

MASS IN CELEBRATION OF THE 30TH OLYMPIC GAMES
Westminster Cathedral

SATURDAY 28 JULY 2012

Homily given by
The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols

Many words have been spoken and written about these great Games, which are now underway. Many more will follow, but only a few from me this afternoon.

Actions speak louder than words. And our actions, in gathering here for this Mass, are eloquent.

We are asking God's blessing on this great venture: that it may be conducted in safety; that all who are taken up in it may be renewed in spirit; that this congress of nations may promote peace between them; that solidarity between rich and poor may be strengthened through deeper understanding and compassion.

The Olympic Games hold up high ideals of fairness in competition, of friendship between adversaries, of individual achievement and national pride. But, in order to be effective, such ideals need to be put into practice. We hope this will be so, despite the huge pressures of world attention, corporate investment and political prestige that surround these Games.

A few years ago I met my first true Olympian: now an elderly man of 91 years of age, he won a cycling medal for Great Britain in the 1948 London Olympics. I hope he was indeed able to attend yesterday's opening ceremony. But when I met Tommy Godwin his pride in that victory was still so evident. He embodied the spirit of the Games. He combined modesty with greatness, self-discipline with deep respect towards others, generosity with a noble spirit of self. I hope that many more people like him will emerge from these London Games, too.

Nine months ago, here in this Cathedral, we launched our programme looking forward to 100 Days of Peace, building on the ancient Olympic custom of a truce between all warring cities at the time of the Games. So many activities have followed and we can be rightly proud of the part played by the Catholic Church, together with other Churches and faith groups, in exploring and promoting the true spirit of this venture.

Schools explored training for peace just as athletes were training for the competitions. The classic virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice and courage were explored as the foundation of true human achievement, whether in citizenship or sport. We looked together at the broad swathes of common ground between the pursuit of excellence in sport and Christian goodness in life.

The readings of our Mass today rather emphasised that connection. I think someone had a little fun in choosing them! Indeed there were so many references to races and running that I for one ended up breathless just listening to them!

But the connections are strong. St Paul used the analogy of the runners in the stadium to urge you and I to know clearly our true goal in life, the real, eternal prize for which we are striving. And if the prospect of Olympic gold can spur a competitor through years and years of sacrifice and effort, so much more can the constant prompting of God's unswerving love and the pure gold of God's presence for eternity spur us on in our Christian journey.

Many popes have echoed the analogy of St Paul. Most strikingly, the Blessed John Paul II did so in words spoken to competitors in the 1985 European Games for the Blind. He said: 'Your sporting achievements are a sign of your great human capabilities. You do not allow yourselves to be overcome by difficulties but are determined to conquer them. In this you show courage and great gifts of mind and will.' He himself did so, too, when, great athlete as he had been, he struggled with his own debilitating condition.

Today we look forward to the Para-Olympics where that same courage, determination and freedom of spirit will be displayed.

The figure of Pope John Paul II is important to us today for we hope that the recent establishment in this country of the John Paul II Foundation for Sport can be the vehicle through which our Catholic community can help our society build a legacy worthy of these Games. This Foundation was launched by Pope Benedict XVI during his recent Visit to the UK. Its time is now coming and I hope you will all give it your support, as requested in our Mass booklet today.

This weekend the Catholic Church observes its Day for Life annual Sunday. The theme chosen for this year is: 'Use your body for the glory of God.' We will see many fine sports men and women use their bodies, their minds and their spirits in the quest for glory. But the message of the Gospel goes deeper. It reminds us, vividly, that our bodies are for the glory of God. Indeed our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. This does not detract from that physical achievement of sport, with its beauty, symmetry, harnessing of speed, finesse and power. Rather it enhances those achievements and gives them their deepest purpose – that of giving glory to their Maker.

This is such an important message for us all today: not simply a negative message that we should not misuse, nor disfigure our bodies, nor subject them to the destructive excesses of drugs or alcohol that are so easily available, and which do such lasting damage to our true happiness; but a positive message that the inner beauty, finesse and poise of our bodies goes beyond our years of athleticism and emerges in new form even into old age. As we rejoice in the physical achievements of the young let us also reawaken in ourselves the belief that our bodies too are always of beauty in the eyes of God and are destined to rise again to eternal life, at the moment to come, when all is made new by the power of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Dear Lord, bless these Olympic Games. Bless all who take part in them. Keep us safe. Bless alike our joys and our disappointments. Teach us, in these weeks ahead, to thank you for all your gifts and to give a generous welcome to all, especially those most in need. Then, indeed, we know you, the one true God, in the glory of all your creation.

Amen

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster