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From the Editor: Learning from the two Olympics

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Learning from the two Olympics

Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

London hosted two Olympics this summer: the XXVI Olympics in July and the Paralympics in August/September. The wall-to-wall coverage of the July events inevitably overshadowed the ‘less important’ Paralympics.

The opening night technology highlighted the greatness of human ingenuity and creativity. Its twenty-first century liturgy enthralled us — a splendid, dramatic evocation of human creativity.

Up close, television brought us right into the various arenas — swimming and diving, track and field, tennis and show jumping, basketball and boxing, weight lifting and gymnastics.

Long and high jump

The long and high jumpers fascinated me both in their run up and after take-off. High jumpers stood way back, measuring the run-up in their minds. Most of them chose a circular route to take off, increased their speed as they passed a marker or two en route and once in the air twisted their body 90 degrees to achieve maximum height. Stand back — measure out — a curving approach — take off — twist and turn in the air — over the bar.

Long jumpers were more predictable. They too started way back, gathered speed as they approached the board and gained a few centimetres by using the full width of the board with the take-off foot. Airborne they continued to rotate both legs for the extra centimeters that might make all the difference between a bronze, silver or gold medal — or, at least, gain them a personal best.

Yogi Berra got it right: “You can learn a lot by looking.”

Altius, Citius, Fortius— Higher, Faster, Stronger

In 1894 Pierre de Coubertin borrowed the Olympic motto from his friend Henri Didon, a Dominican priest. Higher, Faster, Stronger than the other competitors — moments of glory on the podium — a lap of victory; or maybe a personal best to comfort the disappointment of not winning a medal: a personal reward for tolerating pain, persevering, finding the

extra turn of speed when rounding the last bend — so much finally came together.

Before the games — months, sometimes years, of training under the watchful eyes of coaches; daily dedication; honing of particular skills and techniques; fasting from junk food, doing without. “One estimate is that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to achieve world championship standard in any sport ...



That amount of work is a living definition of perseverance and determination.” (Christopher Jamison CSB)

Can we learn something about religion and life from the Olympics? Both have their ceremonies. But the Olympic Games remind us that the really real takes place between the opening and closing spectaculars.

Higher

Much religious language is so high it’s out of this world altogether: incarnate; begotten; consubstantial; graciously; vouchsafe; oblation; perfect us as a people of one accord; bestow, we pray your grace. Surely God understands contemporary English just as well as medieval Latin.



On the other hand, do we aim high enough in what we expect of our church? — its real presence in the lives of people, its understanding of those daily lives, its ability to move with the times, its willingness to challenge half-hearted Christian living, its understanding and forgiveness, its God-centredness?

Faster

Ours is a speedy society. As drivers, how many of us are prepared to keep to the speed limit? How many of us come to church on Sunday hoping it will all be over in less than 40 minutes? Well, 50 anyway.

In my parish in Dublin when I was growing up there was Sunday Mass on the hour from 7:00-10:00 am. Then 11:00, 11:30 and 12 noon. No distribution of Communion at the last three Masses. Sermons were short. My uncle, a salesman, often told me that if it took the priest more than three minutes to give his sermon, he had lost half the people. I find I have

to eliminate a lot to keep a homily to five minutes. Then again African Spiritans tell me that longer is better where they come from. Know your people.

Stronger

Achievement culminates countless hours of practice — getting it right, improving on this or that technique, repeating, rehearsing under the watchful eye of a knowledgeable coach, denying oneself the easier way out, stretching for that extra second, those extra centimetres that make the difference between a medal and an also-ran.

What do we stand for? What do we give in to? How about our overall condition? Are we too comfortable, too complacent, too sure of ourselves? Have we become too soft? Do we aim high enough?

The training fields are all around us — family, colleagues, friends, fellow Spiritans, other parishioners, students and staff in the school, patients in the hospital, fellow passengers in bus or subway.

The Olympic Games remind us that the really real takes place between the opening and closing spectaculars.

The laurel-wreath

In ancient Greece wreaths were awarded to winners including the Olympic Games winners. In ancient Roman successful generals rode through the streets of Rome crowned with a laurel wreath.

The English language has borrowed two laurel sayings: “Resting on one’s laurels” refers to someone relying entirely on long past successes for continued fame or recognition. “Look to one’s laurels” encourages someone to take inspiration from past achievements to conquer a fresh task.

Perseverance, dedication, giving of one’s best, being humble winners and gracious also-rans — these and many other bits and pieces make for life’s true Olympians. Achieving personal bests, not beating others, is what really counts.

The Christian laurel-wreath

The Roman soldiers put a wreath on Jesus’ head — but not a laurel-wreath. After twisting some thorn branches into a circle they crowned him with a ‘crown’ of thorns, then put a reed in his right hand, knelt before him and mocked him saying, “Hail, King of the Jews.”

A religion replacing a laurel wreath with a crown of thorns was countercultural back then. A religion that puts a gold medal around the neck of a crucified Christ cannot but be countercultural now, cannot but march to a different drumbeat. ■

Spiritan House Mural, Duquesne University

The recently installed *I AM BECAUSE WE ARE* Mural in Duquesne University, Pittsburgh celebrates the Spiritans in Africa. Artist Gerry Tonti depicts the Holy Spirit hovering above two African women locking arms over a baobab tree — the tree of life in West Africa. Kente, the distinctive woven cloth of West Africa, serves as a background and represents the commitment of Duquesne University to Africa. The chain links on the cloth represent unity in human relations: in unity is strength. The moon-star squares, two West African symbols, symbolize love, faith and harmony.

I AM BECAUSE WE ARE is taken from Ubuntu, a South African term meaning: “I am what I am because of what we are.”

