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1 August 2024

Prot. No. 272/1/24
Cir.24.68

The Paris Olympic Opening Ceremonies 2024

Those entrusted with designing and staging the Olympics Opening Ceremonies in Paris did not deserve the privilege given to them.

The scene of the Last Supper mocking Jesus and his disciples was especially egregious. This production was paid for by many well-meaning small donors who believed in and still believe in (as I do) the Olympic Games.

Why in the name of artistic license would those few persons entrusted to entertain, create a scene that would mock something so sacred to over a billion people? What the Olympic organizers placed before us was not art, nor was it culture, and certainly it was not “liberty, fraternity, equality”. It was also not becoming of France.

How can one not be offended to see the Last Supper of one’s Lord ridiculed? Would the organizers think to do such to any other world religion, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism? Does Christianity, the most persecuted religion in the world, deserve to be mocked in front of the world to see? Moreover, innocent children and families were watching, along with sincere athletes, coaches and their families.

Christians perhaps are an easy target, because they will always “turn the other cheek” as Jesus asked. Yes, we do “turn the other cheek”, but Jesus’ command did not intend for us to be doormats to the world, especially to the gratuitous insults of others. Rather, our Lord intended for us to stand strong against wrongdoers, to invite them to strike again, but not as superiors, but as equals. That is the deeper meaning behind the saying.

Martin Luther King, and the 2,000 students he helped train in nonviolent resistance, understood this as they stood lovingly against racial hatred in America. They knew that undeserved respect given to wrongdoers, especially when they do not merit it at all, sometimes changes hearts. They were right.

The message of Christ and his Last Supper does not deserve ridicule, but rather wonder and admiration. I hope that those who have done so, as well as those who persecute Christ throughout the world, will one day listen to the voice of conscience, come to ask his forgiveness, and come to know him personally and the power of his saving passion, death and resurrection, which takes away the sin of the world.

One more important and timely lesson may be drawn from this occasion. At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread, broke, and gave it to his disciples and said, “this is my body, given for you, do this in memory of me.” Luke 22:19

Christians find profound meaning and identity in this most generous act of love. This is our Lord and Teacher offering himself for us. This is his own personal way of seeing the gift of his body, which was all he had left to give us in this world, as a food for our souls. This great mystery is what we call Eucharist.

There is so much that can be learned from this. But let us take only one lesson for now, the words: “This is my body”. Our Lord offered the gift of his body for others.

Ironically, those who designed and portrayed the Last Supper with overly sexualized images seemed to also be saying “this is my body”, but with capital letters, MY body. In other words, I will do with MY body what I want. It is mine, nobody can tell me what to do with MY body. I alone will do what I want, no one has any right to tell me otherwise.

This emphasis on MY body, unlike the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, “this is my body”, says that I alone am the sole reference for whatever I choose to do with MY body. This has implications for the child in the womb, the desire to change one’s gender, the living out of one’s sexuality, as if the only reference is MY and ME.

This understanding of one’s body is so different from the profound Christian understanding of body and soul as a composite gift from a Designer, a loving Creator who gives purpose and meaning by fashioning us male and female with an ability to love and be loved in and through our bodies.

We likewise have the awesome power to bring a new life into this world through our bodies and through God’s grace. We can love and be loved in a way that makes the angels stand in awe and wonder. Each one of us is a gift from God, and we are all created to be such. If we alone are the only reference for what to do with “my body” we may never come to know the profound meaning and beauty of “my body”. Instead, we may try to find meaning for life, and for our body, in inferior places, far from the intent of the Creator, and far from our own conscience, which speaks quietly but clearly to our hearts.

For this reason, the Opening Ceremonies of the Paris Olympics, wrong as they are in mocking Jesus, have given us pause to reflect. Olympic athletes use their bodies to excel with greatness in competition and in the building of friendships and love. With God’s help we too can rediscover the gift and purpose of our bodies for a similar excellence and for a similar building of love.

The Paris Opening Ceremonies did not help us find that deeper meaning. But Jesus, who speaks in our conscience, can. He said, “this is my body, broken and given for you”. Athletes get that, most believing people get that, most people of good will, no matter what faith or lack of faith, get that. Jesus shows us a sacrificial way of loving with our bodies that makes sense to most people. It is too bad those who were given the privilege to design and play a role in the opening ceremonies, did not.

But it is not too late. All of us can learn. As Martin Luther King and his coworkers did in changing America for the better, we too can bring back to our world, longing for true meaning, the proper understanding of our bodies as gifts. In this way the amazing world of sports, as well as our daily lives, will be all the better for it.

Lord Jesus help us to bear your insults and indignities, and yet still offer the world what you offered. Remind us that we are a gift from a loving Creator, made by and for God's love and for one another. Correct us when we misuse our bodies, and help us to assist one another to find the profound meaning and gift of our bodies. The Paris Olympics helped us see the stark contrast between two ways of seeing ourselves and our bodies. Lord help us choose your way: This is my body, broken and delivered for you and for the many for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life."

+ Gregory

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