

British Catholics urged to help house Olympic athletes, families



MANCHESTER, England (CNS) --

Catholics in British cities hosting events for the 2012 Olympic Games are being urged to show hospitality to athletes who cannot afford to stay in hotels.

They are being encouraged to register with the Athlete Family Homestay Program and open their homes for eight days or more to Olympic and Paralympic competitors and their families from poor nations.

James Parker, the Catholic Church's executive coordinator for the 2012 London Olympic Games, told Catholic News Service that the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales saw the initiative as an act of solidarity.

"It is estimated that approximately a third of all official Olympic and Paralympic athletes and coaches will be from a Catholic background," Parker said in a Feb. 17 email to Catholic News Service.

"With this in mind, the Catholic community, alongside other Christians and those of other faiths and no faiths, wishes to offer a tangible way of 'welcoming the stranger' to our shores by offering free board and lodging for limited periods during the games," he said.

The homestay program is being organized by More Than Gold, the churches' umbrella charity that serves the games.

Parker said that the charity, of which the Catholic Church is a member, is focusing in particular on athletes' family members and friends "who come from the developing world who could never afford to stay in the U.K."

"We believe that they, as much as anyone, have the right to see first-hand their loved ones display the fruit of what has often been years of ongoing commitment," he said. "Anyone linked to the 2012 games' athletes and officials qualifies to apply, irrespective of their financial situation, so we want the wider Olympic family to know that Britain welcomes them with open arms."

Parker said the presence of relatives "can dramatically affect an athlete's performance on the day" and "the whole world wants to encourage the best performance from each competitor."

Catholics who sign up to the program will be expected to collect and welcome up to two guests from a hospitality center, then provide them with beds and breakfast for eight days or more during the July 27-Aug. 12 Olympics or the Aug. 29-Sept. 9 Paralympics.

They will be asked to be "caring and helpful hosts," dropping off guests at a transportation hub each day.

Most hosts will be sought in London, where most of the events will take place and where hotel prices will be most expensive. But they will also be required in such English cities as Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle; in the Scottish city of Glasgow; and in Cardiff, the capital of Wales.

According to the More Than Gold website, at previous Olympic Games Christians have provided more than half of all the homes needed to host athletes' family members.

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