

Tribute to Greece and to Pierre de Coubertin

by Juan Antonio Samaranch

A young Frenchman, Pierre de Coubertin voiced on 25 November 1892 at the Sorbonne University a challenge that was universal in nature: to revive the Olympic Games, which had originated in Greece in 776 BC and discontinued in AD 392.

Many critics considered his initiatives absurd. He himself said that these people were *"curious to know how far I would take this concern [...]. Some were indignant and damned me to hell, accusing me of blasphemy and profanation"*.

An exceptionally intelligent man, he was able to overcome all the obstacles. Pierre de Coubertin succeeded, with a measure of cunning, in transforming the International Congress for the Union of Athletic Sport Societies, which had originally been called to discuss the topical theme of "amateurism and professionalism in sport", into the "International Paris Congress for the Re-establishment of the Olympic Games".

Thus, in the grand setting of the amphitheatre at the Sorbonne, he won the delegates' enthusiastic support for his proposal to revive the Olympic Games, and the decision was taken to organize the first edition in 1896 in Athens, Greece, the birthplace of Olympism, a country of art, culture and millennial traditions. The

entire Greek nation and the citizens of Athens in particular mobilized to support our first President, Demetrius Vikelas, and the organizing committee, thus ensuring the success of the Games.

After a century of existence, the IOC, which since that evening in June 1894 has been maintained and strengthened by seven successive presidents and four hundred and fourteen members - citizens of every continent - can be proud of its achievements. Olympism today continues to uphold its initiator's concepts which

le building upon the foundations that were laid by Pierre de Coubertin. In this year of the Centennial Olympic Games, this can be strongly asserted.

History teaches us that every decade is marked by political, social, economic, scientific and technological developments which have all affected the Olympic Movement. We have always reacted promptly, finding solutions to our problems: making any useful or necessary changes to our rules and bringing ourselves into line with the modern world by introducing new concepts.

But our greatest source of pride is to have consolidated the unity of the Olympic Movement, without which no tangible progress would have been made. The International Federations play an essential role in promoting sport throughout the world.

Owing to the geo-political changes that have occurred in recent years, the number of National Olympic Committees is currently one hundred and ninety-seven. There were only thirteen in 1896. NOCs' responsibilities have grown a great deal in recent years thanks to funds from Olympic Solidarity. In accordance with the Olympic Charter, the IOC relies on the NOCs to disseminate the fundamental principles of Olympism in their respective countries.

I would like to take this opportunity to salute the hundreds of thousands of famous and unknown volunteers working tirelessly all over the world to promote sport and the Olympic ideal in sports clubs and national federations, for it is they who help to bear up the three pillars of the Olympic Movement.

Coubertin said that, *"humanity must take from the heritage of the past all the force it can use to build the future. Olympism is one of these forces"*. We will endeavour to do the same.

