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Deacons, nuns, laity and even athlete-priests to be Olympic chaplains

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service



A man raises Olympic and British flags outside his hotel in Sennen near Lands End in Cornwall in southwest England in May. (CNS/Reuters/Toby Melville)

MANCHESTER, England -- 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 Fr. 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, 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 July 27-Aug. 12 at the Olympic Village 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," 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 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 longer performing at the top level."

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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.

The chaplains include Deacon Roger Stone, who will be chaplain to the sailing and water sports on the south coast, and Frankie Mulgrew, a former stand-up comedian who will be ordained deacon in Birmingham, England, on Saturday ahead of his priestly ordination next year.

Mulgrew, 34, told CNS in a he volunteered to be a chaplain because, as the son of the popular British comedian Jimmy Cricket, he had spent his life with people in the public eye and had an "affinity" for them.

The chaplains also include Servite Sr. Petronia Williams, a nun based near the Olympic Park who usually works with Gypsies and Irish Travellers.

Petronia said she volunteered because she thought work as an Olympic chaplain would offer a "golden opportunity" to fulfill St. Paul's injunction to "welcome the stranger."

"I'm very excited," she said. "I presume I will be welcoming people, and I expect that some will want to pray with me before they race.

"I am looking forward to the business of meeting people from other countries and being able to welcome them and being friendly," she said. "That's an important part of our Christian tradition, to show hospitality and welcome."

Fr. Christopher Jamison, a Benedictine monk of Worth Abbey, southern England, is the only Catholic priest to serve as a chaplain to the 25,000 journalists who will converge on the Olympic media center for the games. He will be assisted by a Catholic laywoman.

"I am very pleased that the church is involved," Jamison said. "[The Olympics] is a vast migration into the heart of London, and it would be quite wrong if the church did not reach out to support those who are coming here."

James Parker, the Catholic church's executive coordinator for the 2012 Olympics, said he would be serving as "the first ever lay Catholic chaplain to the Paralympic Games."

"The picture on our TV screens can move rapidly from one Olympic event to another," he wrote in an email to CNS. "The camera rarely covers the days and hours leading up to an athlete's event and never fully covers how an athlete might respond to losing.

"This could mean coming last, fourth, or even winning a 'mere silver or bronze medal' in place of the gold," Parker said. "The accumulation of literally years of training and the pressure of national expectations can come crashing down on thousands of people within a very short space of time. As chaplains, we need to be ready to respond."

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