

The Pychester Lent Course

St Pythag's has developed a Discipleship Course with its sister church, Santa Croce in Extremis, humorously based on the game of Croquet, beloved of Edwardian Vicarage lawns. The Genesis of Croquet is hidden in the long grass of time, but when I used to play Croquet it was the domain of earnest young men and intelligent little old ladies; a microcosm of the Church of England in its heyday.

Croquet is like a cross between Snooker and Quidditch, played on grass, and can be a parable of the religious life with many hoops to be run, hopefully with a partner ball, before you peg out. In this Course, each of the 6 hoops offers the disciple 2 spiritual lessons.

1. The Liturgical Year – apart from purple (Advent/Lent), the two sets of balls cover the whole range of liturgical colours; blue (Our Lady) and black (All Souls) play red (Martyrs) and yellow (gold for Christmas & Easter) in one game, while in a second game white (Our Lord) and pink (Gaudete & Laetare) play brown (Lenten Array) and green (Trinity/Ordinary). I can sing a rainbow.
2. Integrities – with primary and secondary colours, 2 games can be played on the same lawn; like 2 Integrities in the same Church. Though Croquet is one of the few games where men and women compete on an equal basis.
3. Roquet – when one ball strikes another; useful for bad puns like “Roquet of Ages, cleft for me” and “What cheese do croquet players like? Roquefort”.
4. Croquet – place your ball against the roqueted ball, hold your mallet firmly and swing it so both balls move; you will achieve far more by playing constructively to build a break like in snooker using all four balls, rather than banishing your opponent to the long grass, however tempting that may seem.
5. Temptation – even if the Church of England is writing the Devil out of its Baptism promises, the Dark Lord will still try and tempt you by “laying a tice”; playing his ball a tempting distance from yours to entice you to shoot and miss, and hinder your progress around the course.
6. Fellowship – to win at Croquet, you have to help your partner ball to run all their hoops as well as your own; isn't the Christian life a bit like a game of Croquet?

At this half-way point the course offers a variety of activities, depending on which option you are playing.

- a. Alpha – improve your smile and have your teeth whitened.
- b. Emmaus – learn about ball games in the Old Testament and enjoy a special afternoon tea.
- c. Pilgrim – visit Stonehenge to stand where Merlin taught Dumbledore to play Wizards' Croquet.
- d. Scientist – visit the Large Hadron Croquet facility at CERN where relativistic roquets result in non-Newtonian behaviour of the balls. Find a Higgs boson and celebrate Mass.
- e. Explored – the acceptable face of Muscular Croquet.
- f. Bashful Camp – short trousers, cold showers and lashings of ginger beer.
- g. Augustine – the course that's not dumbed down; visit fashionable Milano for a weekend role-playing St Augustine's book “Confessions of a Theologian”.

7 (*known as 1 back*). Stewardship – you like playing Croquet and want to support the running of the Church – sorry, Club – and upkeep of the Lawns, so consider joining as a regular member; ask the Treasurer about subscription options.

8 (*2 back*). Disappointment (the bit most other courses miss out) – no one wins every game and very few get through all the hoops of life without setbacks; when you're experiencing the Long Grass of the Soul, or feeling short-changed by God, seek help, try changing your swing, or even your Club, but above all persevere.

9 (*3 back*). Meditation – while sitting out (when the opponents are in play) you will have plenty of opportunity to pray, meditate or maybe crochet a lacy cotta for your favourite server.

10 (*4 back*). Practice – probably won't make you a perfect player, but you become better by playing, not just by knowing the rules; and beware of celebrity preachers – sorry, players.

11 (*Penult*). Be Inclusive/Welcoming – with the help of bisques (free turns, not soup) all ages and genders can play Croquet on a level Cathedral Green; is your Church – sorry, Club – a community which welcomes new players, explains the customs and offers coaching if wanted?

12 (*Rover*). Vespers – the end is nigh; get the thurible going so you can incense any wasps that try to spoil your enjoyment of felicity at the heavenly bun-fight.

Peg-out – go to the Club-house for the heavenly banquet; there's tea and cucumber sandwiches for Evangelicals, prosecco and strawberries for Anglo-Catholics, or elderflower wine and carrot cake for Progressive Radicals.

Join the Lord of the Dance and do the Roquet-Croquet.

Richard Barnes – Feb 2017.

