

PEACE IN THE IDEOLOGY OF BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN

The decree promulgated by Theodore I ('Theodore the Great') in 392 A.D., banning pagan ceremonies¹, put an end to the Olympic Games organized to honour Zeus, the most important and famous pagan God in ancient times².

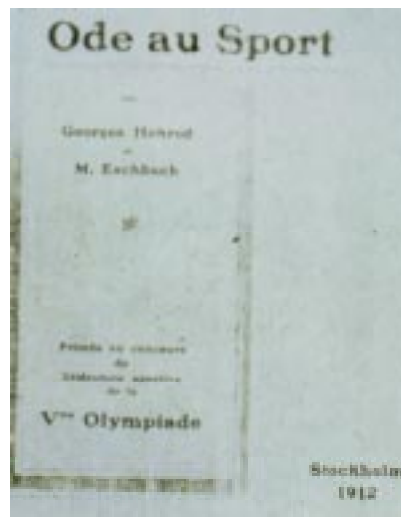
Preservation of the Olympic festival was enveloped in a centuries-long silence, until the issue of its continuation was raised on 23 June 1894 at the historic Sorbonne Congress in Paris, when Pierre de Coubertin's wonderful historic and social vision allowed the ancient competition to be revived³.

Coubertin's rich and extensive literary works⁴ abound with profound ideas on the most diverse subjects (education, history, sport, medicine, sociology, etc.)⁵, but underlying his persistent campaign for the restoration of Olympism is his quest for international peace, a constant preoccupation and one of his primary objectives. In the lecture he gave at the Sorbonne on 25 November 1892 on the occasion of the first (frustrated) attempt to revive the Olympics, Coubertin remarked that, *obviously, the telegraph, railways, telephone, passionate scientific research, congresses and expositions had done more for peace than treaties and any diplomatic agreement, but it was his hope that athletics would do much more still*. He saw the export of rowers, runners and fencers as the free trade of the future, adding that when such a system was introduced into the customs of the old Europe the cause of peace would receive a great boost⁶. Two years later, with Olympism re-established, Coubertin again recalled and made special reference to the international movement for peace as the reason for and essence of the Olympic Games which are designed to give the world's youth the opportunity to meet amid friendship and happiness at a festival which will gradually erase mutual ignorance amongst peoples, an igno-

by Conrado Durántez*



*rance which perpetuates hatred, builds up mistrust and cruelly precipitates events into a fight to the death*⁷. Peace is a constant reference in the speeches and writings of Coubertin⁸, who, with the sociological vision of a humanist educator, was of the opinion that a better distribution of wealth and of consumer goods and, primarily, access to sports on the part of those social classes most in need, would be the best possible fillip to social peace, the objective of his *integral and democratic*⁹ Olympism, since sport, as man's inalienable inheritance has to be *for all*¹⁰, as it is the incarnation of peace. Coubertin put forward this



idea in poetry in his *Ode to Sport*, which, under pseudonyms, won the literary competition of the Games of the V Olympiad in Stockholm in 1912¹¹.

Coubertin made timid efforts to protect the eminently pacifist nature of his revived Olympism, given the turbulent international scene in the second decade of the twentieth century, but his fears were to become all too real in the tragic events which were approaching, and the two World Wars left a vacuum in the Games of three Olympiads (for 1916, 1940 and 1944). Yet, the conflict over, the four-yearly invitation to take part in the Games was sent out again, in the context of the Games' peaceful confrontation¹², to communities destroyed and tormented by war and overflowing with understandable bitterness and prejudice towards those who had been their adversaries in battle. With the passage of time, thanks to the survival of Olympic comradeship, prejudices, fears and intolerance gradually disappeared and concord and peace were reborn. Had Olympism and the programme of the Games not existed, where and how would it have been possible to stage a world event aimed at achieving the objectives of harmony and concord through a one-off assembly based on a simple but powerful moral force?

