



Team chaplain sees humility in Super Bowl Colts

By Sean Gallagher
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BROWNSBURG, Ind. (The Criterion) -The Indianapolis Colts had just completed a 38-34 heart-pounding victory on Jan. 21 that would send them to the Super Bowl on Feb. 4 in Miami.

With blue and white confetti streaming through the air, team owner Jim Irsay and head coach Tony Dungy stood on a stage on the field at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis to receive the Lamar Hunt Trophy, which is awarded each year to the winner of the American Football Conference Championship.

At that moment arguably the greatest in the history of the Colts' franchise since its move to Indianapolis in 1984 - both men expressed thanks and praise to God.

Standing nearby, Father Peter Gallagher, the Colts' chaplain, appreciated their words.

"I was grateful that [Irsay] said that and I thought, 'Man, thank you,' " said Father Gallagher. "I really thought that."

For him, the faithful words of the team's leaders echoed "what Tony [Dungy] has said all along and what a lot of these guys really do live, that is, gratitude to God."

After the awards ceremony, the players made their way to their locker room, where Father Gallagher said Dungy called them to prayer.

"Tony said, 'We've got to finish like we've finished every game and just like we started,' " Father Gallagher said. "So we got everybody [together] and huddled down and I said, 'Heavenly Father, there are two words we want to offer you: thanks and praise.' "

The gift of humility

Irsay and Dungy's words and Father Gallagher's post-game prayer were rooted in humility. They recognized that, however great the Colts' athletic talents might be, they are still gifts that they received from God.

Father Gallagher said that he prays the way he does with the team because he

views being the Colts' chaplain as a gift.

"I'm fortunate to have been asked to be a part of this organization and what I'm doing to promote our Catholic faith," he said about his volunteer ministry.

"My prayers before and after the game are about humbleness for the gifts that God has given us, and to share those gifts and to use those gifts one day at a time and one game at a time."

He also said that the humility he brings to his ministry with the Super Bowl-bound team is tied to his memory of the priest who preceded him in that position, Father Patrick Kelly, who died on Dec. 30, 2003.

"The coaching staff and I, that knew Father Pat, we all kind of have a sense of his presence with us," Father Gallagher said. "That memory is there [and] it keeps me humble."

Father Gallagher acknowledged that thoughts of Father Kelly were in his heart at the end of the first half of the AFC Championship game when the Colts trailed the New England Patriots 21-6.

"I'll be honest, I was asking [Father] Pat Kelly to help us out," he said.

Sharing in the excitement

Father Gallagher's halftime prayer fulfilled the wish of Alex Farris, a member of St. Malachy Parish in Brownsburg and a senior at Cardinal Ritter Jr./Sr. High School in the Indianapolis West Deanery.

"I kind of wished that I was on the field with him," said Alex of his parish's associate pastor and his high school's chaplain.

"I was actually hoping at the end of the first half ... that he was [praying] a few extra Glory Be's and Hail Mary's."

As associate pastor of St. Malachy Parish, just minutes away from the Colts' headquarters on the west side of Indianapolis, Father Gallagher has inspired a lot of excitement about the team in some of the parish's members.

On the morning of the AFC Championship game, after a few inches of snow had fallen overnight, Father Gallagher joked with the congregation at the end of the parish's 9 a.m. Mass.

"If any of you would like to be on the sideline this evening in my place, let me know," he said. "I just want to stay here and admire the pretty snow."

Then Father Gallagher paused for a moment, smiled and said, "Nah."

Seated in the front row at the Mass was parishioner Jennie Miller, who wore a

pink Colts shirt for the occasion.

“My dad was a semi-pro football player up in Chicago,” she said. “So anything involved in football is exciting for me. To have someone so closely involved with our local team is great.”

It’s also great for Robert Alerding, a member of St. Matthew Parish in Indianapolis, and a resident of Marquette Manor, a retirement community in Indianapolis.

Father Gallagher celebrates Mass twice a week for the manor’s Catholic residents.

“I’m just thrilled and excited about him going [to the Super Bowl],” said Alerding. “It’s almost as exciting as if I was going.”

More than just a game

Father Gallagher acknowledged the excitement of being on the sideline with the Colts as they play their games and sharing moments of faith with them in the Mass he celebrates with Catholic members of the team and in pre- and post-game prayers.

But for him, being a football team chaplain on both the high school and professional levels is more than just a game. It’s also “a way of evangelizing.”

“The number of [Colts] players who are practicing their faith a little more intentionally now has grown, even through this season,” said Father Gallagher, who after the game was literally knocked to the RCA Dome floor by a huge hug from Colts linebacker Rocky Boiman, who frequently attends the team Mass.

Ty Hunt, who just completed his first year as Ritter’s head football coach after serving more than a decade on its staff, recognizes the spiritual good that can come for the young men he leads from their participation on the team.

“A championship team develops character. They’re not made of characters,” said Hunt, who led his team to a one-point loss in the Indiana High School Athletic Association Class 1A state football finals in November.

Hunt called on Father Gallagher’s help in carrying forward that message.

Ritter’s chaplain celebrated Mass for the team before many of their Friday evening games and would lead them in prayer just before kickoff and after the games.

Ritter junior Luke Floyd, a tight end and outside linebacker on the school’s football team and a member of St. Malachy Parish, said the message of being

humble about his athletic gifts is important to him and ultimately helped the team - which has played in the state finals three of the past four years - to be successful.

“If one person thinks he’s better than others on the team, then he probably won’t practice as hard,” said Luke. “So then if one guy does it [like that], then maybe more guys will follow. Then the games go that way [too].”

“We’re trying to make sure we establish that Catholic identity,” said Hunt, “[and remember] what’s best for the community and trying to make sure that things are done for the greater good.”

Memories of victory and defeat

As Hunt watched the Colts’ AFC Championship victory, his mind turned to his own team’s hard-fought championship game two months ago.

“We had a pretty good run this [past] year, and came up just a little short,” he said. “[I liked] the fact that my guys never gave up and the Colts, even being down 21-3, never gave up.”

Ritter High School was also on Father Gallagher’s mind as he described the celebration that erupted in the RCA Dome following Colts defensive back Marlin Jackson’s game-ending interception of an errant pass by Tom Brady, the Patriots’ quarterback.

“When Jackson got that interception, the place was just silly,” Father Gallagher said.

“The closest [to that] I got was this year [with] Ritter going to the state final and losing it, but not losing it poorly, losing it with a struggle by a point, and here we were winning.”

As gratifying as the AFC Championship victory was, Father Gallagher said he suspected the Colts would not sit on their laurels but humbly prepare for one more game.

“I think these next two weeks are going to be about focusing on the next task at hand,” he said. “I think there’s just a lot of gratitude.”