



Milwaukee Brewers' catcher sports a major-league Catholic faith

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MILWAUKEE, Wis. (Catholic Herald) - Kathie Solie remembers vividly the day in 2002 when her young groundskeeper at the Siena Center waited for a phone call that never came.

Vinny Rottino, the 1998 St. Catherine High School, Racine, graduate who had been doing maintenance work at the Racine retreat house since his senior year of high school, was washing windows at the center on the day of the Major League Baseball draft.

A standout shortstop at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, where he was named a first-team All-American and earned first-team NCAA Division III honors, Rottino expected to be chosen in the draft.

“He was waiting for a phone call that day because the (Milwaukee) Brewers had said they planned to draft him,” said Solie, administrator at the Siena Center, “but as it turned out, the phone never rang.

“He was very disappointed and I remember talking to him in the break room a day or so afterward and I told him, ‘God has a plan for you. If the plan is baseball, you will get there.’”

And get there, he has!

Clutch hit

Rottino, a catcher for the Brewers, added to the highlight film of his major league career on Saturday night as he pinch hit in the bottom of the 11th inning, singling to knock in the winning run in a 4-3 come-from-behind victory by the Brewers. The win ensured that the Brewers would finish with their first winning season since 1992.

As he was mobbed at home plate by his teammates celebrating the victory, Marcia and Tony Rottino, members of St. Paul Parish, Racine, watched from the stands with pride as their son continued to live his lifelong dream.

“Whenever he comes to bat, I always say a lot of prayers,” admitted Marcia, a Racine public health nurse, in a telephone interview with your Catholic Herald. “It was just a wonderful moment for him to come through for the team.”

As he lives out the dream that began in the backyard of their Racine home when Rottino played catch with his dad, he hasn't strayed far from his close-knit family nor his Catholic roots which, he said, continue to ground him.

The youngest of the Rottinos' four children and the only boy, Rottino, 27, told your Catholic Herald that faith was always a central part of his family life.

"My parents have always been real devout Catholics. Both of my parents instilled in us a devotion to the church. You can really sense that in my parents, in my dad, and that's really shaped my faith," he said.

Rottino said he tries to attend Mass a couple times a week and continues to look for ways to learn more about his faith.

"I've been seeking out the teachings of the Catholic Church, because what the Catholic Church teaches is not exactly elementary, so I've been trying to learn more about it. It's helped my commitment to (the faith) because the more I learn about it, the more truth is revealed, the more beauty is revealed in the church and it's really shaped me," he said, noting he likes to watch EWTN and listen to Relevant Radio.

Teammate Jeff Suppan, a pitcher acquired by the Brewers last offseason, has been a real "blessing," noted Rottino. Rottino said he and Suppan, a fellow Catholic, often discuss faith and have recently watched together a 13-part "Our Father's Plan," a Catholic Bible study video hosted by Catholic apologists, Scott Hahn and Jeff Cavins.

"Jeff (Suppan) has been great. I've learned from him and his faith and we talk about different things about the church," he said, noting it is rare to find a Catholic teammate willing to discuss faith. "Usually, Catholic guys are less vocal about it."

Catholic faith in the dugout

Both Suppan and Rottino are members of Catholic Athletes for Christ, an organization founded by Ray McKenna which, according to its Web site, "serves Catholic athletes in the practice of their faith and shares the Gospel in and through sports."

McKenna has arranged for Catholic Masses to be celebrated at several baseball parks around the league for ballplayers and staff prior to Saturday evening games. Since he was called up from the minor league Triple-A team in September, Rottino has attended a few of the Masses at Miller Park — including one on Sept. 15 celebrated by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan — and a Mass at Turner Field prior to a game against the Atlanta Braves.

Even though Rottino makes it a practice to attend Mass, even when he's on the road, he said he found the stadium Masses convenient.

“I think I would be able to find a Mass on a Sunday morning, really early probably, but knowing we play at night and you don’t wind down until later at night.... Plus it’s convenient and it’s nice to go to Mass with fellow ballplayers and coaches,” he said.

Rottino said he values the opportunity to attend Mass, “because of the grace we receive when we receive the Eucharist. That’s the bottom line; it’s such a blessing, such a gift we are able to have.”

Catholic faith was an important part of marriage and family life for the Rottinos, said Marcia.

“All four of our kids are very strong churchgoers who also volunteer,” she said, noting that two of Rottino’s sisters, Gina Holton and Anna Emmerich, are mentors at San Juan Diego School in Racine. Tony Rottino, a school psychologist at Horlick High School and Racine Park High School, consults as a school psychologist at San Juan Diego and is the baseball coach at St. Catherine. A third daughter, Kristina Russell, lives in Peoria, Ill.

“I am in awe of him,” said Marcia of her son. “For all the distractions that could have come his way, he has stayed very focused. He really makes me proud. He’s a great role model and he keeps me grounded,” she said, noting he’s godfather to several of his eight nieces and nephews.

She recalled that as a teenager, during parish missions at church, Rottino would often be the only high school age person there.

“He never was a rebellious, disrespectful kind of guy,” she said, adding as a teen, he became an extraordinary minister of holy Communion and “you don’t see too many kids wanting to do that.”

‘Fear and trembling’

Rottino also has a built-in fan club with the sisters at Siena Center, according to Solie. Because he worked at the center for seven years until 2004, the sisters have anxiously followed his career. After the disappointing draft in 2002, a former coach arranged for him to try out with the Brewers in Arizona. Following the tryout, he was signed by the team.

As he’s risen through the minor leagues, Solie has posted photos and updates on Rottino at the center for the sisters. Solie, who has visited Rottino in Arizona during spring training several times, admitted she has a small “Vinny shrine” in her office. While it embarrasses him, the “shrine” includes a bobblehead, his letters and hats of the teams for which he’s played.

“I am so proud of him. He’s very, very firm in his Catholic beliefs and he tells me he works hard at keeping his Catholic faith and values strong,” said Solie. “I think the world of him, his values, his humility. He really loves the sisters and they’re all praying for him.”

As a ballplayer, it's difficult at times to maintain values, admitted Rottino.

"There are temptations. Every human has temptations I don't know if there would be any more or less if I was in baseball or if I wasn't," he said. "But basically you have to continue to get fed at Mass and do a lot of praying, get to confession as often as possible. I don't think people realize the power and grace that is available at confession. It is pretty powerful and it helps and holds you more accountable, that's for sure.

"Obviously there's temptation in baseball, but we have to continue to work our salvation out with fear and trembling, right?"

A public figure, Rottino knows he is a role model to others.

"As God blesses you with more in your life, the more responsibility you have. Obviously, as athletes, you are seen in the spotlight more, that's more responsibility to be a good role model for young kids, even for older people," he noted.

Rottino's season ended Sunday when the Brewers fell short of making the playoffs. He will head to the Dominican Republic for winter ball and next spring hopes to make the Brewers' major league roster.

Although he majored in chemistry and began pharmacy school after not being drafted, Rottino said he hopes to stay in baseball in some capacity.

"I hope to keep playing as long as they let me have a uniform," he said. "I love the game and hope to stay in it in some capacity."