



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

Office for Ethnic Chaplaincies and Eastern Catholic Churches  
Co-ordinator: Monsignor Daniel McHugh

---

# *The Olympic Cross and Peace*

Reflection for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

22 February 2026

**Mgr Daniel McHugh**

**“You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” (Mt 4:10)**

As I start writing this Reflection on Monday 16 February the enthusiasm and celebration of the UK’s achieving 3 gold medals at the Winter Olympics is ringing in my ears from radio and TV. The “amazing belief, commitment and courage of the Athletes” is being lauded! The mixed team skeleton gold is especially to the fore. So, it’s good to see the link being made by Pope Leo as to how the Church sees such sporting activity. Before the opening ceremony the Vatican released Pope Leo XIV’s letter “Life in Abundance” on the value of sports (cf Vatican News Deborah Castellano Lubov). In the text, the Holy Father praises sport and reflects on the many ways it fosters human fraternity and helps individuals pursue what is good and holy. He also refers to the Olympic Truce, a tradition from Ancient Greece that dates back to 776 BC. “A truce was announced before and during the Olympic Games to ensure that the host city state was not attacked and athletes and spectators could travel safely to their Games and peacefully return to their respective countries (cf Wikipedia). The Olympic Truce Resolution for Milano-



# THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

Office for Ethnic Chaplaincies and Eastern Catholic Churches  
Co-ordinator: Monsignor Daniel McHugh

---

Cortina 2026 adopted by the International Olympic Committee and the United Nations calls on Member States to observe the Truce for seven days before the start of 2026 Winter Games (6-22 February) until seven days after the Paralympic Winter Games (6-15 March), ensuring safe passage for athletes and officials. The Pope affirmed “I wholeheartedly encourage all nations to rediscover and respect this instrument of hope that is the Olympic Truce, a symbol and promise of a reconciled world.”

The Pope goes on to encourage the Church to be pastorally present in the realm of sport and to offer accompaniment, discernment and hope, citing *Athletica Vaticana*, created in 2018 as the official team of the Holy See and under the guidance of Dicastery for Culture and Education, as an initiative which bears witness to “how sport can also be experienced as an ecclesial service”. As I was thinking of these words I looked up to my wall of memories in the living room of my apartment: there is a copy of an article and picture in *The Universe Catholic* paper for March 25, 1966. The heading “Ambassadors of the Church, of Britain... and of Rugby”, and it’s the English College Rome Rugby Team and the article reports on our interaction with Italian Rugby. We built good relationships with what was at that time a fledgling sport in Italy. When Rugby Roma wanted to celebrate winning the league we were the chosen opponents for a friendly in Stadio Flaminio. The Italians saw us in a new light: priest friends in the world of sport.

As well as seeing the Olympic Games as an opportunity to highlight the importance of work for Peace in a sadly fractured world, the Holy Father reflected on sport truly becoming ‘a school for life, where all can learn abundance does not come from



# THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

Office for Ethnic Chaplaincies and Eastern Catholic Churches  
Co-ordinator: Monsignor Daniel McHugh

---

victory at any cost, but from sharing, from respecting others, and from the joy of walking together.”

The Season of Lent is for the Church a special time of walking together: a walk that begins with a Cross of Ashes on our forehead on Ash Wednesday (If you missed that day ask for the Ashes on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent) and continues to the kissing of the Cross on Good Friday, the day we venerate the one who has brought all nations, all peoples together in peace and hope. Returning to the Olympics: it was a joy to see the Olympic Cross being carried in procession to St Babila Basilica in Milan, the Athletes’ Church for the duration of the Games. The ‘Independent’ for 10 February has the News item “Catholic Cross like no other is a beacon of Unity in Olympic host city Milan”. The article begins “much like the Olympic flame, there is another symbol of triumph and transcendence – far less known – that graces one host city after another, a one-of-a-kind, wooden cross... the cross is unique in that it is made from pieces of wood sourced in five continents, an apparent nod to the five Olympic rings that convey the same sentiment... English artist Jon Cornwall used 15 pieces of wood from continents around the world to craft the cross which made its grand entrance at the London Olympics in 2012.” The article continues: “The Cross - carrying the prayers and hopes of athletes – is a Christian message addressed to the entire world of sport, a sign of hope for humanity and a proposal of peace among peoples”.

Lent is the time when we turn to the Cross afresh, embracing the one who gave his life on it for love of the human race. Our Lenten Observance assists us to take His



# THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

Office for Ethnic Chaplaincies and Eastern Catholic Churches  
Co-ordinator: Monsignor Daniel McHugh

---

way of love and service. On the first Sunday of Lent we take to heart the words of our Lord in the Desert:

“You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” (Mt 4:10)