

Vatican Plans to Take on Church of England and World Religions — in Cricket

The newly formed St. Peter's Cricket Club also hopes to play Muslim, Hindu and Sikh teams, as well as those from other religions and cultures, to promote dialogue and virtue.



VATICAN CITY — The Holy See has plans to finally beat the Church of England at its own game: not in a theological debate, but on the cricket field. The Vatican has a new cricket club that aims to encourage dialogue between cultures, as well as growing virtue among the athletes, both on and off the field.

“The idea was if we start a cricket club, cricket being so popular in the whole of the East, especially in the Indian subcontinent, we could start a dialogue through cricket,” said Father Theodore Mascarenas.

Father Mascarenas is a member of the Pontifical Council for Culture, overseeing the departments for Asia, Africa and Ushuaia (capital city of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina). He is also the new chairman for the Vatican cricket team, called St. Peter's Cricket Club.

St. Peter's Cricket Club currently has several different objectives. The first is to organize a tournament among the various colleges in Rome, which, according to a survey done earlier this year, will be able to count on roughly 300 players and supporters from the city.

Eventually, the club hopes to challenge the Church of England to a match and aims in the future to play teams from Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist educational institutions in order to fortify relationships and dialogue with various cultural communities.

The club was originally proposed to Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, who suggested the team be named after Peter, by Australian ambassador to the Holy See John McCarthy. The team will be composed of priests and seminarians in Rome.

“There are lots of young seminarians here who have played cricket, and some of them are very high quality,” Father Mascarenas added. “You won’t believe it when you see them playing.”

Speaking of the decision to start a cricket club, the priest noted that one of the determining factors in founding it was that “a dialogue through cricket meant we could talk to people, to Muslims, to Hindus to Buddhists, to sects, in the medium of cricket, because that’s one language that everybody speaks together,” he said.

Getting to know people, said Father Mascarenas, is the first step in intercultural dialogue and is also the “most difficult part.”

“Most of our cultural tensions come because we do not know the other. Ignorance is the spark; ignorance is the dynamo; ignorance is the source of almost all fundamentalism,” he said. “We don’t know the other.”

He added that, although this first step is challenging, “cricket, I think, is an easy means” to enter into this dialogue. He expressed his hope of “starting a dialogue over the ocean.”

Another hope of the club, said the priest, is that “first, through sports, the priests and seminarians, with their exemplary behavior on the field, would be an example of how spirituality influences sport, on the practical level.”

Secondly, Father Mascarenas said that “we hope that seeing priests and seminarians play sports, participate in sports,” that “sports gets an elevated stand and elevated status in society.”

The priest added “that sports is not something dirty played for money, but is played as a part of faith, as a part of spirituality,” and that part of the intention is also to promote the adage of “healthy mind and healthy body” among those who play.

Cricket is the second most popular sport in the world, its strongest presence being in the entire Indian subcontinent, as well as Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the West Indies.

With 105 countries currently participating in the sport, cricket is also beginning to have a stronger grip in the countries of Ireland, Canada and Holland, and even some parts of the United States.

Speaking on the global significance of the sport of cricket, Father Mascarenas recalled that “when India and Pakistan play cricket, India and Pakistan stop; everybody starts watching the TV, and nothing works.”

“It’s really a game that brings passion into people,” he said, adding that “what baseball has done to America, that’s what cricket is doing to the subcontinent.”