

Chaplain at the Olympic Village, Father Joe knows the Olympics well, he did them!



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A former Olympic athlete, Father Joseph Fitzgerald is a member of the team of Catholic chaplains for the Paris Olympic Games. He who was at the forefront thirty years ago now wants to serve Christ by providing spiritual support to athletes.

He is participating in the Olympic Games (JO) for the second time. The first time, in Atlanta in 1996, Joseph Fitzgerald was 25 years old and competed on the American team to win the gold medal in the handball events. Twenty-eight years later, here he is on the other side of the Atlantic to attend the Paris Games. Except that he changed teams and no longer plays quite the same sport. The one we now call Father Joe chose another path, that of the priesthood. Dressed all in black and measuring a head taller than most passers-by, he does not really go unnoticed on this street in the capital which faces the Saint-Augustin church (8th) where Aletheia met him. With an affable smile and a sporty appearance, Father Joe has that charismatic and relaxed look that we imagine to be typically American. The excitement that took over Paris at the start of the Games pleased him and brought back memories. "There is the same excitement, the desire to do everything, to go everywhere, to see everything, I have experienced that too, even if it would perhaps be better for the athletes to relax before the events," he explains.



Sent by the United States Bishops' Conference, Father Joe Fitzgerald is the only American priest in the Catholic chaplaincy of the Holy Games, the Church's evangelization program during the Paris Olympics. For almost two weeks, he will assist the athletes and provide spiritual accompaniment to those who wish it. "Some expressed the desire to pray and receive the sacraments," he notes. "The maturity that I had thirty years ago was not at the same level as that of these young people. They are really in search of faith."





U.S. OLYMPIC TEAM HANDBALL TEAM
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Who would have thought that the young handball player from Atlanta, full of talent and the desire to win in his stomach, would one day attend the Games wearing a Roman collar instead of a sports jersey? Born into a Catholic family in New York, he followed in the footsteps of his father and his older brother, both of whom were keen on sports. "My brother played handball in high school, and since I was the little brother, I wanted to do the same and follow him, so I started handball," he recalls. "I was part of the national team for 10 years, from 1993 to 2003." At the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996 and the world championship in 2001, father Joe devoted his life to sport and trained up to seven days a week to prepare for competitions. But he does not forget God. "I had wonderful athletic experiences, but wherever I went, I always wanted to find a church," he still assures. "On Sunday morning, no matter what we had done the day before, whether we had gone dancing or had a beer, I was looking for a mass, and there was no smartphone!"



After much thought, while he was considering getting married, Father Joe decided to enter the seminary in New York on August 30, 2001, his 30th birthday. "This is the age that Christ was when he began his public ministry," he emphasizes. Eleven days later, a plane flew over the seminary where he was studying and crashed into one of the two twin towers of the World Trade Center. A test for the future priest, who lost three friends in the attacks, including two firefighters. "It was difficult to go from a life as an athlete to that of a future priest, and with this ordeal, I asked myself, "why?" Father Joe confides that the courage of his two firefighter friends who died in the fire continues to inspiring him to get through things, just like his past as an athlete. "An athlete trains his mind and his body to deal with anything," he explains. "In a match, the situation changes very much. quickly, and you have to be able to react and stay calm. As a priest, there are joyful moments and difficult moments, for example when someone calls me to come and assist a dying person, or when there is a global pandemic and I have to bury 230 people in less than a year."



He who thought that by calling him to become a priest, God was asking him to put aside his past as an athlete, understands that this is not the case. On the contrary, Father Joe is today convinced that his experience helps him to be better and to hold on in the face of adversity. "When I was an athlete, there were times when I was very tired, and I would say to myself, "Come on, we need a little more!" Also, the preparation time for the Atlanta Games was very hard, because I had to miss a lot of family events. But that meant being away from my family to be able to take care of the faithful.

More than anyone, Father Joe knows the joys and difficulties of an athlete, his desire to win, and his disappointment at losing. "I can tell them that thirty years ago, I was in their shoes, and I was fighting for the gold medal. I was captain of the team for several years, or the American athlete of the year," he lists. "But all that ends up going away. There is something greater, it is knowing Jesus Christ. And when you know him, you never want to leave him!", smiles Father Joe. He himself had to learn to give first place, to serve rather than be served. Difficult for an Olympic athlete who tastes the exhilaration of the admiration of crowds and leads a permanent quest for performance. "I had to learn to die to myself, and it's hard because in sport, you sometimes try to "kill" the person opposite you. You want to win, to dominate your opponent," he explains. "But in faith it doesn't work, the King allows him to die on a cross. I went from being a competitor to being a recipient of God's love, and that changed my life. " His model? He shows us a photo on his phone: an illustration of Christ washing the feet of his disciples. "That's what I want to do. I need to let Jesus wash me so I can wash other people's feet." With the forty priests made available for the Games, Father Joe makes himself available everywhere, with a single motto, adaptation: "We can welcome the athletes at mass or go to the Olympic village, or in a hotel, etc.," he explains. "We adjust the situation, there is a program but if there is an opportunity, we adapt." A true Olympic rhythm, during which the priests take turns from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., every day for the duration of the Games.



What he wants to convey to the athletes he will meet during the Games is the message of Christ's love which does not change depending on performance. "Fighting to be the best is not a bad thing in itself, but that is not our deep identity. The thing is not to be the first, to win the gold medal," insists- he. "I want to help people hear this powerful message that their identity is to be a beloved child of God, not the medal or lack of medal around their neck."

