

English Catholic Church has a great deal in store for the Olympics



ALL IS SET FOR THE LONDON 2012 GAMES

With the London Olympics just days away, the Archbishop of Westminster talks to "Vatican Insider" about the initiatives launched by Catholics

With the London Olympics just days away, the Catholic Church is ready to do its part to ensure this great event is not just a series of competitions but truly representative of the “Olympic spirit”. In an interview with Vatican Insider, the Archbishop of Westminster, mgr. Vincent Nichols, talks about the initiatives that have been put in place by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales ahead of the Olympic Games.

“As happens in all Olympic Games - the archbishop said – there is a movement called “More than Gold”, which groups together all the Churches that help out in the Games.”

What does “More than Gold” mean?

“We concentrated mainly on accommodation for athletes’ families who want to come and see them compete but can’t afford hotel prices. We found hundreds of people who were willing to share their homes with these families. We also want to get young people involved in the Games and give them the chance to experience them up close. For example, those taking part in social projects will get the chance to watch all competitions in bars in their parish bars.”

The Olympics are being held in London but the whole country is involved in the Games...

“Absolutely. We held a big event for young people, which 8-9 thousand people participated. It was called “the flame” and offered the chance to speak about the flame of faith. Some Olympic athletes also took part; they explained how their Christian faith was an integral part of their work as athletes.

We also founded the John Paul II Foundation for Sport in England, which will live on even after the Games. The organisation will try to use the buildings of Catholic schools and organisations across the country to give young people from difficult neighbourhoods the chance to play sport together instead of being left alone on the streets. But following pope Wojtyla’s vision, the foundation will try to work on people’s spirit not just their body, introducing its “theology of the body”, to combine physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Have any events been organised in schools as well?

A year before the Olympics, Catholic schools took advantage of the Games to educate young people in traditional virtues: just as athletes train for a competition, we train to be virtuous citizens. A very original initiative. Finally, we used the Olympic Truce as inspiration to respond to the problem of urban violence. Groups of young people in collaboration with police and other foundations, asked shopkeepers to become urban “safe havens”: whoever feels under threat can enter, ask for help and call the police. The initiative began 50 days before the opening ceremony and will end 50 days after it.

Will there be any liturgical moments?

There will be an opening mass in Westminster Cathedral on 28 July and at the end of the Paralympics there will be a closing ceremony. So I think we’re ready and can’t wait for the Games to start.

Alessandro Speciale