opened with a sacrifice to the gods. Men who had committed murder, defiled temples or broken the truce - which was considered sacred and began three months before the start of the Olympic Games - were barred from taking part. The judges of the games, called "*Hellanodikai*", received special training; they partook in purification rituals in order to perform their duties with total impartiality. For this reason, they were considered to be the most **just** among the Greek people.

But despite all this, the celebration of the Olympic Games was suspended for centuries. Although this is not the place to ponder the question, I would like to point out one thing: whatever transformations have affected the concepts of **truth, beauty and sublimity**, there is an underlying reality in them, an element

which, like molten gold, rises to the surface and shines with perfect purity.

So while it was natural, or even an historical necessity, that the organization of the Olympic Games should cease for awhile - as in fact it did -, it was equally natural and important that it should resume. And whereas in ancient times the Games were organized among the Greek city states, today they take place on an international scale. They nevertheless maintain all of the elements which are **true, eternal** and **good** in the minds of humanity.

It is highly symbolic that the flame of the Olympic Games is kindled from the rays of the sun at Olympia and that it is borne by athletes to the country in which the Games are being held. It is also significant that efforts are made to encourage noble-minded competition and exercise of the body and spirit.

In the theological tradition of the Orthodox Church, we take part in another exercise in seeking the divine uncreated light, which is an eternal consolation

at another level, corresponding to our deepest desire for freedom and the transfiguration of man. This never-ending glory is the light of the world. Of course, now is not the time to expand on this theme, but it would perhaps be an omission on my part not to refer to it.

Allow me simply to congratulate you on choosing to work within the framework of the International Olympic Committee. Your contribution is great and your efforts are praiseworthy.

I wish you continued fruitful and sustained success in carrying out your sacred duty, in order that mankind may attain the fullest potential of human exercise and endeavour. May the spirit of Truth and Consolation give to each one all that he seeks and desires but could never attain were it not given to him from above.

May you receive this gift from above like the holy crown of olive branches, a **wreath of victory** for your struggles and your noble endeavours.

Pictured with His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios are His Eminence the Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland (left) and His Eminence the Metropolitan Chrysostome of Ephesus (right).

