

SPORT AND LIFE THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE OLYMPIC SPIRIT AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

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ABSTRACT

Through the contemporary context of social, economic and political crises that are engulfed the world, as well as globally imposed value systems, the authors emphasize in this paper the importance of Christian values and the Olympic spirit in fostering both authentic identities, as well as preserving the unity of life on Earth. Value placed in the focus of this work is a constant human improvement through the sport and through the life in general by comparing Olympic motto "Citius, Altius, Fortius", with Christian values (forgiveness, love, mercy, tolerance, solidarity, modesty and others) whose source is the Gospel. Such a foundation gives society a greater chance to be successful, and sport and life follow the same meaningful direction – nurturing a spiritually and physically healthy individual. The comparative method, the historical method, and the method of content analysis are used as a methodological base of this work. This paper follows the genesis of the Olympic Games from antiquity to modern times, and sets research question: to what extent are the Olympic spirit and Christian values threatened in the 21st century? Authors make use of various connections between the Olympic spirit and Christian values, to promote high ethical and moral standards. Such standards are also part of best pedagogical practice. On the other hand, some negative trends in sports and life repeat themselves throughout history, leading us to opposite sides. Despite those regressive phenomena that divert society from the stable to fleeting, and from the eternal to the transient, examples of the exceptional personalities are discussed who stand for the lasting values in sport and life. Thanks to them, the Olympic flame as a symbol of the Olympic spirit keeps burning, along with the Blessed fire on Holy Saturday in Jerusalem.

Key words: Christianity, Olympic Games, sport, Christian values, pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

The sanctuary dedicated to the Greek god Zeus – Olympia in the Peloponnese, as the venue of the ancient Games (776-393 AD) once again became the place where the Olympic flame was lit in April 2024 (Greek mythology). He set out for Paris as a symbolic sign of peace and continuity of the Olympic spirit. On the other hand, the only day the world lived without God - Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday - the Crucifixion and the Orthodox Easter of Christ, is celebrated in Jerusalem as the descent of the Blessed Fire from heaven to earth (the Lord's grave is in the Kuvuklija chapel, inside the Church of the Resurrection). The appearance of the flame is considered a special blessing from God for all the pilgrims present, who came from different parts of the world and belong to different churches. Flame, i.e. light, is the most universal symbol of eternally renewing life. For Christians, the foundations of life are hope, faith and love, on which other Christian values are built. Sport, among other things, has the potential to encourage Christian values: humanity, altruism, tolerance, patience and dedication. Sport at its best encourages Christian values: humanity, altruism, tolerance, patience and dedication. In this way, Christian values are a spiritual accompaniment to sports. The unity of the physical and the spiritual was understood in ancient Greece, where the ideal of *kalokagathos* – a combination of the beautiful and the moral, meant that the competitors, in addition to physical skill, also possessed a spirited mind. What did the Olympic spirit once reflect? In the past, it was more defined by the humanistic religion within the ancient Greece. The values that this humanism once carried were: the best should win, fair competition, glory follows the winner, and that mass-involvement brings quality. Those values were at least declaratively supported at the beginning of the Modern Olympic Games. At any rate, the spirit of the time during which they are held has always been reflected in the Olympic Games.

If we start from the basic premise that sport and spirituality should go together in the process of continuous human improvement, the question arises: To what extent are the Olympic spirit and Christian values threatened in the 21st century? First, what should an Olympic sport not be? It should not be politicized and corrupt. There are many indications in modern times that morals and ethics in Olympic sports are on the decline. In addition, the Christian faith (especially in the West) is on the decline too, which also contributes to the decline of moral and ethical standards. In ancient times, man addressed God through some kind of "sacrifice" that represented the beginning of future prayer. It goes without saying that sport and religion in modern society still require some kind of purposeful sacrifice.

Finally, in its development, the Olympic Games go through various trials and problems such as wars in the world, doping of athletes, terrorism, boycott, falling under the power of economic and political interests of multinational corporations, states and so on. There is no doubt that the challenges that modern society imposes on athletes are numerous, as well as the challenges on the endless path of spiritual improvement of man. Deeply aware of the complexity of that process, Berdyaev says: "Christianity in history was not only the discovery of God, but also the creation of

man.” And the creation of man was both good, but it was also ugly (...) Human-like, too human-like, it was presented as God-like» (Berdyayev, 2006:83).

