

Catholics, Vatican officials react to controversial Olympic ceremony

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This scene during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris, July 26, was meant to represent the Greek gods during a banquet, according to organizers. (Video screengrab)

Catholic leaders along with a host of other Christian groups voiced outrage following the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris over a scene starring drag performers and French entertainers that many interpreted as a parody of Jesus' Last Supper.

Organizers have since apologized for the ceremony, while the creative director of the controversial scene, Thomas Jolly, said the Last Supper was not among his inspirations and that it was meant to represent the Greek gods during a banquet.

The tableau featured artists in drag, representing diverse cultural backgrounds, posed behind a long dining table while a woman wearing an ornate silver halo stood in the middle. Singer and actor Philippe Katerine emerged painted blue on a silver platter and adorned with grapes.

Over the weekend, before Jolly's clarification, social media was rife with arguments over whether the scene was meant to invoke paintings of the Greek gods gathered at Mount Olympus—such as the 1636 painting *The Feast of the Gods* by Dutch artist Jan van Bijlert or the painting *Feast of the Gods* by Johann Rottenhammer and Jan Brueghel, circa 1600—or if its true similarity was to Leonardo DaVinci's famous artistic depiction of Jesus' Last Supper.

Many Christians worldwide, including Vatican officials, saw the latter and took offense.

Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna, one of the Vatican's top advisers in investigating sexual abuse cases, wrote on X that he had contacted the Maltese embassies to France to express the "distress & the disappointment of many Christians at the gratuitous insult to the Eucharist during the Opening Ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics."

Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, who heads the Vatican think-tank on human life and society, also commented on the "derision and the ridicule of the last supper" during the Olympic ceremony on X. "It reveals a profound question: everyone, truly everyone, wants to sit at that table where Jesus gave his life for all and taught love," he wrote.

The French bishops were among the first to push back against the "scenes of derision and mockery of Christianity" in a statement on Saturday. "We think of all Christians worldwide who were hurt by the excess and provocation of certain scenes," they wrote, adding that they hope faithful will see beyond "the ideological biases of a few artists."

Speaking to OSV News, the special Holy See representative to the 2024 Olympic games, Bishop Emmanuel Gobilliard, said he was "deeply hurt" by the images of the opening ceremony. "It is contrary to the Olympic Charter, to the dimension of unity that is present in its values, to the idea of bringing everyone together, without political and religious demonstrations," he said.

The news outlet of the Italian bishops, Avvenire, commented on the ceremony in several articles and editorials. “Exaggeration excludes,” wrote Editor-in-Chief Luciano Moia, commenting on the scenes on display at the ceremony.

The Middle East Council of Churches, which includes the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, issued a statement “with a lot of love mixed with astonishment and disapproval,” asking the Olympic organizers to commit to its values of respect and friendship.

“Freedom, diversity, and creativity are not compatible with insulting the beliefs of others, nor with mocking them, in ways that have nothing to do with human equality,” the statement read.

Many Catholic bishops in the United States pushed back against the controversial representation at the Olympics. Bishop Robert Barron commented in a social media post on the “gross, flippant mockery” in France, a country once described as “the eldest daughter of the church.”

“We Christians, we Catholics, should not be sheepish, we should resist,” Barron, who leads an influential Catholic communications organization, said in the post.

A number of prominent US evangelicals also reacted with outrage over the scene, including Southern Baptist leader Al Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who called it “a pornographic corruption of Christianity” [on X and said](#) “Paris aspires to be the new Babylon, with a drag queen at the center behind the altar.”

Former Olympian and trans woman Caitlyn Jenner [said that](#) “as an Olympian and a Christian,” she was outraged and [called the scene](#) “a disgusting display of mockery of one of the most Holy and Sacred images of our Christian faith, by the least tolerant demographic in the world, the Radical Rainbow Mafia! SHAMEFUL!”

The chair of the US Bishops’s Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis urged believers to fast and pray in preparation for the events in Paris.

The organizers of the Paris 2024 games apologized on Sunday, stating that “clearly there was never an intention to show disrespect to any religious group” and that the goal was instead to “celebrate community tolerance.”

“We believe this ambition was achieved. If people have taken any offense we are really sorry,” the statement added. —Religion News Service