



The Olympic Movement, a twentieth-century phenomenon



On 23 June 1894, in the main auditorium of the Sorbonne in Paris, a young Frenchman, wise, concerned and visionary, set back in motion the old Olympic machine that had been abandoned in AD 392 as a result of a decree of the Roman Emperor Theodosius. Baron Pierre de Coubertin was to unearth the centuries-old rites of agonistic competition, giving them a new form, endowing them with universal principles and imbuing them with an ethical code which allowed them to survive the social cataclysms and various calamities through which Olympism would pass, shielded by the faith of its underlying philosophy: the physical and mental perfection of man, non-discrimination, peace, universal concord, culture, beauty and celebration.

The birthplace of modern Olympism to a large extent prefigured the great cultural and humanist character of this phenomenon as it came to the fore, for it emerged into the new light of modernity not on a sports field or track, or in the elitist premises of a famous sports club, but within the walls of a venerable university, with all that this implies in terms of intellectual and humanist hierarchy and global dimensions. For, the university, with its aims of erudition and research, seeks universality just as the vocation and aims of the modern Olympic Movement are themselves universal.

The great modern Olympic celebration began in Athens in 1896 and, after a century of progress full of successes, glory, but also tragedies, it celebrated its centenary at the Games of the XXVI Olympiad in Atlanta in 1996, pushing vigor-

by **Conrado Durántez***

ously on towards the twenty-first century. These first one hundred years have not been easy, as Coubertin foresaw in 1920, when he stated with foresight: "Olympism is a silent mechanism whose wheels do not creak and whose movement never stops, despite the fistfuls of sand people cast at it, as persistently as ineffectually, to try to prevent it from working."

The "fistfuls of sand" which have been cast at Olympism during its turbulent century of existence include the two World Wars, which prevented the celebration of three editions of the Olympic Games (1916, 1940 and 1944); the racial demonstrations in Mexico 1968 which, although perhaps legitimate in the black power activists' country of origin, were inappropriate for the Olympic podium, where excellence in sport is honoured in an egalitarian way, absolutely regardless of colour, race, language or religion; the terrorist attack in Munich, where the global attraction of the Games was used as a sounding board by criminal or terrorist factions with the tragic outcome that is now part of history, and where the Olympic arena was stained with innocent blood as athletes became the victims of an incident totally unrelated to sport; and the political pressures applied by means of absurd boycotts (Montreal 1976, Moscow 1980, Los Angeles 1984), in which incompetent leaders, buoyed up by an arbitrary and supine ignorance of what the Olympic celebration really means, forced their athletes to use boycotting as a political battering ram, unaware that the four-yearly

festival of the Games neither depends on nor is conditioned by any State, however powerful, and that it is not subordinate to the International Federations, the National Olympic Committees, or even the International Olympic Committee; for the perennial, joyous encounter of the Olympics belongs totally and exclusively to the youth of the world. The acute crisis to which boycotts led at the time, when they threatened to become a regular occurrence, was decisively eliminated by the skilful diplomacy and adept intervention of President Samaranch.

In its modern version, the essential characteristics of the Olympic Movement - whose roots reach back thousands of years into unknown periods of the past and emerge on the stage of recorded history in the year 776 BC, thanks to a chronological record of the first Games - define it as a phenomenon typical of the twentieth century, whose distinguishing features have made it the main social force in the century of its development.

Within the structures of our troubled society, is there any motivation today besides Olympism that assembles such a large and varied family of adherents within its sphere of influence? Is there any other human activity that, with its many cultural, scientific, political, philosophical or artistic dimensions, brings together on a regular basis and in one place such a varied mosaic of races, languages, religions and political, cultural and economic systems as the Olympic Games in their celebration of the Olympiads? The vigorous impulse of the Olympic giant is at the zenith of its splendour as we approach the third Mil-

lennium, into which it will advance with a determined step, keeping a watchful eye out for a new enemy: excessive commercialization.

Otto Szymiczek, who was Dean of the International Olympic Academy until his death, summed up the problem in an historical statement made in the summer of 1976: "commercialization is good and positive to the extent that it provides resources for the practice of sport. But it also entails the risk that, by accepting it, we may 'allow the money-changers into the temple'. The truthfulness of these words, couched in both Biblical and sport terms, is indisputable. The demographic explosion of the sports phenomenon has occurred in part thanks to the generous economic assistance of commercial firms, which have also enabled the IOC to acquire an autonomy, independence and power to which it could not otherwise have aspired. With all these resources: the IOC has planned and implemented complete programmes of sport education, disseminating the Olympic ideals in far-flung countries with very modest economic standards. By so doing, it has made it possible for all the members of the Olympic family to attend the great quadrennial festival of the Games, overcoming an otherwise insuperable lack of means which would have excluded the participation of the poorest relations. The dangers of excessive commercialization and the consequences its damaging impact would entail are a priority concern for the IOC, which seeks to maintain the benefits of commercial assistance while limiting and curbing any attempt by those who grant them to interfere.

As the ethical and philosophical code of the Olympic Movement, Olympism can be described as a philosophy of life that uses sport as a means of conveying its educational, pacifistic, democratic, hu-



manitarian, cultural and, today, ecological, principles. Of all the Olympic Movement's objectives, the one which carries the greatest element of newness is the environmental one, since, in addition to the urgent need for man to preserve and respect the environment in which he lives, the Olympic principle of seeking individual psychological and physical balance becomes impossible if one lives in an unhealthy or unbalanced environment.

A balanced, peaceful environment based on mutual respect for a peaceful world: has any human activity, national or international, done more for world peace than Olympism? Once again, one of Coubertin's predictions has come true, for over a century ago, during his first attempt to re-establish the Olympic Games, he called upon his countrymen in a speech delivered at the Sorbonne on 25 November in 1892: "Let us export oarsmen, runners and fencers. This is the free trade of the future, and the day it has entered into the mores of old Eu-

rope? the cause of peace will have been given its most important support." As I said earlier, the two World Wars prevented the celebration of three editions of the Olympic festival, leaving behind a tragic and cruel legacy of destruction, pain and death as well as anger, prejudice, hatred and resentment. But the powerful pacifist faith of Olympism again brought together the grieving and ill-used communities in the celebration of the Olympic festival. In Antwerp in 1920 and in London in 1948, the nations assembled once again. Their best athletes were part of the great Olympic celebration of peace. As a result of those gatherings and those that followed, misunderstandings were dissipated, differences were smoothed over, resentment faded and peace was thus reborn. What other institution but the powerful and pacifistic

modern Olympic Movement could have achieved this? The Greek tradition of *Ekecheiria*, the sacred Truce called during the Games in Olympia, has been revived world-wide with modern Olympism. The IOC President's peaceful pilgrimage to the devastated city of Sarajevo, which hosted the XIV Olympic Winter Games in 1984 and suffered the ravages of a cruel and senseless war, as most wars are, heralded the birth of new hopes for peace, which not long afterwards were fulfilled and which prompted the IOC to offer assistance in the reconstruction of the city as a demonstration of its support and of its intrinsically pacifistic nature.

Like the Christian code, the Olympic code plans for, desires and brings about lasting peace for all men and women of good will.

*President of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee and the Association of Ibero-American Olympic Academies.