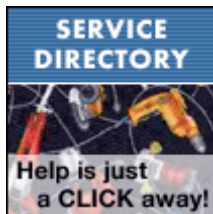


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News & Features

Former baseball player speaks to teens about his faith journey

current article

by: [John Franko](#)

During his 12-year Major League Baseball career that included stints with the Indians, Reds, Pirates, Tigers and Red Sox, Sean Casey had a .302 batting average, clubbed 130 home runs and had 735 RBIs.

He was named to the National League All-Star team three times.

As a member of the Reds in 2001, he became the first player to hit a home run at PNC Park.

But in spite of his success on the diamond, Casey measures himself by a different standard.

“Baseball won’t define me, but hopefully my faith will,” he said. “I was never afraid to say that I was a Christian, or a Catholic.”

Casey, who grew up as a member of St. Thomas More in Bethel Park, has returned to the parish since his retirement from the game last fall.

He spoke about his faith April 19 with young people from St. Thomas More who will take part in a week-long service mission in Jefferson City, Tenn., in June.

Casey praised them for exhibiting their love of God and neighbor as they represent the parish and community.

He pointed to Matthew 25:31-40: “I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.”

Through their actions, he noted, they will embrace a heart of service.

“If that’s not Christ I don’t know what is,” he said.

When asked how he was able to live his values during his time in the big leagues, Casey pointed out that he relied on the lessons he learned as a teenager. Good deeds performed at age 16, he said, will help influence what is important later in life.

He spoke of how he tried to follow the example of “Preach the Gospel always and sometimes use words.”

In mentioning that Casey was once named the “nicest guy in baseball” by a vote of his peers, Father James Farnan, parochial vicar at St. Thomas More, said it was a direct result of his faith.

“He’s a bridge of grace to these kids that they aren’t used to,” he said. “Everyone has a fascination with sports. If they can see him in love with the Lord it’s a great witness for them — and for me, too.”

Casey credits his parents — Jim and Joan — with instilling the faith in him from an early age.

Sunday Mass was always important to the family, he noted, and he was taught that his family was part of a community of believers that was something greater than themselves.

Casey recalled watching his father pray, and he spoke of how much he was inspired by books on the Eucharist that his father gave him.

“It was a journey of faith that I’m still on,” he said.

Casey spoke of how he has leaned on his faith many times in his life. His biggest test, however, came early in his Major League career when he was struck in the face by a ball. His orbital bone was broken, and his vision was impaired. Some thought his playing career was over.

He recalled lying in bed and thinking what a blessing it had been that he had fulfilled his dream of playing in the big leagues. He was more thankful than upset. Casey said his faith life had taken on a deeper dimension following his sophomore season at the University of Richmond when he took part in the Cape Cod League in Massachusetts.

While there, he met Father Paul O’Brien of the Archdiocese of Boston, who helped him enrich his prayer life.

Father O’Brien gave him a Bible, which he still carries with him.

The Bible’s pages are well-worn and contain handwritten notations of passages Casey has studied.

Casey recalled how he would spend a half-hour to 45 minutes each evening reading the Bible and pondering what the Spirit was saying to him. He would then discuss the passages with Father O’Brien.

“It was one of the first times when I really felt the Spirit working in my life,” Casey said.

Father O’Brien later officiated when Casey married his wife, Mandi, and he baptized their three children.

Casey has helped support Father O’Brien’s “Labels are for Jars” (www.labelsareforjars.org) ministry to the hungry in Lawrence, Mass.

Other supporters include comedian Conan O’Brien, a roommate of Father O’Brien’s at Harvard University.

Casey noted that he continues to learn about his faith through his family, which includes Andrew, 7, Jacob, 6, and Carli, 3.

“At some point they’ll feel the Spirit in their life and that will be what guides them,” he said.

Another milestone in his faith life, he said, came April 11 when his wife was received into the church during the Easter Vigil.

It was a decision she made on her own, he noted, and he is grateful that she can now

experience the Eucharist and the family can worship as one.

“It was more on the Holy Spirit’s time than it was on my time,” he said.

Mandi’s faith journey through the RCIA program impacted his own faith life, he said, and he recalled eagerly awaiting her return from meetings so he could ask her what she learned.

Father James Wehner, pastor of St. Thomas More, said the comfortable and confident way in which Casey discusses his faith is the type of leadership he needs in the parish, and the type the church needs for its Catholic men.

“His faith as a husband and father, and his testimony as a Catholic, is a great example,” he said.

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