

Notre Dame kicker gets strength, confidence from his Catholic faith

By Brian T. Olszewski
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WEST BEND, Ind. (Catholic Herald) - Like many place-kickers, Carl Gioia contends that his craft is 98 percent mental and 2 percent physical. But he qualifies that larger percentage.

"I include the spiritual with that," he said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Herald*, the official newspaper of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wis. "Faith gives you strength and confidence in what you do."

What Gioia does is kick field goals and extra points for the University of Notre Dame football team.

The 11th-ranked Notre Dame Fighting Irish (10-2) play the nation's 4th-ranked LSU Tigers in their home state Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, La., on Jan. 3.

The youngest child of Dan, an attorney, and Helen, a middle school social studies teacher, Gioia credits his parents for rooting him in his Catholic faith. He has a sister and two brothers.

"I didn't go to a Catholic school, but our environment was Catholic," he said of life in Valparaiso, Ind., where he belongs to St. Paul Parish.

Terming Catholicism "a big part of our family's life," he noted that they "celebrated (Easter and Christmas) with more than candy, eggs and turkey."

That same environment also attracted the 2003 Valparaiso High School graduate to choose Notre Dame, where he was a "preferred" walk-on who did not receive a scholarship until his sophomore year, over the other 20 schools that recruited him.

"A nice thing about Notre Dame is that they are very accepting of people, and of integrating faith into everyday life," he said. "As a student-athlete, (faith) helps you put things in perspective."

Gioia said that another help in his faith development at Notre Dame are the Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings he and 19 of his teammates attend the night before each game. Participants, he said, are reminded to "glorify God in the gifts God has given you."

The pre-professional studies major with a 3.6 GPA looks forward to attending Sunday Mass at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on the Notre Dame campus.

“There is so much business, work and tempo to life. Meetings, practice, and studying,” he said. “You don’t have time to thank God for helping you out (until you get to Mass).”

That thanksgiving is at the heart of his prayer life. Echoing a motto found in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Gioia expresses prayerful gratitude to God “for gifts you have given me. Let me use them to best glorify you and build you a platform and to put you on it.”

As to why he doesn’t pray, “God, help me win this game,” Gioia said, “There are more important things; there are a lot of people who need his help.”

Two and a half hours prior to every game, the football team, wearing suits and ties, attends Mass before heading directly to the stadium.

Noting that Notre Dame head coach Charlie Weis not only wanted to produce great football players but also to “get them to grow in life,” Gioia said, “We want to win at life, not just on the football field.”

A place-kicker since eighth grade, Gioia maintains a Pauline attitude about his solitary trade, quoting Romans 8:31 - “If God is for us, who can be against?”

“No matter how I do, I know that at the end of the game my family is still going to hug me,” he said.

While the 5-foot-10-inch, 165-pound kicker is third on the team in scoring with 71 points, having been successful on 47 of 52 extra point attempts and eight of 12 field goal tries, some fans and some sports writers have criticized his performance.

“What other people say or write has no bearing on how I kick a football,” he said without a hint of defensiveness.

After the Sugar Bowl Jan. 3, Gioia will consider his options for the next academic year. Although he will graduate in May, he could return to Notre Dame for another season of football as a fifth-year senior or enroll in one of the dental schools to which he has applied - Marquette and Penn.

A self-described “people person,” Gioia sees the profession he is pursuing as another opportunity to use his God-given gifts.

“There’s a negative that goes along with being a dentist; people are afraid to see the dentist,” he said. “I want to help them treat their oral health. God has plans for me to help them settle their fears.”