



Ravens Head Coach Harbaugh, Faith on and Off the Field

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“His relationship with God is the thing he leans on whenever he has tough times.”

BALTIMORE, MD (The Catholic Review) - Not long ago, John Harbaugh walked into a barbershop near his home off Falls Road. As the wholesome-looking 46-year-old sat in the barber’s chair with a smock draped around his torso, a young hairdresser carefully snipped his closely-cropped brown hair.

“What are you doing this weekend?” she asked casually. He offered an answer that he has been able to get away with most of his life. “Oh, I don’t know,” he replied, “a little bit of this and that.” The hairdresser kept up her poker face a little longer. She was trying to tease a man whose visage has quickly become one of the more recognizable in the region.

Eleven months ago, Harbaugh, a lifelong Catholic, was plucked from relative obscurity to become the third head coach in Baltimore Ravens history. Not realizing the joke was on him, Harbaugh steered the conversation with his hairdresser away from his career. He never boasted about his high-profile job or tried to embarrass his playful tormentor.

The Ohio native wanted to stick to the ideals that have defined his life: treating others with respect and staying humble. Catholicism, he says, gave him those principles and they apply to the hairdresser just as much as they do the multi-million dollar athletes he coaches.

“The first thing you notice about John is that he treats others the way he wants to be treated,” said Jack Harbaugh, his father, who spent 41 years as a coach and directed Western Kentucky to the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I-AA title in 2002. “He’s a sensitive, caring individual.”

The Harbaugh Way is working, even with some bumps in the road. The 6-4 Ravens suffered a 30-10 loss to the defending Super Bowl champion New York Giants Nov. 16, ending a four-game win streak. They still barely resemble the 2007 edition of the franchise, and there are whispers of a playoff berth in the parity-laden National Football League.

Five days before the biggest game of the season, Harbaugh sat in his office at the Ravens’ Owings Mills training facility for a wide-ranging interview that

discussed his faith and profession, and how the two mix.

Catholic formation

When Harbaugh was growing up, he didn't stay in one place very long. His father was an up-and-coming coach who relocated his family as high school and college opportunities came along.

The family moved from Ohio to Iowa to Michigan over the course of a decade. When his father coached at the University of Michigan, Harbaugh attended a public high school in Ann Arbor, but he spent almost all of his elementary school years in various Catholic schools.

Harbaugh has fond memories of the nuns who kept him in line. After he clapped erasers on the walls, one punished him by making him write a sentence hundreds of times on the chalkboard. Another made him work as a janitor for two weeks after he scaled a church tower so he could clang the bell.

"Accountability was a big part of it," said Harbaugh, whose favorite duty as an altar boy was ringing the bells at Mass. "They made you be courteous and respectful and not be judgmental of others," he said. "To understand right from wrong was the biggest thing."

There was a natural rivalry between Harbaugh and his younger brother, Jim. Just a year after John climbed the church bell tower, Jim tried to match his brother's feat only to be stymied halfway by a fear of heights. School officials had to get John to scale the tower one more time to talk his little brother down.

Jim admires his big brother's dogged determination, and calls him his hero. He remembered that when John was a 10-year-old hockey player, the metal blade of a wayward skate sliced open his knee, sidelining him through baseball season. Other knee injuries slowed him in high school and at Miami University in Ohio, where he played defensive back.

"He never lost faith," said Jim Harbaugh, a former Ravens' quarterback who now serves as the head coach at Stanford University. "He always rehabbed harder than he thought was possible."

Harbaugh faced a steep climb up the coaching ladder, laboring for more than a decade in the collegiate ranks before joining the Philadelphia Eagles in 1998 as a special teams coach and then their secondary coach in 2007. Harbaugh was often among the runners-up when interviewing for jobs at places like Boston College, according to his brother.

