



## Catholic Digest: Catholic faith, family home runs for 'Champions' baseball star catcher

By Kerry Weber  
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### Catholic Digest

NEW LONDON, Conn. (Catholic Digest) – From batting practice with his father in his backyard to becoming one of the greatest hitting catchers of all time, baseball always has played a role in Mike Piazza’s life.

And though he perhaps best know for his heroics on the field, Piazza, catcher and designated hitter for the Oakland Athletics, has become known among his peers and family for another of his passions – his Catholic faith.

Piazza spoke with *Catholic Digest* about a new “Champions of Faith” film in which he appears, his Catholic faith and the life of a 62nd-round draft pick.

**Catholic Digest:** In the film you talk about how we should never listen to the people who say we’re not good enough or strong enough to do something. Did anyone try to tell you that you couldn’t make it as a major-league player?

**Mike Piazza:** Oh, yeah, I’ll never forget when I was 12 or 13 years old – which is a little young as far as evaluation – [my dad] brought out a scout from, I think, the [St. Louis] Cardinals. He was a very esteemed and recognized major league scout. He saw me play, and he said to my dad, “Vince, tell this kid to go to school.” But you know, I always like people being honest with me. You may not like what they have to say, but it’s better than patronizing you. In a way it wasn’t really an insult. It just gave me more fuel.

**Catholic Digest:** As you worked your way from the 62nd-round draft pick to 1993 National League Rookie of the Year, did your Catholic faith play a part in your progress?

**Piazza:** No question about it. It was probably the most important thing for me. My mom, thank God, she kept us focused on our faith. I just remember everywhere I

**went, I tried to find a local church where I could go to Mass. Once I started doing research into the history of the Catholic Church I became more and more proud to be Catholic. One of the things we're trying to do with the ["Champions of Faith"] DVD is to try to refocus Catholics on their faith.**

**Catholic Digest: Did you find a sense of community among any of the other players in the film?**

**Piazza: Yeah, just meeting Mike Sweeney and Jeff Suppan. I played against these guys for years and really didn't make that connection. There was a time when I had to face Jeff Suppan in spring training and he hit me in the elbow [with a pitch]. I was really mad at him. But that's on the battlefield. It's not a big deal. The point is that a few years later I was invited to Mass in St. Louis and I saw him, and I was nice to celebrate Mass together.**

**Catholic Digest: How are you able to live out your faith and attend Mass on the road?**

**Piazza: One of things that Ray McKenna [of Catholic Athletes for Christ] started was basically trying to inspire Catholics to continue to attend Mass. In San Diego last year, we had this amazing Franciscan friar who would come in and say Mass for us there, and I would get everybody I could to attend. I would go around and I'd say, "Are you Catholic?" and they'd say, "Uh, yeah," and I'd say, "All right. You're going to Mass on Sunday."**

**Catholic Digest: Being on the road so much, it must be difficult to maintain balance between work, family and faith. I understand you and your wife recently had a baby girl?**

**Piazza: Yeah, we have a beautiful little daughter [born Feb. 2, 2007]. ... I was holding her with my wife in bed and we just said, "What a gift from God she is." It's just pure love, when you're holding your little baby in your arms.**

**Catholic Digest: How has having a child changed your life?**

**Piazza: It's just continued to help me to evolve as a Christian, as a Catholic, and to realize how special children are, what a treasure they are.**

**Catholic Digest: Do you pray before or during a game? Or do you just find yourself saying, "Oh God, let me hit a home run?"**

**Piazza: You never really pray for victory, you pray that the Lord helps you to go**

**out and do your best, and to be strong and concentrate and let the chips fall where they may. You can't win every match. You do as much as you can. You obviously look for inspiration and guidance and safety, those things.**

**Catholic Digest: Do you say a particular prayer?**

**Piazza: I like to pray the Rosary as much as a can. I love the devotion to the holy mother. I pretty much just stay with the standard Our Fathers and Hail Marys, but if you really listen to those and dissect them, they're very beautiful and inspirational. Then I read prayers of the saints and whatnot.**

**Catholic Digest: Do you have a favorite saint?**

**Piazza: Michael, of course. 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. I love the tradition about the church. I love Benedict too, I think he's awesome. He's really inspirational.**

**Catholic Digest: Do you see yourself as a role model?**

**Piazza: I hope so. Like most kids, I went through a little rebellious stage in my teens and I didn't really know who I was or what I was about. I remember my mom said to me, "You're old enough now that you don't have to go [to Mass]. You're a man, you can do what you want." I just found myself still going and realizing how much I enjoyed going to Mass and enjoyed going to confession. Well, I don't enjoy confession, but I feel better coming out. I want to continue to impress that upon people, especially young people, especially in this day and age. It's so easy to criticize the church. And we're not trying to preach to say we're perfect. That's one thing about being Catholic – we realize we fall down. That's part of being human. But we pick ourselves up, and we go to confession, and God's always there for us. No one's claiming that everybody who's come through the Catholic Church is perfect and without fault. But at the end of the day, it's a great institution. There's nothing else like it, and I'm proud to be part of it.**

**Catholic Digest: The "Champions of Faith" DVD is a great example of the kind of faith tool that can be made available to young people.**

**Piazza: Yeah. And it's not preachy or stoic. It's just like, "Hey, this is what I'm all about, and this is what I enjoy, and this is what I'm proud of, and you can get the same joy, if not more, out of it." It was a lot of fun. I hope it continues to inspire people. There are a lot of people who may have fallen away from their Catholic faith for whatever reason. [It's helpful] just to tell them, ... "Come back," the**

**church is always here for you.” It’s very special, what we have, and we need to continue to take care of it and not be embarrassed. In this day and age there are people who want to make us feel bad about what we believe in.**

**Catholic Digest: Have you faced that yourself?**

**Piazza: Yeah. What I’ve faced is that people think that just because you’re a big league ballplayer and you have a lot of money that you’re going to indulge in these things that people would expect you to – gratuitous materialism and things like that. And I’m not going to say that I’m perfect by any means. When I was younger, I used to think all these things were what I wanted, but then I realized how empty they were.**

**Catholic Digest: 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 in Wrigley Field in Chicago. It was green. It was September ... 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.**

**Catholic Digest: Sort of like our faith journey in a way.**

**Piazza: Absolutely. We were trying to draw that comparison [in the DVD]. You always have to keep reaching for it. You always have to keep putting into it.**

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**Kerry Weber is associate editor of *Catholic Digest*.**