

Thy Kingdom Come!

The Rev. Dr. Eamonn O'Higgins, spiritual director and manager of the St. Peter's Cricket Club XI, Rome, has agreed to answer our questions about the forthcoming cricket match with an Anglican (Church of England) XI on September 19th at Canterbury in England.

Q. Fr. Eamonn, what is all this we hear about seminarians, cricket, and the Vatican?

A. Rome is the spiritual centre of the Catholic Church and draws seminarians and priests from all over the world to study and work here. Among them are both seminarians and priests from cricket-playing countries such as Australia, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and England. Although their number is not large, occasional matches for seminarians have been organised by those of us who share the love of cricket.

Q. And how did you get involved?

I work at a Pontifical International Seminary, Maria Mater Ecclesiae, here in Rome. When I first came here over 10 years ago, I saw one day a few of our Indian theology students playing with a bat and a ball (without stumps) on our football field. It struck me that I should help them in this sport which has such an important place in their culture. Little by little we were able to build things up, getting proper equipment, organizing internal (and fiercely competitive) matches as well as matches with our big cricket rivals, the Pontifical Urbaniana College. This is how things started at the seminary level.

Q. What about the St Peter's Cricket Club?

This is where His Excellency John McCarthy, Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, comes on the scene in 2012. He was a Trustee of the Sydney Cricket Ground prior to coming to Rome. He explored whether there was interest in having a cricket club for seminarians and priests here at the Vatican. There was interest among many seminarians, including at Mater Ecclesiae. I worked with Ambassador McCarthy and others in Rome, in particular the Pontifical Council for Culture and Sport, to form a club committee and organize matches. The St Peter's Cricket Club was launched in

October last year. Ambassador McCarthy also proposed that the club consider challenging the Anglicans to a match in order to foster ecumenical relations and express support for the joint interfaith campaign to eradicate modern slavery and human trafficking. This challenge was accepted by the Archbishop of Canterbury in December 2013 and the acceptance was conveyed to us by Archbishop Sir David Moxon, the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative in Rome.

Q. Why play the Anglicans and why at Lords, in London?

Lords was only ever a possibility. I don't think it needs explaining why we would want to play at Lords! As things worked out, Canterbury was offered, rather than Lord's. The St Peter's XI are above all seminarians and priests dedicated to the Catholic priesthood, with its many great demands. We are primarily seminarians and priests who play cricket rather than cricketers who happen to be seminarians and priests. We wanted to bring our shared faith to others, starting with our close brothers and sisters of the Anglican Communion. Cricket is the medium, the context, in which bonds of faith and friendship can be established, creating what Pope Francis calls 'a culture of encounter'. This is the fundamental goal of our *Light of Faith Tour* to England in September.

Q. What do the Anglicans think of all of this?

They will be able to tell you better than I! What I can say is that our challenge was kindly accepted and that we have received great courtesy and cooperation from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Sir David Moxon, Dean Robert Willis of Canterbury and many others. I have sometimes wondered how 'the Vatican' challenge to the Church of England at cricket (of all things!) must have appeared to them. They have shouldered the major part of the organization of this historic and unprecedented match.

Q. Is this just about a cricket match?

No, the event at Canterbury has great Christian significance. We arrive on Thursday, 18th to pray evensong with our brother and sister Anglicans at Canterbury Cathedral, together with the saints of our common Christian heritage, St. Augustine, St. Anselm,

St. Thomas Becket, and the multitude of unobtrusive Christians who have glorified the Lord God with their prayer and their lives. This is what this engagement is about.

Q. But there is a cricket match the next day?

Of course there is, at 4pm, at a first class venue, the Kent County Cricket Ground, near Canterbury Cathedral. Our criterion has been to choose a team consisting overwhelmingly of seminarians and ordinands. What will be on display is a group of 22 men who dedicate their lives to Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

Q. How do you reckon your chances against the Anglican XI?

Realistically, we are rank underdogs with a very outside chance, but that's okay. What we hope for, above all, is a good match. On paper, the Anglican XI has much greater experience and match practice as individuals. That is not surprising in England, the home of cricket. We are a competent side, nothing more. None of the Vatican XI has played first class cricket. Our pool of players here in Rome is small (about 30, so far). We do not play in tournaments or leagues, mainly due to the restriction of time. If we lose, we learn. If we win...Win or lose, the first cricket match in history between the Vatican and the Church of England will be an event to remember and to build on.

Q. I hear that you arrive on Friday, 12th September. What are you up to before the 19th?

Nothing suspicious. We need to play on English wickets, never having done so before. We have received so many invitations and have accepted 4 of them. On Saturday, we play the British Army Chaplains at Aldershot. On Sunday, we play a strong local team in Brighton, also called St. Peter's (what you would call a win-win situation for St. Peter). On Monday, we play the Authors' XI, and on Wednesday, the Royal Household at Windsor. If we are still able to move, we will arrive at Canterbury on Thursday.

Q. Do you expect a whirl of parties and receptions?

Frankly, no. We have published our *Light of Faith Tour* schedule for the 8 days, and you will see that our team follows a fairly demanding schedule. Prayer is part of our daily life, Holy Mass is a daily feature of our lives as priests, and we come to England wanting to give of ourselves, to greet people, to witness to the love of the Lord God. We want and need to be coherent with what we profess. For us, this is not a holiday or any type of tour, but a spiritual venture. A day of the tour is dedicated to visiting and praying at the holy sites in London.

Q. I hear that the match is to be played in support of the new interfaith association, the Global Freedom Network, to eradicate modern slavery and human-trafficking?

Yes, this match is specifically to promote the Global Freedom Network, an agency that is determined to eradicate modern slavery and human-trafficking and which was formed as an alliance that includes the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury among others. Through this network, whose leaders include Pope Francis and Archbishop Welby, a great evil in our world can be more strongly confronted and overcome. The Christian faith searches to make people more authentically human and to contribute practically to the conditions that make people so.

Q. Anything else to add?

Yes, to thank the people who have worked with us here to make this happen. The work has not been easy, and our volunteer committee has taken up the burden, all on a shoestring budget. One of our committee members, who is unable to attend the match due to work commitments, wrote recently: 'I will get great satisfaction knowing that others less fortunate will benefit from my input, which is what I wanted from this role'. He speaks for us all who have been drawn into this exciting and ground-breaking ecumenical endeavour.