"His relationship with God is the thing he leans on whenever he has tough times," said Jim Harbaugh, noting that their father Jack and mother Jackie encouraged faith development among the brothers and their sister, Joani, who is married to Indiana University basketball coach Tom Crean. "When he didn't get a job, he would say, 'God has a different plan for me,'" Jim

Harbaugh said.

Father Christopher Whatley, pastor of St. Mark in Catonsville and Catholic chaplain for the Ravens, said the head coach is always at Sunday Mass with other Catholic coaches before games. On the road, local priests are called ahead of time to lead worship.

“He’s very prayerful during Mass and very attentive to what I have to share in the homily,” said Father Whatley, who celebrates the Ravens’ Mass at a downtown hotel near the stadium. “He’s there to gain some spiritual nourishment.”

It was Harbaugh who revived Catholic Masses for the Ravens after an absence of several years. He also attends a weekly Bible study at the Owings Mills training facility with his fellow coaches. Even though Sundays are the most high-pressured days of his life, Harbaugh said it’s critical to make time for God.

“I think it’s a way to honor God and praise God,” he said. “You just humble yourself a little bit before God and let him know that these things that we do are for you.”

Harbaugh’s wife Ingrid, a Lutheran, recently chose the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland as the family parish for herself, her husband and their 6-year-old daughter, Alison. He said that the Harbaughs are attracted by the long history and intellectual depth of the Catholic faith. “We’re trying to get her (Ingrid) to convert to Catholicism,” he said with a smile.

Tough guy with a soft heart

When the new head coach first arrived in Baltimore, he had a reputation as a hard-nosed guy with his players. John Harbaugh doesn’t deny his regimen is tough. He imposes curfews and other restrictions, and acknowledged having very high expectations.

He likened his job to that of a shepherd who keeps everyone “moving in the right direction to get them to the pasture we want them to graze in.”

“I care enough about the players to be demanding of them – to make sure that everything we do is about attention to detail,” he said, “sticking to the plan and not backing out from the values and principles that we think are important.”

Players test him all the time, he said. “When they know you’re strong enough, that you believe in it enough to stand behind it, then they’ll stand behind it, and then it becomes their way,” he said. “I think that’s where we’re going right now with our team.”

Harbaugh talks frequently about humility and looking out for the other guy. “When you make yourself small and raise the other people up around you, that’s the whole Christian message,” he said.

Asked what he thought of players who run into the end zone carrying the ball with one hand or who whoop it up after sacking a quarterback, the coach said those actions are not necessarily bad.

“If you are taunting your opponent, if you’re belittling your opponent – that’s a bad thing,” he said, adding that any action that results in a penalty is also a problem. “We can celebrate all we want as long as it’s directed toward our teammates, but if we start to celebrate what’s directed toward us, we don’t encourage that.”

Kevin Byrne, the Raven’s senior vice president for public and community relations, got a glimpse of Harbaugh’s unique combination of toughness and caring when he was being grilled for the head coach position.

The candidate never lost his cool while undergoing hours on end of questioning, Mr. Byrne said. “He has a disarming way of stating his beliefs and then commenting on those beliefs while being inclusive,” he said.

Power of prayer

Before, during and after games, Harbaugh said he’s always praying – not for a win, but for God to draw near. “I used to pray for other reasons, and every now and then, I’d pray for a turnover,” he said, “but more than anything else, I want God to stay close to me so I don’t get caught up in myself and basically embarrass myself. That’s selfish behavior.”

While he’s not necessarily praying for a win, the coach gladly encourages fans to do some praying for his team. Seated not far from a crucifix made for him by his daughter Alison, Harbaugh relished being in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Premier See.

“Catholic fans! Hey, you know, say a rosary!” he exclaimed with a grin. “Sunday morning for the Ravens!”

Informed that Father John B. Ward, pastor of Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk, always ends his game day Masses with a prayer for the Ravens, the coach laughed, leaned forward and issued a direct appeal.

“Father Jack Ward,” he raved, “keep bringing it!”