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(Web exclusive: Mike Piazza)

## Q&A: Mike Piazza, designated hitter, catcher, Oakland Athletics

BY KERRY WEBER

**F**rom batting practice with his dad in his backyard to becoming the greatest hitting catcher of all-time, baseball has always played a role in Mike Piazza's life. And though he perhaps is best known for his heroics on the field, Piazza isn't shy about sharing another of his passions — his Catholic faith. Recently, Piazza, along with other prominent Major League Baseball players and coaches, offered insight into their varied spiritual journeys on the DVD "Champions of Faith: Baseball Edition," produced by Catholic Exchange. Below are additional excerpts from Catholic Digest's interview with Piazza, found in our September 2007 issue. Piazza offered Catholic Digest his thoughts on the film — not to mention the pope, Catholic pride, and the life of a 62nd round draft pick.

**CD:** It seems like baseball has been part of your life since you were a kid. In the film there are photos of you with baseball greats such as Dusty Baker and Johnny Oates. You even received batting tips from Ted Williams. That must have been amazing. How did this interest in baseball begin?

**PIAZZA:** I guess like most kids. My dad liked baseball. When he came out of the army he was a pretty good little athlete. He wasn't very big and he, unfortunately, was a left-handed second baseman, so his future employment prospects in baseball weren't good. My dad started pitching to me underhand with a wiffleball set, and I think he saw that I kind of had a little bit of ability at that time. He really funneled me and got me a [batting] cage and tried to get me to continue to hone my craft. I'm glad he did, you know?

**CD:** Of course. It seems to have worked out for you.

**PIAZZA:** (laughing) Yeah.

**CD:** You had the batting cage in your yard, right?

**PIAZZA:** Yeah, I remember I was about 11 years old and he bought us a batting cage and a pitching machine and an automatic feeder, and said, "If you want to do this, you really have to apply yourself." Then it was intoxicating for me. Every off-season, after I was 10 years old, I went back in the cage, and I saw myself progressing. When you work at something and you see yourself getting better, you start to want to do it more, and that was the case for me.

**CD:** My own dad set up a batting cage in our backyard as well — of course we're not major league players, but we're a big baseball family.

**PIAZZA:** (laughing) It kept me out of trouble. It keeps you focused.

**CD:** Sure. Who were some of your baseball



Mike Piazza with daughter Nicoletta Veronica Piazza, on the day of her Baptism. (Photo taken by Jo Von Tomaselli)

### heroes growing up?

**PIAZZA:** I grew up in Philly, so I grew up with the great teams of the '70s: Mike Schmidt, Larry Bowa, Steve Carlton, Tug McGraw, Bob Boone, and Pete Rose, when he was there. It was a very inspirational team to watch if you wanted to play Major League Baseball because they were a great team. And with my dad's friendship with [then Los Angeles Dodgers manager] Tom Lasorda, I became involved with the Dodgers, and I remember when they won the World Series in 1981. I was full-on into baseball. From that stage on it was what I really wanted to do.

**CD:** Once you were eventually drafted in the 62nd round in 1988, did you have the feeling that you had finally made it, or did you still feel you had a ways to go?

**PIAZZA:** I didn't feel like I had made anything — especially as a last-round draft pick. You don't get treated like a first-round pick. Just going to spring training — the way [the equipment guys] treat you, you're almost like cattle. It's, "OK, you're a catcher," and they throw the equipment bag at you. But it was a fun time as well. It was a very innocent time.

I'll never forget the first day of spring training. All the rest of the players, and the big guys, they're stretching and doing their hitting and whatnot, and they come up to me and say, "Hey get over to the bullpen." And, literally, I caught about 12 bullpens that day for pitchers warming up. I didn't do one other thing. And at the end of the practice they said, "Yeah, go hit in the cage if you want." I didn't get to hit on the field. But you know what? I wouldn't trade it in for the world. That toughened me up. That gave me incentive.

**CD:** How did you get involved with "Champions of Faith"?

**PIAZZA:** I was doing a tour of Italy, [three or four years ago], where I did a couple of appearances for Major League Baseball, and they said, "Would you like to go to an audience with [Pope John Paul II?]," and I said, "Are you kidding me? Of course!" So they got me there, and that's when I met [writer and narrator of "Champions of Faith"] John Morales. When we met there, he started talking with Tom Allen [of Catholic Exchange and producer of the film], and they started putting this idea together of producing this DVD. Did you enjoy it?

**CD:** Very much. There were many honest and compelling thoughts from the players, and it was very professional.

**PIAZZA:** Good. [Writer and producer John Morales and I] started talking about our faith and how proud I am to be Catholic. Part of it is that we want to learn a little bit from what evangelicals do, as far as building a national Catholic sort of movement in a way, connecting us all, because a lot of it is localized as far as parishes go. The evangelicals are more on a national front, and we want to say, 'Hey, we're a force, and we're proud to be Catholic,' and I think it would be great to continue to connect Catholics nationally, and show how inspirational it can be to meet people in different parts of the country.

