

Former Olympian takes on new challenge as priest

ROCKVILLE CENTRE, N.Y. – More than a decade ago Joseph Fitzgerald was balancing his work as a youth minister at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Lindenhurst with membership on the men's national handball team that represented the U.S. at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Now as a priest of the Rockville Centre Diocese, he is still working on finding a balance in life.

"On a place like Long Island where it's so diverse – you have young people and old people, you have different ethnic groups – everyone wants a piece of you," he told The Long Island Catholic, Rockville Centre's diocesan newspaper, before his June 9 ordination.

"It's about balancing, because you want to do everything," Father Fitzgerald added. "The most challenging thing is realizing you have to take that quiet time in prayer (for yourself) and balance that with the ministerial aspect."

The 35-year-old priest and former schoolteacher was ordained by Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre along with Father Edward Sheridan, a 53-year-old former account executive for IBM, and Father Lee Descoteaux, 36, who worked in the admissions office at Adelphi University in Garden City before entering the seminary.

As a handball player, Father Fitzgerald participated in the World Cup and the Pan American Games, as well as the Summer Olympics. He described the sport in a 2001 article in The Long Island Catholic as being "like lacrosse without the sticks, or water polo with no water, or soccer using your hands instead of your feet."

The U.S. national handball team finished ninth among the 12 qualifying teams at the 1996 Olympics but has not qualified for the Olympics in the two Summer Olympics since then.

Father Fitzgerald, who played football and baseball while attending Ithaca College in Ithaca, plans to continue working out and preparing for marathons while serving at St. Kilian Parish in Farmingdale. But he has his priorities straight.

“God has blessed us with many different gifts,” he said. “I would like to work with the youth and young adults, but most importantly, to serve and to be a good server.”

Contributing to this story was Mary Gorry in Rockville Centre.