

Super Bowl Sacraments

Father Nick Marro, who is the pastor of Santa Lucia-Santa Maria Incoronata parish in Chicago has served as the Chicago Bears' unofficial Catholic chaplain for more than 20 years.

BY Tom McFeely

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Father Nick Marro will say Super Bowl Sunday Mass for the Bears in Miami, then head to the stands for the game.

He'll be with his brother, cheering on the Chicago Bears against the team that he tried out for 50 years earlier, the now-Indianapolis Colts (*also see "God's Colts," page 2*).

Father Marro, who is the pastor of Santa Lucia-Santa Maria Incoronata parish in Chicago, has served as the "Da Bears'" unofficial Catholic chaplain for more than 20 years. He spoke Jan. 25 with Register Contributing Editor Tom McFeely about his gridiron experiences.

Did you play football while you were growing up?

Yeah, I played high school ball and college ball. I grew up on the East Coast. I was born in Rhode Island and spent time in Brooklyn, went to college down in Maryland and went to seminary there.

I went for a walk-on tryout with the Baltimore Colts in 1957 — didn't make it. I always wanted to go into the priesthood, but I had that urge to try out.

Didn't you have to leave the seminary in Maryland because of the tryout?

I flunked a test. In other words, I went out there for the tryout and I didn't study. So when I went back to take a theology test, I was supposed to get a C or something and I didn't get it. I asked the rector, "Give me another shot." But he didn't and I left.

I was studying to be a diocesan priest at the time for the Diocese of Providence. I came home and I knew I still wanted to be a priest, so I joined the Scalabrini Fathers. They're a religious order, and they do parish work.

I went into the seminary a second time in 1959. I did my novitiate and then I was ordained a priest in Staten Island, N.Y., in 1963. My first assignment was here in Chicago.

How did you become involved with the Bears?

In 1984, I got a call from somebody in the Chicago Bears office, asking if I would say Mass for the Bears. At first, I thought it was a prank by another priest, so I said, “You want me to play quarterback too?”

The fellow identified himself, so I went down and said Mass. At that time, it was at the McCormick Inn. I was very excited, and I met Mike Ditka and I met Walter Payton that morning. And then Mike Ditka says, “See you next week.” I said, “Wow!”

I’ve said all the home Masses for the Chicago Bears since 1984. Now they have their Masses said at the Chicago Hilton. That’s where they stay in Chicago.

I go down on Sunday morning at 6:30, I say Mass at around 7:15 at the Chicago Hilton Hotel. I have two services; one service is for the Catholics and one service is interdenominational.

When I have the Mass, it runs about half an hour. I get one or two of the players or one or two of the coaches to do the readings, and I give a brief talk. Then they have their breakfast, but I leave and come home to do the parish Masses that I have here at my parish church.

And they give me a bench pass that allows me to go to the games and be on the field. In the early days, I went to practically every game. But this year I haven’t gone to all that many games.

At the present moment, I just got two tickets and I’m going down to Miami. I’m going to say Mass for them on Saturday and Sunday and go to the Super Bowl game. I’m driving down to the game with my brother.

What are some of the issues a Christian athlete encounters, in terms of trying to live out his faith as a professional football player?

One of the biggest things, and I’m also very surprised that people don’t think of it, is they have their regular issues like anybody else. Somebody gets on your nerves sometimes, you’re maybe not always pleased with this particular person.

I remember, without mentioning names — I’m not talking about Mike Ditka — there was one of their coaches, they didn’t care for him. But they respected him.

Another issue sometimes is that it’s hard for the players to understand that they’ve got responsibilities when they get out [of football], because they’ve had so much done for them since the time they went into the NFL draft. They walked in, some of these rookies — good young men but they’re still young men, 21 or 22. They don’t have the maturity of somebody that’s been there 10 or 15 years.

So they have those issues, where sometimes they’ve got to be reminded just like any mom or dad will

remind their own children: “Don’t go overboard, don’t do too many things, your main job is to practice.”

Who are some of the players and coaches you’ve encountered over the years who most stand out in your memory?

Mike Ditka, Dick Stanfel, he was a defensive coach, and then a fine gentlemen who used to be with the Bears was Gerry Vanisi, he was the general manager.

And the players — Maury Buford, Kevin Butler, Mike Tomczak, Tom Thayer, Walter Payton, Jim McMahon.

Walter Payton would come around, and he would talk and he would joke. He was very respected by everybody. He would make the rounds of the breakfast tables. He rarely sat down. He would come to your breakfast table, and then he’d go to someone else’s table. That’s how he broke the tension. He was the silent leader of that era.

The McCaskey family [the owners of the Bears] is a very, very fine family. I knew Ed McCaskey, who passed away, extremely well. They are strong Catholics, very strong. Even today, when Virginia McCaskey comes to the games, she comes to Mass.

You know, when you stop to think, the Rooneys with Pittsburgh, the Maras with the Giants, most of those teams had a strong Catholic background because the owners were Catholic.

Athletes are often criticized these days for being selfish and for not living up to their responsibility to be good role models for kids. Based on your experience with the Bears, do you think this is the case?

Can I use an example without sounding rude? Not all priests are doing a bad job, but those are the ones that make the paper. Not all newspaper writers are a pain in the neck, but those are the ones that people talk about.

The same with the athletes. I can only speak for myself, but I never had any bad experiences with any of them. Everyone, rookie, older, they’ve all showed respect by saying “Good morning,” “Hello,” things of that nature.

What they do is they help, they come to functions where they signed autographs sometimes for two or three hours and they dedicated their time. The only way they got paid, to my knowledge, when they helped me or at other places with the churches, is they gave them a dinner.

When you are saying Mass for the Bears, what do you pray for?

I pray for basically two things. I pray that they use the grace that God gives them — whether I’m

saying Mass here in my own parish, for the schoolchildren we have at our school in the parish or I'm saying it for the Bears or whoever is present at Mass — that we use the grace that God gives us, the help that God gives us to do the best we can in following what Jesus asks of us.

And the second thing I pray for, when it comes to the Bears in particular, is no one gets hurt. And then I close by saying, "As we ask for God's blessing, we ask that we can have good results."

Has serving as the chaplain of the Bears helped you in developing your own faith?

Oh, definitely. What I mean by that is, I see the other side that other people can't.

Most people just see the young men, when they go out with their helmets they look like they are so self-sufficient.

But when you see the person without the helmet, without the shoulder pads, without the uniform ... they just don't look like they're invincible.

The average person that sees Brian Urlacher right now thinks that this guy is made of steel. And he is a fine young man. But, you know, you sit down and you talk to him, in fact any young man at that age, he's well-mannered but he's not so self-assured as he looks like out there as a linebacker.

Yes, it has helped me as a man, and certainly as a priest. As I get older, I begin to look at things that I didn't look at. When I was first ordained as a priest, I thought I was the closest thing to Jesus. Now after 44 years I realize how far away I am, how much further I have to go.

I've been very fortunate and very happy and very, very thankful that I've had the opportunity. Because being involved with the Bears has also helped me as a parish priest to serve in my parish.

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