



The Eiffel Tower is seen July 26 during the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. (OSV News/Ludovic Marin, pool via Reuters)



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Are you watching the Olympics? These young athletes, and they are almost all shockingly young to have to endure such a spotlight, push themselves to the limits of human endurance to achieve feats of strength or speed or acrobatic skill that are almost superhuman. This year, like millions of Americans, I am already enjoying cheering on Frederick Richard and Simone Biles in gymnastics and Katie Ledecky, Caeleb Dressel and hometown hero Leon Marchand in the swimming pool. The glasses-wearing, slightly nerdy,ommel-horse hero Stephen Nedoroscik from Worcester, Massachusetts, has become a [cultural icon overnight](#). I can't wait to watch Noah Lyles scorch the competition when the track and field competition begins. It's fun.

The Olympics sometimes are not fun. Hitler saw the quasi-religious, albeit pagan, potential of the Games' pageantry and competition for his project of Aryan supremacy. Among other things, [Hitler invented](#) the torch relay ending in the lighting of the Olympic cauldron at the stadium in Berlin in 1936. (Fortunately, the [great Jesse Owens](#) gave the world a lesson in the stupidity of Aryan supremacy when he won four gold medals.) The Olympic Anthem has a fascistic quality, even when [sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir](#); it always sounds like an outtake from "[Carmina Burana](#)." Nationalism, the first iteration of identity politics, raised no eyebrows [in 1896](#) when the modern Olympics were reborn, but we have come to recognize it as a more complicated inheritance now.

The Paris Olympic organizing committee promised us the opening ceremonies of the 2024 Games would be like no other. They succeeded beyond our wildest nightmares.

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The whole thing was overdone. As the Times' television critic [Mike Hale noted](#), it felt like "just another bloated made-for-TV spectacle."

The most conspicuous difference from past opening ceremonies was that the parade of athletes took place in boats sailing down the Seine from the Pont d'Austerlitz to the temporary stadium erected at the Trocadero. Usually, the athletes enter the stadium marching behind their flag bearer. Videos of early Olympics show the parade of nations had a military feel to it which gave way to a more informal marching in more recent years. Bringing the athletes down the river on boats had the benefit of showcasing many Parisian landmarks, but at the expense of keeping the focus on the athletes.

Because traveling the length of the river took longer than marching around a single track, the parade was filled with cultural segments of uneven quality. The [images of a decapitated Marie Antoinette](#) staring out from the windows of the Conciergerie were disturbing. "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" is the French national motto but perhaps we should add "brutalité" to the list.

The scene of a "[ménage à trois](#)" starting in a library might see an uptick in library visits, but I could have done without it.

The most controversial scene featured a group of drag queens involved in some kind of pagan feast that mimicked Leonardo da Vinci's fresco "The Last Supper." The organizers and the man who choreographed the ceremonies, Thomas Jolly, denied there was any attempt to mock anyone, which is difficult to believe [when he also said](#), "I didn't have any specific messages that I wanted to deliver. In France, we are republic, we have the right to love whom we want, we have the right not to be worshippers, we have a lot of rights in France, and this is what I wanted to convey." Amidst the confusion of his comments, his agenda is hiding in plain sight. What is more, the organizers later admitted the da Vinci painting [was an inspiration for the skit](#).

The first thing that should be said to Mssr. Jolly is that if you have to explain the symbolism of your art, your art isn't very good. The second thing is that the episode shows, again, the limits of [laïcité](#), the aggressive separation of church and society legally enacted in the late 19th and early 20th century. The third thing to be said is that it is for the Christians of France to register their displeasure.



An athlete boat on the Seine River passes in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral July 26, 2024, during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris. (OSV News/Reuters/Wang Dongzhen)

This last point is important because Bishop Andrew Cozzens of Crookston, Minnesota, and Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, both rushed to denounce the sketch. Cozzens [took to Instagram](#) to issue a statement that read, [in part](#), "Jesus experienced his Passion anew Friday night in Paris when his Last Supper was publicly defamed. As his living body, we are invited to enter into this moment of passion with him, this moment of public shame, mockery, and persecution." This is overwrought. Persecution is made of sterner stuff. Besides, I thought the persecuted were blest ([cf. Matthew. 5:10](#))?

Not to be outdone, Barron said in a video [posted on X](#), "France felt evidently, as it's trying to put its best cultural foot forward, that the right thing to do is to mock this very central moment in Christianity." It seems Mssr. Jolly mocked Christianity, not "France," but never mind. Barron went on to ask: "would they ever have dreamed of

mocking in this gross public way a scene from the Quran? We all know the answer." Excuse me, *mon excellence*, but have you forgotten the massacre of journalists at [Charlie Hebdo](#)? And is Barron suggesting we Christians should be more like radical Islamists in defending the faith?

The problem with these two statements is not just that they are a bit shrill and hysterical. It is that they do not mention if they consulted with the French bishops, [who issued a statement of their own](#). The French bishops were more measured and less histrionic than their American confreres. My question to Bishops Barron and Cozzens is this: On what authority do you feel it necessary to weigh in on an event that happens outside your diocese without consulting the local ordinaries? They could have done what Archbishop John Wester did, [issue a statement](#) expressing solidarity with the French bishops and reposting their statement. Neither man is a leader of the U.S. bishops' conference. Did the Holy See ask them for their thoughts? The word "Catholic" is a word with a meaning. There is an archbishop of Paris and his name is Ulrich, not Barron or Cozzens.

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Barron seems to enjoy commenting on every issue under the sun. If there were a Dicastery for Hot Takes, he could be the prefect. The problem is deeper than the vanity of one bishop. Both U.S. prelates fail to recognize the self-defeating quality of taking the bait every time the culture wars burst into flame. It always cedes the choice of battlefield to one's opponents. It always puts one in a defensive crouch. It always risks exacerbating tensions that might be resolved or at least ameliorated with a different approach. I am not afraid of being a bit stiff-necked when it is necessary. When it becomes routine, it becomes unconvincing.

The two bishops also make the mistake of assigning motives that may or may not be present. Barron talks about France's "post-modern society" which may or may not have been part of the choreographer's motives. He might have just been looking to cause a stir, to generate clicks. Perhaps Barron has lost the capacity for recognizing the way commercial interests tend to distort one's message and blur one's intentions.

There is a happy ending to this story. The interminable, overwrought and controversial Olympic ceremony was saved in the end by Celine Dion, who closed out the night by singing Edith Piaf's famous torch song "[Hymne A L'Amour](#)." Dion's

performance was, like those of so many of the athletes, sublime. It did not need to provoke. It was art at its best.