After World War I, Coubertin, encouraged, examined how revived Olympism had exorcised latent fears and had brought nations back to the one-off event that was the Games. Recalling the day of 14 August 1920, the date of the opening of the Games of the VII Olympiad in Antwerp, he reflected, satisfied, that *the procession, the Opening Ceremony; the choirs, the release of doves, the greetings and promises, and the prestige of that solemn act which after Stockholm provided proof in the eyes of the entire world of its educational value, emphasized the extent to which Olympism was being reborn intact after*

Olympism



Opening Ceremony of the Games of the VII Olympiad in Antwerp.

VII.

O Sport, tu es la Fécondité! Tu tends par des voies directes et nobles au perfectionnement de la race en détruisant les germes morbides et en redressant les tares qui la menacent dans sa pureté nécessaire. Et tu inspires à l'athlète le désir de voir grandir autour de lui des fils alertes et robustes pour lui succéder dans l'arène et remporter à leur tour de joyeux lauriers.

VIII.

O Sport, tu es le Progrès! Pour te bien servir, il faut que l'homme s'améliore dans son corps et dans son âme. Tu lui imposes l'observation d'une hygiène supérieure; tu exiges qu'il se gare de tout excès. Tu lui enseignes les règles sages qui donneront à son effort le maximum d'intensité sans compromettre l'équilibre de sa santé.

IX.

O Sport, tu es la Paix! Tu établis des rapports heureux entre les peuples en les rapprochant dans le culte de la force contrôlée, organisée et maîtresse d'elle-même. Par toi la jeunesse universelle apprend à se respecter et ainsi la diversité des qualités nationales devient la source d'une généreuse et pacifique emulation.



the storm and how its honours were at the forefront of young people's minds, ahead of all other sporting ambitions¹³, and he went on to make an evaluation of history; recalling that, in the Ancient Games, there was no shortage of unpleasant incidents and stormy periods, or attacks fomented by implacable adversaries. Olympia lived through periods of disunity, but Olympism overcame these without hesitation. The new Olympic Movement would thus evolve in an identical manner. The Games had suffered initially, but the sap was rising too vigorously to allow withering away. The Great War had not shaken the foundations of the Games - nor would they be affected by social revolution in the future¹⁴.

After the Games of the XI Olympiad in Berlin, Coubertin was happy at their undoubted success, their magnificence and perfect organization, despite the political propaganda and pressures they were under. In his closing speech, and just a few months before he died, the great humanist turned, happy, to the runners who had for the first time brought the sacred flame from Olympia, urging that athletes should remember that the fire which had been lit by the heat of the sun had come to them from Olympia to light up and to warm their age. Athletes should guard it jealously within themselves so that it could flare up again on the other side of the world when, in four years' time, the XII Olympiad would be celebrated on the distant shores of the Pacific Ocean¹⁵.

However, Coubertin's fondest dream was to be thwarted once again by the spectre of war, and on 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland, thus triggering World War II, causing a vacuum in the Games of two Olympiads (for 1940 and 1944)¹⁶. Two years earlier, on 2 September 1937, whilst strolling through Geneva's *La Grange* park, the tired heart of the celebrated French humanist stopped beating forever¹⁷. The great ideologue of modern Olympism died with the bitter experience of not having been able to confirm in practice his special objective, namely the pacifying effect of the great universalist movement he had founded.