KEY EVENTS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

During the Roman rule of Greece, in 393AD, the Olympic Games were abolished, because Emperor Theodosius I saw in them the remnants of pagan rituals, and Christianity was declared the official religion. Many years later, in 1894, the “International Olympic Committee” (IOC) was founded to restore the Olympic Games. The founding congress defined the rules for their maintenance. For example, according to Article 4, only amateurs could participate in them, except in the fencing discipline. In 1896, the first Games of the modern era were held in Greece, the birthplace of the Olympic Games. They are improved over time in terms of rules, sports disciplines, participants and more. The period between the games was called the Olympics. The Olympic anthem, which was composed by the Greek Spyridon Samaras and whose words were written by the Greek poet Kostis Palamas for the first Modern Olympic Summer Games in Athens, is still sung today. The text of the anthem mentions the first three Olympic disciplines as places of enlightenment with the “noble light of the Games”. Furthermore, the participants pray to the “Immortal Spirit of Antiquity”, the father of beauty, greatness and truth to, “make our body firm and valuable”.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who was himself an athlete, is considered the founder of the modern Olympic Games and the founder of the IOC. He revived the idea of Olympism with values such as loyalty, universality, respect for opponents and, most importantly, he connected the Games with peace in the world (Danas, 2024). The Games were held steadily, but surprisingly two World Exhibitions threatened their success. Coubertin himself judged the Games in Paris in 1900 and in St. Louis in 1904 as unsuccessful. The Olympics were overshadowed by the World’s Fair, which celebrated the centenary of the purchase of Louisiana from France. The St. Louis Games had few athletes from other countries (out of 554 participants, 432 were Americans) and lasted several months. Americans won 22 of the 23 athletic disciplines (Sclamber, 2007:94). The five circles on the Olympic flag are a symbol of the five continents and the universality of Olympism. The Games in Stockholm in 1912 were the first in which athletes from all five continents met. Athletes from the Kingdom of Serbia (five competitors) participated in those Games for the first time.

At the VIII Olympic Games in Paris in 1924, the Olympic motto “faster, higher, stronger” (Citius, Altius, Fortius) was promoted, which was devised by the Dominican preacher Henri Didon (Olympic Committee of Serbia, 2024). The motto of the Games extolled the ideals of fame, honor, and uniqueness. Also, Paris is the first city in which an Olympic village was built (according to the idea of Coubertin). The Paris Games were solemnly closed by the flags of the IOC, the host countries, as well as the host countries of the next Games. Furthermore, Amsterdam was the first host city in 1928 to take over the flame traditionally lit in the Greek Olympia. The Games were canceled in 1916, 1940 and 1944 due to the First and Second World Wars, but they were held in Los Angeles in 1932 during the Great Depression. The Olympic Games in Berlin in

1936 were characterized as racist due to the policies of the Nazi regime, and that due to the construction of infrastructure and other preparations, they helped the Hitler regime to gain legitimacy and popularity on the domestic stage, as well as become accepted on the international stage (Sclamber, 2007:101). At the 1952 Helsinki Games, athletes from the Soviet Union participated for the first time, but West Germany and Japan withdrew their teams.

Several organizational and technological improvements are associated with the Olympic Games in Rome in 1960. For example, the first live TV broadcasts of competitions. It is especially worth pointing out that the first Paralympic Games were held at the same time. Before the Olympics in Tokyo in 1964, the National Olympic Committee of the Republic of South Africa was suspended due to the apartheid policy. The first doping tests were used in 1968 at the Olympic Games in Mexico. The stadium built for those Games is still the pride of Mexico today, and the biggest football competitions are often held there. The Munich Games in 1972 introduced terrorism (an attack on Israeli athletes) to the Olympic world with, as they were postponed for 34 hours. Women first appeared as competitors at the Olympic Games in 1900. After more than a century, in 2012 in London, they participate in all Olympic disciplines. The Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980 were boycotted by the West. The Cold War was the cause of the boycott of the Games in 1980 and 1984. In 1992, Barcelona hosted the Olympic Games where the NBA professional basketball players competed for the first time. Beijing 2008 overshadowed the world with the organization and spectacle, which were supposed to show how much China managed to develop. In 2016, Brazil's Rio de Janeiro hosted 11,303 competitors who competed in 306 disciplines. Then, the games in Tokyo in 2021 went down in history not just as the first to be postponed for one year due to the COVID-19 epidemic, but also as the first to undergo sudden expansion of the Olympic sports program; several new sports and disciplines were introduced (among them surfing, karate, basketball 3x3), so that in total there were the most up to that time (339 disciplines in 33 sports categories).

