

LONG ISLAND / RELIGION

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

Joseph Fitzgerald, Seaford pastor with Olympic past, part of global faith push in Paris



Father Joseph Fitzgerald, pastor at St. William the Abbot Roman Catholic Church in Seaford, in 1996 when he competed for the United States Olympic handball team in Atlanta. Credit: Getty Images/Mike Powell

By Bart Jonesbart.jones@newsday.com

Updated July 23, 2024 4:16 pm

 [SHARE](#)

Listen to this article now



1.0x

00:00

08:12

North Babylon native Joseph Fitzgerald competed in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta as a member of the United States men's handball team. Now, he is returning to the Summer Olympics, only this time as a priest.

Fitzgerald, a cleric for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, is among 40 people of faith worldwide selected to be chaplains at the Olympic Games, which begin Friday in Paris. The only U.S. priest in the contingent, he appears ideally suited — a former world-class athlete and also an ordained minister.

"I want to make sure that these kids know that it's bigger than just the games. It's their lives that come afterward, and their family, and that God has a plan for them besides winning the gold medal," Fitzgerald said.

Currently the pastor of St. William the Abbot Roman Catholic Church in Seaford, Fitzgerald, 52, will be part of a mission spearheaded by the Catholic bishops of France called "The Holy Games."

The project is intended to encourage people to seek holiness through sport and spread Christian messages of fraternity and self-improvement. It also aims to "evangelize" — introduce people to Christianity and help others return to it — at a global event expected to attract more than 10,000 athletes and up to 20 million visitors.

Sign up for the NewsdayTV newsletter

From breaking news to special features and documentaries, the NewsdayTV team is covering the issues that matter to you.

SIGN UP

By clicking Sign up, you agree to our [privacy policy](#).



Stay logged in.

The Newsday app makes it easier to access content without having to log in.

Read in the app



Father Joseph Fitzgerald eventually left his pursuit of Olympic gold and is now pastor at St. William the Abbot Roman Catholic Church in Seaford. Credit: Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca

Fitzgerald's specific mission will be to minister to Olympic athletes and help them put their competition in perspective through prayer at what could be among the most intense and pressure-packed two weeks of their lives. He will use his experience in Paris to help U.S. bishops prepare for a similar faith-based effort at the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

Faith in sports

The Holy Games are part of an effort by Pope Francis to strengthen the role of faith in sports. Bishop John Barres, spiritual head of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, is representing the U.S. bishops on a "Faith in Sports" mission to the Paris Summer Olympics.

Stay logged in.

The Newsday app makes it easier to access content without having to log in.

[Read in the app](#)

Besides being an Olympian, Fitzgerald was a quarterback for Ithaca College when it won a Division III national championship, and is in that college's Athletic Hall of Fame.

The 40 chaplains officially approved by the International Olympic Committee to serve in Paris are mainly Christian, with most of them Catholic priests, nuns and lay people. But there will also be rabbis, imams and nondenominational ministers.

Just being present

Fitzgerald's duties will include celebrating Mass, hearing confessions and just being present for any athlete who wants spiritual guidance or to pray with someone else amid an intensely pressurized experience.

He knows what they are going through, because he did, too. He recalls walking in the opening ceremonies in Atlanta alongside other American athletes, including NBA Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal, in what seemed like a surreal experience.

"As an Olympic athlete," Fitzgerald said, "being at the highest point, like walking in the opening ceremonies, high-fiving the best athletes in the world, competing really well ... I had a great experience."

But he also knows that with the incredible highs can come incredible lows. When the Games are over and you are going home — in most cases without a medal — it can be a shock and lead to depression, he said.

After the 1996 Olympics, in which Fitzgerald's U.S. handball team, one of 100 in the competition, finished in ninth place, he played the sport professionally in Sweden for several months.

Post-Olympic setbacks

Not there, there is a

Stay logged in.

The Newsday app makes it easier to access content without having to log in. e Olympics,

Read in the app

y great athlete," he said. "You want to fight, you want to stick your foot on the throat of the opponent. That person is dead in some ways."

He noted well-known Olympians have publicly acknowledged their struggles. Legendary swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated American Olympian, has said he first felt "post-Olympic depression" after winning six gold and two bronze medals at the 2004 Athens Olympics. At one point, Phelps has said, he felt suicidal. Therapy helped turn his life around, he has said.

Citing her mental health and the stress she was under, Simone Biles, considered the greatest gymnast of all time, withdrew from five event finals at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, shocking the sports world. She later disappeared from competitive gymnastics in general.

Now, Biles is back and is set to compete in Paris. She has credited therapy with teaching her that one's athletic prowess far from defines people.

Space for God and sports

Fitzgerald's goal in Paris is to put the Games in perspective for other athletes as well — with a religious twist. Too often "we base our identity in athletics on our success, whether we win a gold medal or not, or we win a national championship," he said. "The hope is to provide a space for those who can allow for their identity as beloved sons and daughters of God, not just if they are gold medal winners."

The Seaford parish pastor is not the first Roman Catholic cleric to see a link between sports and faith.

Pope John Paul II was an avid athlete and sports fan, especially soccer, skiing and hiking. In a homily in 2000, he said: "Sport is of great importance today because it can foster in young people the affirmation of important values such as loyalty, perseverance, friendship, sharing and solidarity."

Catholics even have a patron saint of sports — St. Sebastian, a 3rd century soldier and martyr who joined the Roman Army to defend persecuted Christians and evangelize prominent Roman citizens.

Stay logged in.

The Newsday app makes it easier to access content without having to log in.

Read in the app

life of virtue."

high regard by

pope Francis noted
mpetition and,
:lf-control of
, of the Christian

Making connections

In Paris, Fitzgerald will stay at a Catholic parish rectory nearby the Olympic Village. He hopes to also spend time at the USA House, a site that offers hospitality — including American-style food — to the athletes, their families and their close friends. There, he hopes to make connections and make himself available.

While he is going as an official chaplain, he also will get special access to competitions and other sites because he is an Olympian, according to Fitzgerald.

Part of his mission is to also report back to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on how The Holy Games went and what the American bishops can do in a similar vein in Los Angeles in 2028.

Barres said that in his presentation at the Vatican conference, he argued the church’s efforts should extend to other major sporting events, including the World Cup, the Tour de France and the Super Bowl.

"We also need to articulate a compelling Catholic athletic spirituality for the everyday person trying to stay in shape," Barres said.

He has often used his own experience as an athlete to make points about faith. When he was named bishop of the Roman Catholic Church on Long Island in 2016, he equated it to being a "point guard" leading the diocese.

Fitzgerald said his message to the Olympians he meets will be clear: "You still are that beloved daughter or son. It doesn’t matter if you finish with gold or if you finish last."

By Bart Iones

Stay logged in.

l. A former foreign
:havez Story from

The Newsday app makes it easier to access content without having to log in.

Read in the app