**CD:** You're able to attend special Masses at the baseball stadiums on Sundays. Do you ever participate as lectors or extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist?

**PIAZZA:** Yeah. I like to do the readings sometimes, and sometimes I like to share them with the other guys. It depends — sometimes it's kind of early (laughing). Sometimes I'll do the first reading and the responsorial psalm and then someone else will do the second reading. There's a little bit more flexibility. We really enjoy it. It's a great celebration of our faith.

**CD:** It sounds like it. You've worked to raise money for causes such as the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and the Mets' Takin'



Mike takes batting practice with the San Diego Padres during the 2005-2006 season. (Courtesy of Catholic Exchange)

### Ted Williams' tips for Mike

"He saw me hit well in the batting practice, and he said, 'That's only half the battle. Once you get a guy out there throwing sliders and sinkers and change-ups, then that's when hitting occurs.' But he was good. I mean he kept it very simple. He said get a good pitch to hit, have a good swing, and do your research and proper thinking."

**it to the Fields, a program which provides grants for youth baseball leagues to repair their playing fields. Do you see that as an extension of your faith as well?**

**PIAZZA:** Yeah, I try to. I do as much as I can as far as events like that, and it is difficult sometimes. I always try to evaluate and realize that sometimes the cause is really important. And also helping your local parish. It's kind of cool. My wife was very instrumental in the church we got married at, and in helping us donate money there, at St. Jude's in Miami, Florida. And it's nice when you get married because you can do those things together with your wife, and pick out causes that are special to you. We don't like to boast about it, we keep it very low key.

**CD: Do you have a favorite saint?**

**PIAZZA:** Michael, of course (laughing). I'm named after him, Michael the Archangel. Joseph is my middle name. [I like] all the saints, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Augustine, St. Patrick even.

**CD: Your middle name gives you a nice connection to St. Joseph as well, especially now, in your new role as a father.**

**PIAZZA:** Exactly. We're actually baptizing our daughter this month (June). Bishop [Ignatius] Catanello, who's an auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn, and I became very good friends when I was with the Mets. He celebrated the Mass at my wedding. There were a lot of people at the wedding who weren't Catholic, but at the end of the celebration when he had his staff and his robes on, everybody was like, "Wow, that's pretty cool."

**CD: I guess it represents a lot of the tradition in the Church that people can respect.**

**PIAZZA:** That's what I love, too. I love the tradition about the church. I love Benedict too, I think he's awesome. He's really inspirational. I'm definitely looking forward to getting his new book.

**CD: You were able to meet Pope John Paul II. What was going through your head then?**

**PIAZZA:** I was just kind of shocked. It was just like meeting a rock star for me because he's such an inspirational guy, too. He was a true spiritual warrior. His whole life was very inspirational and his popularity was very evident. It was so much fun to meet him because of the excitement that he generated. He was that superstar pope that everybody loved.

**CD: He certainly was a role model, especially for young people. Are you hoping to share your faith with your daughter, as well?**

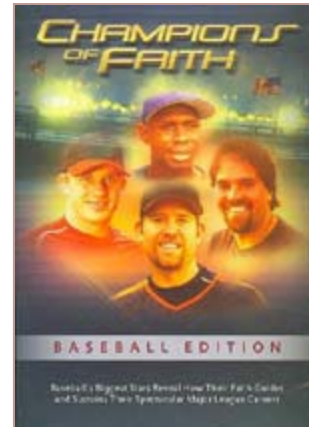
**PIAZZA:** I hope so. With children, the only thing you can do is give them the tools, spiritually, and then they're on their own. You need to give them that spiritual foundation. Then when they get older it's kind of like teaching someone to swim — you let them go, and then they swim on their own.

**CD: As you grew more successful, did you ever have a moment when you thought, This is it. I've made it. ?**

**PIAZZA:** Well, I guess my first day in the big leagues was very special to me. It was very inspirational and a lot of fun because it was Wrigley Field in Chicago. It was green. It was September but the weather was great. That, to me, was a really cool moment. But one thing about baseball is there are always more hurdles to jump, there are always more mountains to climb. There are never-ending challenges. You never have the game perfected.

**CD: Sort of like our faith journey, in a way.**

**PIAZZA:** Absolutely. We were trying to draw that comparison [in the



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Jeff Suppan, Milwaukee Brewers pitcher (Courtesy of Catholic Exchange)

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DVD]. You always have to keep reaching for it. You always have to keep putting into it.

**CD: Did you feel particularly close to God in that moment at Wrigley field?**

**PIAZZA:** Yeah, because I prayed for guidance and inspiration and strength throughout my whole career. I remember being in high school and praying for the privilege of being a major league player because it meant so much to me. I feel like I've been totally blessed, but I say all the time: of whom much has been given, much will be demanded. I think things like this [DVD] are a way for me to give back and tell people how special and important God is in my life. **CD**

Kerry Weber is associate editor of *Catholic Digest*.

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*Digest's* interview with Milwaukee Brewers pitcher and 2006 National League Championship series MVP Jeff Suppan.