In the 21st century, the Olympic spirit is becoming more and more politicized, corrupt and largely nationalistic (Table 1). It is necessary to emphasize that nationalism does not originate in Christianity. Russian religious and political philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev believes that nationalism is in eternal conflict with Christianity: "Nation is a cultural-historical fact, while nationalism is a relationship to that fact, turning a normal fact into an idol" (Berdyaev, 2006:61). Of course, the rise of religious nationalism in the 21st century is also idolatry. Sins committed in the name of God are the sins of man. For example, during his visit to Bolivia in 2015, Pope Francis apologized to Bolivian indigenous people for suffering during Spanish colonization, "I say this to you with regret: Many grave sins were committed against the South American Natives in the name of God" (Luković-Jablanović, 2022).

Policy of IOC, i.e. the trend of the modern Olympic Games is to add new sports, as well as to tighten the Olympic competition norms in the already included sports, all with the aim of increasing profits and elitism in sports. Participation in sports is declining, the culture of spectacle and superstars are being promoted, which, due to their popularity, bring the organizers huge incomes. Therefore, new sports

are introduced, while those that are not profitable enough are thrown out (karate, OI 2024. Paris) [Mondo, 2024]. In support of the mentioned trend is the fact that a new sport – breakdancing, has been included as an official competitive discipline. The IOC’s official explanation was that they wanted to increase viewership and attract a younger audience.

Table 1. *Olympic Games in the past versus in the 21st century*

Criteria	In the past	In 21 st century
Reward	Fame and honor: «may the best win»	Money and glory: «may the representatives of my country win unconditionally»
Training	Mass participation, physical improvement	Elitism
Meaning	It's important to participate	It's important to win
Goal	Promotion of a healthy individual through sports	Promotion of sports as a function of economic and foreign political interests of states
Content	Sport	Politicized and corrupt global sports-media spectacle
Values	Humanism, patriotism, respect for opponents, unification of humanity, and promotion of peace in the world	Unconditional victory and profit, nationalism, values of consumer society, fragmentation of the world

Source: authors

At the Summer Olympic Games in Paris 2024, 10,500 athletes from more than 200 countries of the world took part in competitions in 329 disciplines. The first Winter Olympic Games were held in 1924 in Chamonix, France. At the last one, in Beijing in 2022, 2,900 athletes from over 90 countries were hosted, who competed in over 100 disciplines. An interesting fact is that athletes from Saudi Arabia and Haiti took part in the Winter Olympics for the first time. The next Winter Olympic Games will be held in Italy in 2026, and for the first time in history two cities will host them: Milan and Cortina. If we look at the period 1896-2024. year (table 2), the highest total number of medals won at the Summer Olympic Games is held by the USA (2,655), the Soviet Union (1,010), Great Britain (930), Germany (797), France (773), Canada (636), Australia (541), Hungary (515) and Japan (499).

The statistics of the host cities of the previous Summer Olympic Games are interesting: out of a total of 32 cities, most of them (about 87.5%) were in Western countries. Only two were held in Latin America (Mexico City 1968, Rio de Janeiro, 2016), one in Eastern Europe (Moscow, 1980), one in East Asia (Beijing, 2008), and all others in North America and Western Europe. (Olympic Committee of Serbia, 2024). Africa, the Middle East and many other regions are not on this map.

Table 2. *Countries with the most medals won at the Summer Olympics since 1896.*



Source: *Olimpedia/ Countries with the Most Olympic Medals, Paris 2024 Olympics by Anna Fleck, Statista, Jul 26, 2024*, <https://www.statista.com/chart/32725/the-nations-with-the-most-summer-olympic-medals/>

Hosting the Modern Olympic Games is still an honor, but the question of the financial effect for the host city/country inevitably arises. In the last two decades, the number of candidate cities for hosting the OI is clearly decreasing, which is a product of the crisis that the IOC faced in the 1970s (Munich 1972, Montreal 1976). The global context is such that host cities face political and financial risks. Namely, the costs of organizing the Olympic Games (building the necessary infrastructure, etc.) are getting higher and often far exceed the budget. Also, a large part of the funds is taken by the IOC. However, for now, the first analyzes say that the French economy received the necessary “injection” with the 33rd Summer Olympic Games. As predicted by the Bank of France, economic growth will range between 0.35% and 0.45% for the third quarter. Due to these problems, the IOC set a precedent in 2017 and decided without seeking more proposals that the host of the 2028 Olympics would be Los Angeles. Besides Paris this city was also the only other candidate for the 2024 Olympics.

