



Diocese of Westminster

**CONSTANTINIAN ORDER ROYAL GALA DINNER
TO MARK THE OPENING CEREMONY
OF THE 2012 LONDON OLYMPICS
Stationers' Hall, Ave Maria Lane, London EC4M 7DD**

Saturday 28 July 2012

Address given by The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols

Faith In Sport

Presidents, Your Royal Highnesses, Your Eminences, Excellencies, Your Graces, My Lords, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this City on behalf of the Catholic Community of England and Wales and to offer a particular welcome to HRH the Duke of Castro, the Grand Master of the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St George. I thank the Order for bringing us together this evening, to mark these days of Olympic Games in these countries. Indeed I thank the Order for all its work and assure them of my prayerful support.

I am sure that already, and during the days and weeks ahead, you will be able to share in the joys and hopes of so many at this time. They are too many to number: for some there are the joys and hopes of victory in competition; for some the excitement of being part of a great historical event; for some the hopes that all this endeavour will lead to greater harmony and understanding between the peoples of the world; for some there is the simple hope that all will take place in peace and without threat or violence.

You appreciate, I am sure, the huge efforts in preparation that have been made for these Games and for the pleasure of welcoming so many nations to this land. The Olympic Park itself has arisen from a polluted industrial waste land with 98% of the material reclaimed from that land reused or recycled. Another less well known effort is that of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, which has recorded 205 different national anthems for the Victory Celebrations. I sincerely hope that they are all required and one, our own, required more than others!

The level of anticipation is now so high, with the first road race completed today, even while we were celebrating Mass for God's blessings on these Games in Westminster Cathedral. Now the serious business begins, with that great challenge of

all sporting contests: the ability to look both victory and defeat in the face and not be phased by either.

Of course, we all look to these Games to tutor us in so much that makes life worthwhile. These Games can stimulate between us a renewed sense of community, of people getting together in joy and fun. They can show us again, in every athlete, how much can be achieved in life with self discipline, concentrated effort and healthy competition. The effort exerted by every competitor is an example for us all in how to apply ourselves to life itself. This is sport serving the fashioning of character. And this, perhaps, is particularly true of the Para-Olympic Games. I believe that this part of these Games may have the longest lasting effect. I learned just recently that the Para-Olympics first began here in London, only in 1948, and there were just three participating countries: The Netherlands, Canada and Great Britain. What progress has been made since then!

The follow up to these Games is also part of this moment of joy and hope. The Olympic Park itself, all 250 acres, will become the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, the largest development of parkland in this city for over 100 years. We are honoured to have received our message from Her Majesty the Queen for this our gathering. Young people who have come for these Games will, it is hoped, return home with a far deeper appreciation of other nations, of other peoples, many less affluent than themselves yet no less noble or honourable, with whom they will now have a deeper sense of solidarity in the face of life's difficulties.

It is proper, in this company and setting, that I affirm most strongly, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, that the joys and hopes of our human family, as well as its sorrows and fears, are the joys and hope, the sorrows and fears of the Church throughout the world. ('Gaudium et Spes' #1)

These words have been fully put into practice by the Catholic community here in so many ways in the preparation, participation and follow up of these Games.

We have worked hard to give credence to ancient Greek tradition of 100 days of peace at the time of an Olympic Games, with safe passage for athletes and supporters for 50 days either side of the Games. These 100 days, from 8 June to 28 October are being filled with ventures of prayer, practical action and strong witness much led by our Catholic Community, in conjunction with many others. Just recently, for example, there was an inter-faith Olympic Family Fun Sports Day, here in London, bringing together Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostal Christians and Muslims. It was a great success, and now set to be repeated next year. Efforts continue, given impetus by these Games, to work against knife crime on the streets and to engage youngsters in projects to improve their own communities.

Parishes in and around the Olympic Park are all ready to receive hundreds of thousands of visitors passing through their neighbourhoods; chaplaincy and hospitality have been organised on an unprecedented scale, including a Joshua Camp for young people, a kind of Olympic 'World Youth Day' event lasting for over two weeks. Already we have been in touch with Catholic groups in Rio de Janeiro, hoping to pass on to them the experience and enthusiasm we have gained. And we have established a John Paul II Foundation for Sport, which we hope will be the vehicle for

taking forward our follow-up to these Games, promoting team sport as an alternative to gang identity, self-respect and personal achievement instead of rancour and violence, the joy of physical activity and achievement instead of the misuse of drugs and alcohol. I salute so many people who have been engaged in these projects and even as we sit here enjoying ourselves are hard at work serving the well-being of these Games.

Of course our Church shares and supports these high human aspirations so deeply expressed in sport. Successive popes have explored the theme of the deep connections between sport and spirituality. We were honoured that, during his recent Visit to the UK Pope Benedict XVI officially launched our John Paul II Foundation and just last Sunday gave an encouraging message for these Games. But did you know that one of the most energetic promoters of sport was St Pius X? At the beginning of the last century less than 1% of the local population engaged in any sporting activity. But Pius X understood the potential of sport. He saw it as a way 'to approach young people, to bring them together while following certain rules and showing respect for adversaries'. He understood sport as a way of overcoming differences of race, religion and differing political ideas. And, it is said, that one day he retorted to a cardinal: 'All right, if it is impossible to understand that this can be done, then I myself will do exercise in front of everyone so that they may see that, if the Pope can do it, anyone can do it!' I think he might have applied those same words to more than a few of us here this evening!

So let us thoroughly enjoy these Olympic Games. I hope that for us they can be a window onto the greatness of the Creator who invites us, as St Paul says, to use our bodies for His glory. (1 Cor 6.20) I hope they will show us again how the vision of faith, of one God who is 'Father of us all, over all, through all and within all' (Eph 4.6) matches and fulfils our deepest longings, brought to the surface of our thoughts and emotions in events such as these. I hope that these Games, made up of competition for bronze, silver and gold, will prompt us all again to remember the far greater prize that lies ahead of us all, the pure gold of life in God's presence, the fulfilment of all our joys and hopes indeed.

Thank you all for your presence here this evening. May God bless these Olympic Games and give us all the grace of his peace and love.

✠Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster