

Deacons, priests, nuns and laity to serve as Olympic chaplains



Some people are simply gifted at sport; they excel at any challenge involving a ball, a stick or a physical contest nearly as soon as they turn their hands to it.

One such person is Father Geoff Hilton, a priest from Salford Diocese in the north of England, who will be serving as a chaplain to athletes competing in the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

It was because of his sporting prowess that the former police officer from Manchester was hand-picked to become one of 16 official Catholic chaplains appointed by the Olympics organizing committee.

Over the years, Father Hilton has distinguished himself as a badminton player on a national level — losing in the men's final in Madrid when he was a seminarian at the English College in Valladolid — as a soccer and a rugby league player, and later as a rugby league referee, working in two World Cups.

Now, at the age of 55, he takes time from his duties as pastor of St. Osmund Church, Bolton, to compete as a professional crown green bowler, a sport usually played only in the north of England.

For him, the chance to minister to athletes at the Olympic Village July 27-Aug. 12 was an opportunity too good to pass up.

“It won't happen again in my lifetime, the Olympics coming to England, and I'm very much looking forward to it,” Father Hilton told Catholic News Service in a June 20 interview at the Red Lion

bowling green in Westhoughton, near Manchester.

“I might have to give up my bowling for two-and-a-half weeks, but I can manage that,” he said.

“I am interested in most sports,” he continued, “and as a young man I was involved in a number of these sports.”

He said that he would be available throughout the Olympics for “anyone who needs spiritual support,” to celebrate Mass, hear confessions and confer blessings.

But the church should separately also offer pastoral support to athletes who have ended their careers, he added.

“I understand how a lot of athletes suffer from depression,” he said. “It is a worry. A lot of them seem to be discarded after they finish their professional careers. People need to know that they need support when they’re no long performing at the top level.”

Overall, there will be 190 chaplains to serve followers of the world’s religions at the Olympics. The number of Catholic chaplains is expected to increase to 24 when the teams of such countries as Italy and Poland bring their own chaplains with them.

At the Olympic Village in London, five rooms will be set aside for Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist chaplaincies, while Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Baha’i and Jains will share a space.

The Catholic chaplains have been selected from a range of backgrounds and include priests, deacons, sisters and laypeople, who will work eight-hour shifts beginning a week before the games open and up to a week after they close.

Besides athletes from all over the world, they will offer spiritual support to more than 50,000 unpaid volunteers and about 25,000 journalists.

Greg Kandra - U.S. Catholic