

Olympic chaplain calls on Catholics to get ready to evangelize at LA's 2028 Games

Gina Christian | OSV News (<https://www.osvnews.com/>)

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With Los Angeles set to host the Summer Olympics and Paralympics in 2028, the Catholic Church in the U.S. is "in the quad" – a four-year-period of training between the global competitions – to hone its evangelization game, a priest and former Olympian told OSV News.

"Let's spiritually respond, pray and have a presence; let's be on every corner (in Los Angeles) so that if someone is looking for a connection with God, we're there," said Father Joseph Fitzgerald, pastor of St. William the Abbot in Seaford, New York, and former vocations director for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York.

Father Fitzgerald spoke with OSV News shortly after serving as a chaplain at both the Paris Games and the Holy Games, the Catholic Church in France's Olympic-related initiative. During both events, he sported not only his "clerical blacks," but his credentials as a past Olympian, having played on the U.S. handball team in 1996.

That combination "opened doors" for moments of encounter and witness, he said.

"People would come up to me and say, 'All right, you got the (clerical) collar on and (the credential). Is that a costume?'" Father Fitzgerald recalled. "And I'm like, 'No, I'm an Olympian from 1996 and I'm a priest.' Those conversations were gold; it was awesome: 'Hey, Father, how can I celebrate the sacraments? Is there a Mass? Where can we go?' So there was a really great openness."

Father Fitzgerald admitted he was surprised by the scope of the Catholic outreach at the Paris Games, particularly the Holy Games.

"It was really incredible. The whole mission was so much bigger than I thought it would be," he said. "They got about a thousand tickets for the games and gave them to persons with special needs, kids in wheelchairs, homeless families. I'd thought I'd maybe hear a couple of confessions and go watch a couple of games, and here I'm handing out croissants and coffee after Mass to homeless families. And then we're playing pingpong and tug of war, and I got to interact with them (in a way that) really had nothing to do with the Olympics – although of course I was certainly attentive to the Olympic athletes and their coaches and their families. But it was more like following the Gospel under the umbrella of the Holy Games. I was blown away."

The 2028 Games promise to be "a great opportunity" to "use all of our resources" in spreading the faith, especially given the spiritual power boost offered by the recent 10th National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis, said Father Fitzgerald – but it will take hard work and preparation, he stressed.

"Many of the pastors in the Archdiocese of Paris were all in. They wanted their parishes to be Holy Games parishes where people could come and pray and participate," he said. "And that's what's going to have to happen to make for a similar experience in Los Angeles. So it's going to take a real effort, and not just on the part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles."

Partnerships with Catholic churches and ministries, at both the local and national level, as well as "financial, volunteer and resource investments" will be critical for spiritually staffing the games, the priest said.

Having "point people on the ground," while ensuring sufficient clergy coverage amid summer vacations, will also be key, he added.

Father Fitzgerald said he was preparing a report on his experiences at the Paris Games for Rockville Centre's Bishop John O. Barres, who may share the findings with fellow bishops.

Ultimately, said Father Fitzgerald, "we're not striving for earthly goals, but for heaven."

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Gina Christian is the National Reporter for OSV News.