
FOCUS missionaries join Catholic team supporting Olympic athletes in Paris



Father Joseph Fitzgerald and the Varsity Catholic missionaries are among the 40 Catholic priests, nuns, and laypeople offering spiritual support to the Olympic athletes in Paris. | Credit: Amber Moseley/FOCUS Varsity Catholic



By [Gigi Duncan](#)

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In an effort to minister to Olympic athletes, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) has sent four Varsity Catholic missionaries to Paris as a means of spiritual outreach and support for participants of the ongoing games.

Varsity Catholic, a division of FOCUS, serves college athletes in helping them to “realize that their deepest identity is in Christ and the God who created them.”

Having been in Paris since the start of the Olympic Games, missionaries Kelley Hartman, Nate Meyers, Will Koppi, and Katie Kampen are continuing to extend their mission to the athletes they encounter, most of whom are college athletes.

“The work of Varsity Catholic is that we’re missionaries on college campuses specifically for athletes, and so we walk with the athletes and talk about how their faith and sports go together,” Hartman told CNA. “We discuss how they can continue to grow in their Catholic faith while also being Catholic athletes.”

Speaking of their experiences within Paris so far, Meyers shared that the four missionaries are “trying to be present” and bring attention to the “presence of the Holy Spirit.”

“We’re just trying to get to know these athletes, and in conversation let them know that there are priests here who will hear their confessions, that they can go to Mass, that the sacraments are available, and there’s a place to pray,” he continued. “We’re seeing where these conversations go, and as things go deeper we can invite people to pray, but we’re really just trying to build the athletes up in their faith.”

village.

“We’ve been using our time outside of the village as well, whether it’s just standing outside and remaining present there, or using other opportunities to find and bump into the athletes in order to get to know them,” Koppi said.

The missionaries also spoke of their work with Father Joseph Fitzgerald, pastor of St. William the Abbot Church in Seaford, New York, who competed for the U.S. handball team in the 1996 Olympics, whom they described as having a “missionary mindset and heart.”

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“The ultimate race is this relationship [with God] that really isn’t a race,” Fitzgerald told **Register Radio**. “It’s being present and sitting with the Lord, knowing that you are a beloved daughter and son of God whether you win the gold medal or finish in last place.”

Hartman said she shares experiences and conversations with athletes who “didn’t do as well as they had hoped.”

“It’s just a really privileged space to speak about their identity because they’re in this place where, for a lot of them, their sport is their god, and they’ve given everything to it. When it doesn’t satisfy them, there’s this darkness and confusion,” she said. “Even if they do as well as they had hoped and win gold, I still think there is this undeniable ache within their heart. The medal on the outside doesn’t fix things that are going on inside. For us to be here and be able to speak into their deepest longings and affirm their identity as beloved sons and daughters of God is a huge privilege.”

These Varsity Catholic missionaries — who were once college athletes themselves — also spoke of understanding the pressures that come with athletics.

“You often hear stories of former Olympians who have an identity crisis when their sport is over, or when they don’t get the gold medal or do as well as they were

a bridge for their relationship with God.

Echoing the need for this mission was Thomas Wurtz, who launched Varsity Catholic in 2007 after sharing his desire to start a “specific, intentional outreach to college athletes” within FOCUS. Currently, there are 225 Varsity Catholic missionaries serving more than 4,000 athletes across 128 campuses.

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“In FOCUS, we want to introduce people to Jesus Christ and to live the fullness of the Gospel, which Pope Paul VI said is to also evangelize,” Wurtz told CNA. “To live mission, to truly be missionary disciples and reach every soul on the face of the

Having organized for the Varsity Catholic presence at this year's Olympics, Wurtz described how Olympic athletes face a "culmination of their lifetime of competition, of training for four years or more, coming down to maybe 30 seconds depending on what event they're competing in."

"It's a lot of pressure, a lot of psychological and emotional pain that can be found in this, so I'm just pleased that we and others can be there to support and comfort them, or help them put things into perspective that the Lord is king," he continued. "[The Lord] is what matters most whether they succeed or fail in their Olympic competition, in knowing that there is something greater beyond this and that a sport doesn't define them. Your worth is not in the fact that you medal, your worth is in the fact that you are a beloved son or daughter of God."

"There's peace and freedom in this identity, and we hope that Olympic athletes can discover this too," he said.

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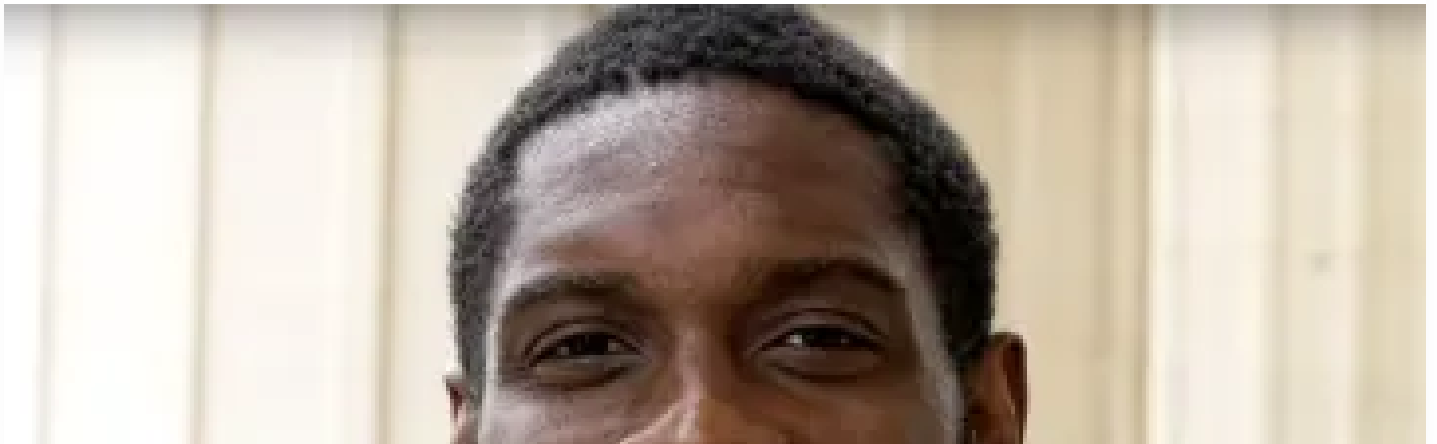
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