The essence of the Modern Olympic Games is far from declarative values, especially from the slogan “it is important to participate” with the help of which Coubertin wanted to massify them. Only the winners are glorified, while the other participants are seen as “losers” by the modern consumer society. The spiritual message of Pope Francis for all those who are discouraged by a certain sports or life failure, as well as for the whole world, is: “that a clean defeat is better than a dirty victory, because it is the best way to live with your head held high” (Pope Francis, 2021).

MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES versus CHRISTIANITY

The modern Olympic Games are far from the ancient Greek aesthetic conception of the world as a harmonious cosmos where everything has its proper measure. External conditions, with their ever-increasing fluidity of criteria for the true measure confuse modern man moving him further and further away from the point of balance between his biological and social being. This “confusion” covers all areas of life. The Olympic

Games in Paris in 2024 have, for the first time in their history, sharply polarized the views of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Boxing Association (IBA), as well as the public regarding the inclusion of transgender sexes in the competition. Transgender male and female boxers are expected to be officially included in competition at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. However, many boxing trainers even from the USA (where transgender boxers already compete), mainly from the southern more Christian and patriarchal societies, such as the states of Texas, Missouri, Mississippi, are against the inclusion of transgender boxers in the competition.

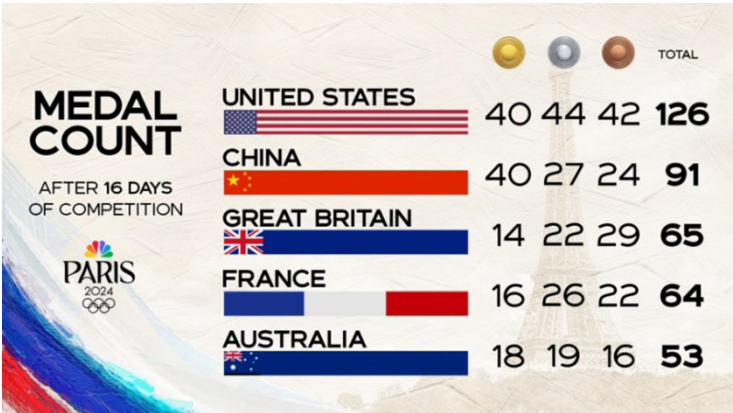
On the other hand, these bioethical questions also trouble the Church. At the end of 2023, the Vatican stated its official position that “transgender people can be baptized in the Catholic Church except in cases where it may cause scandal or confusion” (BBC News, 2023). Even earlier, in 1986, the Serbian Orthodox Church took the position (formulated by Patriarch Pavle) that holy mysteries and rites can be performed on persons who have changed their gender for justified medical reasons, and not based on their personal feelings. The position of the Russian, Greek, and Serbian churches judging from the words of their church dignitaries are very similar: they generally do not justify the change of gender, but they have shown willingness and understanding to make certain exceptions (Politika, 2019).

Political rhetoric can seemingly cover up many mistakes. The Olympic Games are no exception. Throughout the history of the Modern Olympic Games, Baron de Coubertin’s idea of respect for opponents and the absence of hostilities faded more and more. From the first Modern Olympic Games in 1896 until today, they have all been more or less a function of politics and geopolitics. In the past, it was enough just to draw the public’s attention away from major social problems through the Games.

It is worth recalling that during the ancient Games, the Greek city-states concluded the Olympic Truce, which guaranteed everyone a safe journey to and from Olympia. Modern times have led to the politicization of sports and the Olympic Games. During the last Olympics in Paris in 2024, neither of the two major conflicts in the world (Ukrainian and Middle East) was interrupted. On the opening day of the Paris Olympics on July 26, 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued an updated report on the situation in Gaza: “Between 7 October 2023 and 25 July 2024, at least 39,175 Palestinians were killed and 90,403 were injured, according to MoH in Gaza” (OCHA, 2024). Also, at least 278 aid workers in the Gaza Strip have already been killed.