Olympism

Yet, with the 1936 Berlin Games, the last Olympic event prior to his death, an Olympic symbol of peace and age-old remembrance had been born in the form of the Olympic flame¹⁸. With the collaboration of Jean Ketseas, Carl Diem¹⁹ conceived the new rite, which he unveiled as a great innovation at the Games of the XI Olympiad²⁰. The flame, lit by the burning rays of the sun at the centuries-old site at Olympia, is akin to a call of deep religious significance (Coubertin's *religio athletae*), which from Antiquity to our times²¹, passes on the profound significance of the peace which was imposed for the duration of the Games. However, the spectacular and symbolic passing-on of the flame by relay runners with torches (formerly *lampadodromia*) makes such a call even more dramatic. The hopeful runners carrying the flame are the incarnation of the former *eleicos espondoforos*, who were the heralds of the Truce²². The torch carrying the flame follows a long and complex path, being passed from hand to hand by an endless succession of arms belonging to young people from different countries, with different languages and religions, and belonging to different races, who collaborate, all making a generous and joyous contribution, to transport a symbol of a deeply religious nature. Destined for a different and often distant country, the Olympic torch crosses the barriers of political and territorial divisions, to arrive at the site of the great four-yearly meeting where its flame burns until the conclusion of competition and the Closing Ceremony of the great Olympic festival.

Because of the Games, the lighting, transfer, installation and extinction of the Olympic flame symbolizes the start of a period of peace during the competition period which finishes when they conclude, but which is not the subject of any formal announcement.

Bibliography

¹ Blázquez, José María: *El cristianismo, religión oficial*. In Historia 16. Number 249.

² Valserra, Fabricio: *Historia del Deporte*. Barcelona.

³ Duránte, Conrado: *Pierre de Coubertin, l'Humaniste Olympique*. Lausanne, 1994.

⁴ Duránte, Conrado: *Pierre de Coubertin y la filosofía del olimpismo*. Madrid, 1995.

⁵ Duránte, Conrado: *Historia y filosofía del olimpismo*. Madrid, 1996.

⁶ Coubertin, Pierre: *Une campagne de vingt et un ans*. Paris, 1908.

⁷ Coubertin, Pierre: *El atletismo en el mundo moderno y en los Juegos Olímpicos*. Lecture at the El Parnaso Society. Bulletin of the International Olympic Games Committee. Paris, January 1895.

⁸ Coubertin, Pierre: *Les Jeux Olympiques de 1900*. In *Textes Choisis*.

Coubertin, Pierre: *Discours d'ouverture de la Session de Rome (7 April 1993)*. In *Textes Choisis*.

⁹ Coubertin, Pierre: *El XXV Aniversario de los Juegos Olímpicos*. Lausanne, April 1919. In *Ideario Olímpico: Discursos y Ensayos*. Madrid, 1973.

¹⁰ Coubertin, Pierre: *Lettres Olympiques (XI)*. In *Textes Choisis*.

¹¹ Ode to sport by G. Hohrod and M. Eschbach, pseudonyms used by Coubertin to submit the composition

to the literary competition of the Games of the V Olympiad.

¹² Duránte, Conrado: *La Historia Olímpica*. Madrid, 1990.

¹³ Coubertin, Pierre: *Memorias olímpicas*. Madrid, 1995. Translation into Spanish by Jose Maria Soler.

¹⁴ Coubertin, Pierre: *Memorias Olímpicas*.

¹⁵ Coubertin, Pierre: *Ideario Olímpico, Discursos y Ensayos*. Madrid, 1973. Translation into Spanish by Juan Antonio de la Iglesia.

¹⁶ Duránte, Conrado: *A History of modern Olympism*. 2 vol. Barcelona, 1992. Vol I.

¹⁷ Duránte, Conrado: *Pierre de Coubertin, l'Humaniste Olympique*. Lausanne, 1994.

¹⁸ Skiadas, Eleferios: *The Olympic Flame*. Athens, 1997.

¹⁹ BORGES, Walter: *Olympic Torch Relays*. Kassel, 1996.

²⁰ Diem, Liselotte: *The ceremonies, A contribution to the History of the Modern Olympic Games*. International Olympic Academy 1964.

²¹ Diem, Carl: *Ewiges Olimpia* Wuppertal, 1971.

²² Duránte, Conrado: *La Antorcha Olímpica*. Madrid, 1987.



Lighting in Olympia of the Olympic flame of the Games in Berlin.