



Trading cleats for collar – College football player to tackle priesthood

By Gretchen R. Crowe

2/10/2006

30

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (Arlington Catholic Herald) – During his college career, seminarian Ben Kessler has always been up on the latest priest jokes. That's because the 6-foot-2-inch, 250-pound 21-year-old spent the last four fall semesters not only studying the gospels, but also studying playbook Xs and Os while starring as a defensive end for the football team at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.

He attends St. John Vianney College Seminary on the university's campus and also takes classes at the university. He is studying to be a priest of the Diocese of Madison, Wis.

Kessler was at Blessed Sacrament Church in Alexandria Feb. 4 to discuss the relationship between his two great loves, God and football, which he said many consider to be polar opposites.

"The stereotypical seminarian is seen maybe as a nerdy guy, real calm, real giving," Kessler said, "whereas a football player is seen as 'in your face' – a dumb jock."

But Kessler argued that the two professions have much in common. He said there was a "fraternal aspect" – men sharing a bond together – that rings true for both seminarians and football players, and that the two groups of men are both "changing the world."

"Putting the two together creates a better person," he said.

Through athletics, Kessler said, he has tried to get closer to Christ, whom he compared to both a football player and a seminarian. He is the Christ who throws the money changers out of the temple (Jn 2:13:16) and also the Christ who is love (1 Cor 13:3-13), he said.

"How in the world can Christ be a tough guy, whipping the guys in the temple, and also be love?" Kessler asked.

Because he preaches the truth and he does it in a pastoral, loving way, said Kessler, whose talk was sponsored by the local organization Catholic Athletes for Christ. The football player said it is up to Catholics to "meet

http://www.catholic.org/printer_friendly.php?id=18662§ion=Cathcom

2/14/2006

Christ where he's at" with the sacraments, particularly confession and the Eucharist. He urged those present to "step up to the challenge."

Sponsored by the local organization Catholic Athletes for Christ, Kessler isn't a typical college senior. According to the group, Kessler is believed to be only the second man in the last 20 years to have played college football while studying in the seminary.

After discerning his vocation since he was in the fifth grade, Kessler arrived at St. Thomas and said he "felt a great peace" inside his heart.

"I didn't know if I was going to be a priest, but I know that was where God was calling me," he said. Fully expecting to stay at the seminary for two months at the most, Kessler will graduate with a four-year degree in May. He said his time at St. Thomas has taught him to "see the world with the lens of Christ."

Kessler, along with teammate Billy Schreiber, who introduced Kessler at Blessed Sacrament and who is also considering a vocation to the priesthood, will begin a Catholic Athletes for Christ project at St. Thomas before Kessler leaves to study at the Pontifical North American College in Rome this July.

Once in Rome, Kessler will act as a liaison for the group of athletes and specifically its founder, Ray McKenna.

"Think about the impact that athletes have on the world," Kessler said. "Pray for the success of Catholic Athletes for Christ."

Kessler "is such a great witness" of Christ, said Susan Gray, a parishioner at St. Leo the Great Church in Fairfax who attended the program.

"He's a 'man's man' that's following the Lord."

This story was made available to Catholic Online by permission of The Arlington Catholic Herald (www.catholicherald.com), the official newspaper of the Diocese of Arlington, Va.