The IOC even showed a certain amount of hypocrisy, because it took upon itself the assessment of the suitability of individual athletes from the Russian Federation and Belarus, whom it allowed to compete individually - among the “exceptions” were 36 Russian and 24 Belarusian competitors. However, only 15 Russians and 17 Belarusians accepted the invitations and participated as “individual neutral athletes”. Teams were not allowed to participate. By comparison, 335 Russian and 101 Belarusian athletes competed at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics (BBC Sport). So far, a total of 13 countries have been banned from competing in the Olympic Games for various reasons: political views, war, doping, or violation of IOC rules (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Table 3. *Final 2024 Olympic medal tally: US gold medal tally in race with China*



Source: NBC New York Staff, August 11, 2024, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/paris-2024-summer-olympics/2024-olympics-final-medal-count-heres-how-many-gold-medals-the-usa-won-versus-china/5694982/>

As for medals, it is indicative that at the 2024 Paris Olympics, the global industrial power – China, won 91 medals and was the main competitor of the USA (126) in terms of the number of medals won (Table 3). This leads to the conclusion that the economic and political strength of countries is closely correlated with the number of medals won.

In 2021, Pope Francis gave an interview to the Italian *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. Since he himself was involved in sports (football, basketball) in his youth, sports topics have always been close to him. Among the thirty questions, the pontiff’s attention was particularly drawn to seven with the following key words: honesty, commitment, sacrifice, involvement, asceticism and salvation. It is noticeable that these concepts are common to sport and religion. The head of the Roman Catholic Church also talks about the importance of nurturing the gifted. He compares the parable in the Gospel of Matthew about the general talents (Mt 25, 14-30) and talent in sports, and concludes that in both cases talent remains unproductive if it’s not nurtured, in other words, purposefully used (Pope Francis, 2021). Human history, not just sports history, is full of people who lost their talent along the way. Any talented person needs to carry an appropriate measure of responsibility.

On the other hand, the Western value system has glorified individuality to the extreme, with selection based on the principle of “either you’re the best or you’re worth nothing.” This has had an impact on sport through the use of doping, psychoactive substances, steroids, and other illegal stimulants. There is no doubt that tradition is in collision with globalism, which one part of the world increasingly perceives as a heresy. At the root of this heresy is pride, which petrifies the spirit of man, not sparing his body either. Pride is common in sports, and its most obvious manifestation is the use of doping in competitions (Jerotic, 2013:138).

The fame that follows talented top athletes can have a negative impact on their mental and physical health, because not all of them are strong enough to withstand the diverse and strong pressures of the modern consumer society. It sometimes leads to absurdity, as for example in the case of one of the greatest soccer players from Argentina Diego Armando Maradona. During his addiction to psychoactive substances, he even appeared in well-paid anti-drug commercials. The example of Maradona confirms how great the responsibility of top athletes is, due to the possibility of strong identification of young people. These athletes influence the prevention of the use of psychoactive substances through the media and sports events, leading to the improvement of public health in general. "A star becomes a role model for others – both an inspiration and a reference point. Sports people and stars must know everything they say or do can affect thousands of people" (Pope Francis, 2021). One study from the U.S. *The 2010 Department of Health and Human Services - "Celebrities in Sports and Public Health: Diego Maradona's Impact on Drug Use Prevention"* just analyzed how the two ways the public connected with Maradona had the effect of producing two conceptually long known effects, as different perceptions of the public about the use of psychoactive substances: those who had a higher degree of parasocial interaction with Maradona were also more likely to exhibit a critical consciousness towards narcotics, while identification with him had a mitigating effect on the prevention of their use (Brown; de Matviuk, 2010). One of the authors of the aforementioned study, in his later work *Celebrity Involvement*, adds worship as a third way of connection with celebrities (as a product of extremely strong identification with them). Through these three powerful interconnected processes, the public engages in interaction with celebrities, while on the other hand, celebrities can influence the public through these same processes (Brown, 2018). Academic literature offers many studies of these processes, especially in the sphere of social psychology, psychology, sociology and communicology. Sclamber notes that "... fame has its own inertia. And while it brings many advantages and benefits to those who enjoy that glory, it also makes them the property of all of us, and sucks their blood" (Sclamber, 2007:284).

