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Playoff-Bound Mike Sweeney Has Already Tasted Glory

By James Penrice

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After seventeen seasons in Major League Baseball, the five-time All Star has finally reached the playoffs for the first time. The Advisory Chairman of Catholic Athletes for Christ told Catholic Online: "I am very excited about the opportunity to play in the playoffs, but my true joy has always and will always come from Jesus Christ!"

GRAND RAPIDS, MI (Catholic Online) - Mike Sweeney has finally reached baseball's "Promised Land."

When the Philadelphia Phillies clinched a National League playoff berth on September 26, the Advisory Chairman of Catholic Athletes for Christ celebrated his first trip ever to the post-season in his seventeenth year as a major leaguer. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Sweeney has the most service time of any active player who has never been in the playoffs.

But Sweeney knows and appreciates that he has already tasted a glory much greater than any athletic accomplishment. "As much as I have yearned for the chance to play in the playoffs and even win a world championship in the major leagues, the most joyful day in my life will always be the day I embraced Jesus Christ as the savior of my life," he told Catholic Online during the Phillies' clinching weekend. "That spring day in 1990 at St Margaret Mary Catholic Church in Chino, California was the day when I understood how much the Lord loved me and wanted to be in relationship with me."

The day Sweeney referred to occurred during a low point in his life. Told by a coach he had a "zero percent chance" of playing in the majors, Sweeney was crushed. While attending Mass on Ash Wednesday shortly after receiving this bitter news, he glanced at a sticker of a tandem bicycle that had been placed on his Bible a few years before at a Confirmation retreat. The image symbolized that the person on the front seat of a tandem bicycle steers the vehicle and controls the speed; the person in the back simply pedals and trusts the one in front. Fully embracing the meaning of this symbol for the first time, Mike's life was changed forever as he allowed God on the "front seat" and vowed to pedal as hard as he could and leave the rest in God's hands.

The results on the baseball field were phenomenal enough. As the long-time captain of the Kansas City Royals, Sweeney was named to the American League All-Star team five times. Through September 26 his career statistics included a .297 life-time batting average, 1539 base hits, 214 home runs, and 908 RBI's, along with a host of awards for both his on-field performance and outstanding character.

But more importantly, Sweeney's relationship with God has continually formed him into an instrument of grace to his family, teammates and friends. Mike and his wife Shara have been very active in youth ministry, pro-life causes, and expanding opportunities for Catholic athletes to grow stronger in the life of discipleship. He has been the Advisory Chairman of Catholic Athletes for Christ since its inception in 2006.

The difference Jesus Christ has made in Sweeney's life is profound. "As a married man and father of three children, I realize that if I spent only an hour a week in communication with my wife or my kids, our relationship would suffer," he said. "I want to share the depths of my heart with my wife daily, I want to hug my daughter when she cries after scraping her knee and I want to embrace my son after hitting a home run."

Sweeney has drawn this commitment to his family from his deep faith. "God feels the same way about us," he said. "He doesn't desire to spend 45 minutes to an hour a week with us at Mass. He wants it all! He wants us to cry out to him and share our highs and lows with him. He wants us to read His word, spend time in prayer, embrace Him in the Sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. I am very excited about the opportunity to play in the playoffs, but my true joy has always and will always come from Jesus Christ!"

Catholic Online congratulates Mike Sweeney not only for this moment in his baseball career, but for the outstanding witness and example he offers as a member of the Body of Christ.

James Penrice is a correspondent for Catholic Athletes for Christ and a contributor to Catholic Online.

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