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The opening ceremonies of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro were a striking display of the friendly solidarity celebrated by the modern Olympic movement initiated by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1894 with the establishment of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In Rio, over 11,000 athletes from 207 countries around the world paraded into Maracana Stadium to the applause of some 90,000 fans. Following tradition, athletes from Greece led the Parade of Nations, a reminder that the modern Olympics are a revival of the ancient games held in Greece for around 1,200 years beginning in 776 B.C.

In Rio, for the first time in history, an Olympic Team of Refugees entered the stadium to thunderous applause. The team consisted of ten athletes from South Sudan, Syria, Congo and Ethiopia. One, a female Syrian swimmer, Yusra Mardini, was crossing the Mediterranean in a small boat with about 20 other refugees seeking asylum when the motor conked out, putting them in danger of capsizing. Yusra and another swimmer on board jumped into the water and towed the boat three miles to safety. The decision of the IOC to fund a refugee team proved to be an effective way of calling attention to the horrendous plight of millions of displaced people around the world and of fostering a sense of solidarity with them.

Another addition to the traditional opening ceremony was the awarding of the first annual Olympic Laurel Award for “significant achievements in education, culture, development and peace through sport.” The award went to the 76 year old Kenyan Kai Keino, a two-time gold medal winner as a distance runner, for his outstanding work to help orphans and to build schools for the needy in his home country.

One of the core values of the Olympic movement is friendship, which “encourages us to consider sport as a tool for mutual understanding among individuals and people from all over the world. The Olympic Games inspire humanity to overcome political, economic, gender, racial or religious differences and forge friendships in spite of those differences.” Participants in the Games often form lifelong friendships with teammates and opponents. Citizens around the world are reminded of the power of sport to bring people together and help build “a peaceful and better world.”

The IOC estimates that some 3.6 billion people, about half of the world population, watched at least some part of the Rio Olympics. Over 340 million watched the opening ceremonies on television, exposing them to powerful images of global solidarity as well as local Brazilian culture. We could say viewers saw globalization with a human face. We live in a global village, connected by the Internet, increasingly interdependent economically, politically and culturally. While some commentators applaud this movement as a constructive advance for the human family, others fear that impersonal global forces will overwhelm local cultures and produce economic dependence and political control. The Olympics suggest that globalization and the new tribalism it has spawned can coexist and even interact synergistically. The global initiative calling together athletes from around the world encourages individual countries to support various sports that usually do not get any attention. Watching athletes raised in very different cultures compete against one another reminds us that we share a common nature. It is harder to demonize someone from another country who demonstrates great athletic skills. The inclusion of the refugee team speaks to our responsibility to care for the marginalized members of the human family. The success of athletes from politically insignificant countries suggests that globalization is not just about power and control. It is a healthy and welcomed challenge for athletes to compete against the best in the world. From the perspective of the Olympics, globalization appears not as a scary force but as an enriching opportunity.

Catholic Social Teaching promotes solidarity as a virtue which inclines us to recognize that we are all member of one human family and encourages us to treat one another as brothers and sisters. The Olympic Games help us develop the virtue of solidarity, which avoids the extremes of a selfish individualism and a suffocating collectivism by celebrating individual accomplishments within the context of global competition.

Another striking feature of the opening ceremonies at Rio was the large number of women in the Parade of Athletes. After being denied participation in the first of the modern Olympics in 1896 in Athens, 22 women were among the almost 1,000 athletes performing at the 1900 Paris Games, primarily in golf and tennis. Encouraged by the IOC, the percentage of women participants has dramatically increased: 13 percent in Tokyo in 1964; 23 percent 20 years later in Los Angeles; and 45 percent in Rio in 2016. With the addition of female boxing in the 2012 Games in London, women competed in every one of the Olympic sports. Furthermore, women athletes at Rio received more U.S. television coverage than men, mostly due to primetime coverage of beach volleyball, diving, gymnastics, swimming, and track and field. Although some analysts detected sexism in the coverage of female athletes, for example commenting on their physical appearance, most reports celebrated their athletic accomplishments. Swimmer Katie Ledecky and gymnast Simone Biles attracted about as much media attention as sprinter Usain Bolt and swimmer Michael Phelps.

One of the core values of the Olympics Movement is respect: respect for self, others, rules, sport and the environment. Respect stands for fair play and against doping and unethical behavior. Based on this ethical principle, the IOC has promoted the advancement of women in the world of sport. In the United States, the 1972 Congressional legislation known as Title Nine, which prohibits discrimination in federally funded athletic programs, opened up new opportunities for young women to play sports. Colleges and high schools started sponsoring more team sports for females, providing them with an opportunity to develop self-confidence and athletic skills. With better training and coaching, collegiate women improved dramatically in team sports and individual events. In Rio, the United States team consisted of 291 women and 263 men. The female athletes won 61 medals while U.S. males won 55. The count in gold medals was 27 for the U.S. women and 19 for the men. To put this achievement in perspective, the medal differential in the 1972 Munich Games, the year Title IX was passed, was 71 to 23 in favor of the American men. The well-publicized success of the American women in Rio will presumably encourage more young girls to participate in sports, which helps foster healthier relationships between women and men in our country while fostering the Olympic value of respect.

It has long seemed to me that the Olympic Games function like a periodic retreat for the human family. It is a time to step back from our ordinary routines and to reflect on universal values that bind us together. Rio’s opening ceremonies prompt us to ponder more deeply the Christian virtue of solidarity. The Parade of Nations, including the Refugee team, reminds us that our one human family is fractured and in need of healing. The Olympic Laurel Award summons us to do our part to help the less fortunate members of our family. The exuberant interacting athletes from all over the world suggests that the inevitable process of globalization does not have to diminish local cultures but can promote genuine solidarity. The prominent presence of women athletes highlights the progress made toward equality and the importance of continuing efforts to make sure no one is excluded from the human family. Our Rio retreat strengthens our hope that the enlightened ideal of human solidarity will prove to be more powerful than the dark forces of division.