Among the multitude of unusual life stories of Olympic winners, two stand out. The first one is about Wilma Rudolph. She was born in 1940 in an African American family of deep Christian faith. At the age of four, she fell ill with polio and the doctor predicted that she would never walk again. "My mother told me I would walk. I trusted my mother," Rudolph wrote (The Guardian, 2024). She wore a prosthetic leg for years afterward and went twice a week for treatment to Nashville 50 miles away (the only hospital willing to treat a Black child with polio), sitting in the back section of the bus reserved for African Americans. Faith has proven many times to be the key to pushing the boundaries in both sports and life. "If there is one thing we experienced in matters of reason and faith, then it is the experience of the limit to which reason leads us, and the experience of crossing that limit, where faith takes us" (Šušnjić, 2007:81).

Picture 1. *Wilma Rudolph makes history in 1960.*



Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2012/jun/01/50-stunning-olympic-moments-wilma-rudolph>

During the 1960 Rome Olympics, Rudolph, the “Black Gazelle”, not only won three gold medals in three different sprinting events, but also broke world records in two of them (International Olympic Committee, 2024). She later became known for her humanitarian work, among other things, she founded the Wilma Rudolph Foundation to help poor children (BBC News, 1960). This athlete undoubtedly possessed spirituality, which Berdjaev defines as follows: “Caring for the life of another, a neighbor, even material, bodily care is already a spiritual care. Bread for me is a material issue, bread for another is a spiritual issue” (Berdyaev, 2006:86). Robert B. Sloan (Robert B. Sloan), president of Houston Christian University in Texas, also cites the example of Rudolph as an illustration of the Christian life that requires discipline, spiritual strength, self-denial, and sacrifice. He precisely connects those qualities of hers with the content of the First Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “Don’t you know: the runners in the racecourse all run, but one receives the prize? So run to win” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). This quote from the Epistle cannot be interpreted out of context because the apostle Paul compares the qualities of a dedicated athlete with the qualities that those who preach the Gospel should have. Namely, the apostle Paul used the model of Corinthian athletes (Isthymian Games) who were disciplined and well prepared, to inspire his readers for Christian discipleship, i.e. to be disciplined and determined in their relationship with God (Sloan, 2013).

Another Olympic life story is that of Muhammad Ali (formerly known as Cassius Clay) about crossing the border of freedom outside the boxing “confined ring”. This North American boxer (picture 2) became the Olympic light heavyweight champion in Rome in 1960. He won the gold medal but did not keep it (Politika, 2016). In the same year, he turned professional. Racial segregation used to be an insurmountable barrier to success for Black athletes, and boxing was a rare niche where they could fulfill themselves as athletes.

Picture 2. *Olympic Games (Rome, 1960) Muhammad Ali receives his lost gold medal*



Source: <https://olympics.com/en/news/muhammad-ali-olympic-gold>

The Olympic Games in Rome in 1960 changed the life of the eighteen-year-old boxer just as it did for Wilma Rudolph. His gold medal had multi-layered symbolism: the victory of anti-racism, human equality, dignity, and poetic justice. He was the absolute world champion from 1964 to March 1967; nine times he successfully defended his title, which was stripped from him by the US Supreme Court, as well as all other awards and recognitions, due to his refusal to go to war in Vietnam (Vreme, 2016). "It's not my war!" said Ali and he did not go to Vietnam (Josipović, 2016). That decision was echoed by his fans: "If he doesn't go, we don't go either." Ali's boxing ban did not expire until 1970, and he won two more titles before retiring in 1981. He was the first boxer whose fights were broadcast via satellite television, which certainly contributed to his popularity; he was a role model for African American athletes and the public alike instilling a sense of dignity in them.

Many things have changed in sports in the last few decades. Among others, two ethically inadmissible trends are observed, which without a doubt cause damage to sport and life. Firstly, the continuous raising of the tolerance threshold for violence in sports and secondly, the glorification of the cult of entertainment and spectacle that leads to ethical distaste, including the emergence of pseudo sports. An example of the first trend is the sport that emerged in the 1990s called Mixed martial arts (MMA), also known as Ultimate Fight. The violence in MMA is undoubtedly stimulated by the monetary rewards to individual fighters for the most brutal knockout. For many MMA fighters, fears of brain trauma and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) are already a reality (Gross, 2020). The competitor's professional contract with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the global MMA organization, prevents any possibility of the competitor later suing the organization for anything, including traumatic injuries. Within the second mentioned trend is a new "sport" – *Power Slap*, which was promoted in 2023 by American businessman Dana White, one of the founders and CEO of the UFC (YouTube, 2023). These and similar examples of increasingly rough and bizarre sports are an expression of the decadence of modern consumer society. Let us remember that gladiatorial games became popular in the time of decadent Rome, but not in Greece, where the Olympic spirit reigned. In any case, Sclamber's observation is truly relevant today: "Violence brings forth the

primitive side of life and very often makes it impossible to play sports according to the rules while manipulating the human need to play” (Sclamber, 2007: 321-325)

Contracts, worth millions of dollars that individual athletes sign, are based on the number of victories won, and stipulated by the top results. The market, especially with the help of television, has colonized sports (Sclamber, 2007:291). Reality is trivialized and that trivialization rules our lives. Today there is a whole pornography of information and communication systems. Something is offered as an obvious truth, although it is not, which is why the French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard calls it trivialized. “We are not far from a one-dimensional world, we have total visibility, but we no longer see anything” (Baudrillard, 2015).

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTS

The Christian Church has historical continuity in caring not only for the spiritual, but also for the physical health of people. Also, the Church is increasingly open to the problems of the modern world and is aware of the historical moment in which it finds itself. Sports can have a positive impact on Christian unity and mutual peace between all religions. Church leaders of two Christian denominations (Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis) point to the importance of sports, physical exercise, with simultaneous spiritual elevation. In ancient Greece and Rome, gymnastics was part of compulsory education. However, modern consumer society turns everything into goods and business.

It does not stand, however, that everything used to be better. Despite the historical repetitiveness of negative phenomena in society, in every era there are exceptional personalities who nurture lasting Christian values through sports and life. At the beginning of August 2024, the headline “Four Olympic heroes shine brightly amid the Games’ darkness” appeared in Higher Ground - The Washington Times, which said everything. Certainly, high budget and “big stakes” sporting events have the potential to bring “a lot of darkness” with them. However, numerous stars “shined a light bright enough to pierce that darkness and remind us of all of the goodness, faith, and priorities we all need to hold on to.” (Hallowell, 2024). In this context, according to the author of the mentioned article, at the Olympic Games in Paris 2024, among others, the following stood out: USA swimmer Hunter Armstrong, South African swimmer Tatjana Smith, USA athlete Sydney McLaughlin-Levron -Levrone), and the author puts Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic in first place.

Picture 3. *Novak Djokovic at the 2024 Paris Olympics.*



Source: <https://www.sportskeeda.com/tennis/news-watch-novak-djokovic-displaying-christian-faith-kissing-cross-necklace-paris-olympics-goes-viral-serb-reaches-maiden-final-event>,

(picture: Getty)

How many opportunities for spiritual development are available to athletes during their strenuous sports career? Djokovic won the gold medal at the Paris Olympics Games 2024. He is a top athlete and an Orthodox Christian. In 2011, after a donation of 100,000 euros to the Gračanica Orthodox Monastery in Kosovo and Metohija, Djokovic was awarded the Order of Saint Sava - the highest award given by the Serbian Orthodox Church for spiritual, educational, and humanitarian services. "This is the most important title in my life because, before I became an athlete, I was an Orthodox Christian," he said (McKeown, 2024). Djokovic possesses talent, dignity, asceticism, discipline, and is altruistic at the same time.

He has donated to children, to the education system of Serbia, for the reconstruction of Serbian Orthodox temples (including the fire-ravaged Hilandar on Mount Athos), areas affected by weather, and health disasters not only in Serbia but also in other countries. For example, a huge monetary donation to the Italian city of Bergamo, which suffered extremely during the COVID-19 epidemic. Djokovic has never spoken publicly about his donations. His modesty in providing help is exactly in accordance with the allegorical description in the Gospel according to Matthew "so that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing" (Matt. 6, 3). In any case, the synergy of the Olympic spirit and the spiritual value of Christianity has the power to give birth to the most valuable people, athletes, and medals are the incidental fruits of a lifetime's effort.

It is worth mentioning here that in September 2023, the First All-Russian Alexander Nevsky Sports Games (*I Vserossijskie sportivnye igry Aleksandra Nevsky*) were opened in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, in which about 430 young athletes participated. A spiritual mentor accompanied each team. The games were organized within the framework of the federal project "Sport is the norm of life". These Games are a joint project of authorities in the Kuzbass region, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Sports of the Russian Federation (TASS, 2023). At the session of the High Church Council in November 2023, Russian Patriarch Kirill pointed out that modern

sport has become a business - “the cult of the developed body has become an element of consumer culture, a form of propaganda for hedonism”, which is increasingly moving away from physical improvement and the meaning of the game. He believes that mass sports require spiritual accompaniment (Russian Patriarch Kirill, 2023).

