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Bishops plan to use London Olympics to renew interest in Catholic faith

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service



Louis Smith of Britain performs on the pommel horse at an international gymnastics event in London on Jan. 12. The competition was part of the testing program for the 2012 Olympic Games, which run July 27-Aug. 12 in London. (CNS photo/Reuters)

MANCHESTER, England -- British bishops plan to use the 2012 London Olympic Games to renew interest in the Catholic faith, with initiatives ranging from fighting human trafficking and homelessness to promoting youth ministry and ecumenical dialogue.

The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales is also preparing resources for liturgies and holy hours and will post them on the Internet before the July 27-Aug. 12 games.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, president of the bishops' conference, called the Olympics and Paralympics "a moment of great opportunity for us all."

"These great sporting events generate all sorts of good ideas and initiatives, particularly for young people, reminding all of us of the importance of good health, the dignity of our bodies, the care of our physical

well-being and its spiritual meaning," the archbishop said in a Jan. 24 statement.

"The example of many who are dedicated to training routines in preparation for these games reminds us of the need for good habits and routines in our own daily lives if we are to make the most of our God-given talents," he said.

The Catholic church in Britain has been preparing for three years to seize the opportunity presented by the games to evangelize, said James Parker, the Catholic executive coordinator for the games.

Twenty-four chaplains have been trained for the occasion, and training is also being offered to representatives of more than 5,000 Catholic churches who will organize parish events, such as street parties, during the games.

In London, visitors will have access to two Catholic hospitality centers -- one at Westminster Cathedral and the other at St Anthony Parish, the church closest to the XXX Olympiad Stadium.

The Joshua Camp, a tented village for Catholic youth, will open near London's Olympic Park, to offer catechesis and formation centered around sport themes.

Parker said the church also will use the Olympics to draw attention to a range of social issues, such as homelessness, fair trade and care for the environment, and the bishops intend to use the occasion to promote Catholic teaching on the human body.

Before the Paralympics, an international conference will take place in London on disability, theology and sport, and Aylesford Carmelite Priory will hold a celebration of disabled people.

Many of the church's projects will be carried out through More Than Gold, a charity made up of 16 Christian denominations, taking its name from the attempts at Christian engagement made at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

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Its initiatives include the Athlete Family Homestay Program, in which individuals and hoteliers are recruited to show hospitality to athletes and their families unable to afford to stay in London hotels.

Parker said the church will be involved in the 100 Days of Peace initiative, which encourages parishes and schools to promote peace in the 50 days before the Olympic opening ceremony and 50 days after the Paralympic closing ceremony. The initiative will aim to combat gang violence in particular.

At a parish level, Catholics throughout the country will be encouraged to make their presence felt during the games, especially on the route taken by the Olympic torch in the two months before the games begin.

Parishes are being asked to at least offer refreshments to the people who will line the streets to watch the passage of the torch, which will travel within easy reach of 95 percent of the nation's homes.

Parker told Catholic News Service in a Jan. 27 email that "it will be difficult for the Catholic Church in the future to not take seriously the importance of engaging wholeheartedly with global sporting events."

"This venture has stirred the Catholic Church in the U.K. to be more than a spectator of the world of sport," he said.

Parker added: "We hope to bring the presence of Christ into greater play by reaching the 800,000 pupils in our Catholic schools and people within our 5,000 parishes about the goodness of sport, the God-given dignity of the human body, and the untapped talents that lie within each one of us, irrespective of our level of ability."

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