



Spring Baseball Training inspires Homilies

By Denise O'Toole Kelly
3/27/2008

Catholic News Service

But it also presents the challenge of meeting the spiritual needs of Catholic players, coaches and team staffers who have crushingly busy schedules.

ORLANDO, FL (CNS) - With the spring training field for Major League Baseball's newest team right across the street, it's no wonder the sport would find its way into a homily at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Viera.

"It was so funny. Our first Sunday here, the pastor (Father Lawrence M. Olszewski) compared the spirit of Lent with spring and spring training. He said how similar they are because it's a new start for everyone, including the ball club," said Washington Nationals spokesman John Dever.

His team has played spring training games at Space Coast Stadium since its inaugural season in 2005. St. John's Parish Life Center, where Masses are celebrated, opened last year.

The Nationals were one of 18 major league teams that played their preseason games in five of Florida's seven dioceses this year.

Players start reporting for spring training in mid-February and it's over at the end of March.

During that time the presence of the teams and their fans does more than inspire homilies and bolster attendance in nearby parishes. It offers opportunities for game-day fundraising and evangelization, and for allowing Catholic players to share their stories with schoolchildren and others.

But it also presents the challenge of meeting the spiritual needs of Catholic players, coaches and team staffers who have crushingly busy schedules.

"Baseball's schedule is not very forgiving for any faith, but I've been able to hit Mass a couple of times here on Saturdays and it has been fantastic," said Nationals left-handed pitcher John Lannan, a parishioner at St. Mary of the Isle Parish at home in Long Beach, N.Y.

Father Tom Anastasia of St. Clement Parish in Plant City is an avid baseball fan. Distance and his role as pastor kept him from more often taking the 40-mile trip to Clearwater to enjoy his front-row seats for the Philadelphia Phillies at Bright House Network Stadium.

"One of the beautiful things in spring training is there are no losers unless someone gets hurt," Father Anastasia told the Florida Catholic, newspaper for six dioceses. "The young guys are playing harder to get a job; the veterans are looser and signing autographs. ... The whole environment is very much fan-friendly. It's a great pastime."

Sitting in Father Anastasia's front-row seats at Bright House stadium on a recent afternoon was Father Michael O'Brien, pastor of St. Justin Martyr Parish in Seminole. As a child growing up in St. Petersburg, Father O'Brien regularly saw spring training games and had a brother-in-law, Bill Freehan, who played for the Detroit Tigers.

"Baseball is just a major part of our family," Father O'Brien said. "Spring training has been in my blood since I was a kid."

Today, the priest, like Father Olszewski in Viera, uses spring training as a metaphor in his Lenten homilies. Lent is a time of preparation for Catholics, just as spring training is a time of preparation for professional baseball. Like the pros, they cannot let their skills go lax after Easter.

"We hone our skills with our praying, almsgiving and fasting," Father O'Brien said. "What typically happens is people say, 'Hey, Lent is over,'" and they stop focusing on growing spiritually, he said, but he tells them, "Lent has been our spring training and the triduum is the opening game, so come out and play!"

In Vero Beach, Sunday Mass has come to Dodgertown once a year for as far back as Chickie Anderson can remember. Her family built Ebbets Field for the Dodgers in Brooklyn, N.Y., long before the team moved to Los Angeles.

But this year's memorial Mass for deceased members of the Dodgers community, celebrated outdoors by Father Mike Edwards, pastor of nearby St. Helen Parish, will be the last at the conference center where the team has stayed and played during its spring training tenure in Vero. The Dodgers are leaving Florida's Grapefruit League training circuit and heading to Arizona next year.

But at St. Bernadette, down the road in Port St. Lucie, parishioners have good reason to hope the New York Mets stay around for a long time for spring training at Thomas J. White Stadium.

"The stadium has a nice thing. They let groups work the concessions. From St. Bernadette we have about 20 people. The stadium gives us a concession stand like a booth," said parishioner Joe Duffy.

This year the parishioners sold hot dogs, beer and nachos at two games.

"We get a portion of the sales," said Duffy. "We put a donation jar out and people toss coins in it, too. The money goes toward the building fund."

The pastor, Father Victor Ulto, said he always joins in and has fun.

"We make a few hundred dollars. More than that, we evangelize. Along with the hot dogs, we tell them about the parish. It's terrific. Man does not live on hot dogs alone," he said.

Many major league teams make time for community outreach during spring training. The ball clubs set up opportunities for the players to sign autographs and talk to schoolchildren.

Nationals spokesman Dever, whose home parish is St. John the Evangelist in Rochester, N.Y., said most of his players participate. "They realize they are privileged in some way and they give back of themselves."