Also, Pope Francis, who himself was involved in sports in his youth, cites sacrifice as one of the greatest similarities between sports and religion: “Athletes are a bit like saints: they fight, but it doesn’t burden them because they are able to see beyond the fight, they see something else. They find a reason that allows them not only to face the struggle but to be happy about it; you cannot accept a sacrifice if there is no reason for it” (Pope Francis, 2021). These words of the pontiff are confirmed by numerous examples of athletes, including Olympic Games participants. Pope Francis expressed special admiration for the Paralympic athletes: “When I see or read about their achievements, I see that the limitations are not in them, but in the eyes of those who observe them” (Pope Francis, 2021).

At any rate, ethical upbringing, and education of athletes in both pedagogical and in the Christian sense share a common goal – human improvement. Body and spirit travel together on the same road.

CONCLUSION

Man’s biological being seeks balance with his social being. The history of humanity, which is the history of its regressive and progressive stages, tells us that this harmony was often disturbed. The world is currently in one of those regressive stages. The hope for getting out of it is people dedicated to the common good, who can see that there is a more complete reality and a higher goal, whether it is in science (for example, the Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla), art, religion, or sport. This dedication is one of the most noticeable connections not just between religion and science, but also between religion and sport.

The modern world is full of insecurities. Starting with the growth of poverty, the deepening of the gap between the “elite” and the “masses” and the intensification of the crisis of legitimacy, all of which cause many negative consequences in the public sphere where health, education, and social benefits are particularly affected. Sports are no exception. From the perspective of the modern materialistic world, all areas of life are dominated by the mentality of competition, which fosters the cult of the “winner”. Liberal-democratic standards are increasingly fluid and distant from Christian values (spiritual and moral maxims), which are increasingly difficult to preserve in global conditions. This should not be understood as the absolute immutability of the spiritual and moral development of Christians, but as the preservation of the essence of their spiritual heritage. It seems to us that we are currently going through a crisis of the Gospel identity of man, an identity that for two millennia connected human society through: love for neighbor, family, forgiveness, repentance, moral responsibility, solidarity, dignity, mercy, respect, tolerance and tradition. What is it in the cultural, religious, and political tradition that should be “defended” from the moral relativism of the new time, and preserved for the generations to come? Serbian academician

Vladeta Jerotić cites the moral and ethical values of religion as a constant that built and maintained every great civilization in the past (including the European one in the present), on which culture and then civilization was built (Jerotić, 2013:138).

The Christian Church has noticed the educational potential of sport and shares many values with it. However, the question arises to what extent the economic and political interests of the most powerful countries in the world shape the moral norms of the 21st century? No less than, for example, in the 15th century during the Iberian conquest of the New World, the economic interest of the colonizers did. Argentinian Mexican multidisciplinary scientist Enrique Dussel brings this fact closer to the present with the words: "The ruler of this world now determines what is good and what is evil. Morality has turned upside down. Earthly wisdom has become the norm and the law." (Dussel, 1988:32-33). As far as sport is concerned, and especially the Olympic Games, one of the ways to protect the essence of sport from negative economic and political tendencies from the outside environment is for sport to have its own "spiritual accompaniment".

Finally, in support of the importance of a developed spiritual component for an athlete, we will remind you that even the ancient Greeks knew that for the ultimate victory, more than "raw strength and madness" is needed. "The ancient Greek god of war Ares (Greek: Άρης) was less respected and appreciated compared to other gods." According to the Greeks, this was also expressed in the attitude of his father Zeus towards his son, whom he did not love because he was cruel, rude, terrible, (...) led wars, destroyed people. However, Ares did not always secure victory. He often must retreat on the battlefield before the goddess Athena Pallas who defeats him with "wisdom and calm knowledge of strength" (Kun, 1990:58-61). Who wins? Good wins, wisdom wins, not foolishness that rushes. Man is part of the world, but he also gives meaning to the world. Athletes distinguish themselves by their Olympic spirit, by the noble spirit of competing in an honorable fight, by the traits that transcend them and their medals – just as Christian values transcend Christians. The need for the higher grounds and for the sanctity of our goal to surpass us, that eternal striving of man towards perfection is the link between the Olympic spirit and Christian values – nurturing a spiritually and physically healthy individual, with strong moral standards.

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