

## Catholic baseball star credits God, church for not striking out in life

By Karl Bierach  
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### The New Vision

SURPRISE, Ariz. (The New Vision) – It was a cool and crisp morning at spring training camp for the Kansas City Royals baseball team in Surprise. Wearing a bright blue jersey with the number 29 stitched on the back, first baseman Mike Sweeney worked on his bunting skills.

The five-time All-Star said he was excited to be playing and had a lot to be thankful for this spring.

"I'm healthy, blessed with a great wife and two beautiful children and at times I ask the Lord, 'Why are things so good?' I know it's due to his mercy, grace and love for me," said Sweeney in an interview with *The New Vision*, newspaper of the Diocese of Tucson.

The 2006 Major League Baseball season began April 2.

As a Catholic athlete, Sweeney gives a lot of praise to God and uses him as a beacon to guide his life.

During a time when some of baseball's biggest stars, including Barry Bonds and Mark McGuire, have been surrounded by controversy about the use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs, Sweeney credits the church in keeping his mind, body and soul pure.

"Without the gift of the Catholic Church and being able to receive the Eucharist, I would probably be the guy experimenting with steroids, drugs and infidelity," he said. "I get filled up by my relationship with God."

When they are on the road for weeks at a time, Sweeney and other members of the Royals seek out a local church before their Sunday games. Attending services on a regular basis has really strengthened his love for the Lord, he said.

At times in the past, he said, he "would just go through the motions at Mass." But in the last few years he has developed "a heartfelt love for the Eucharist," he said. "I truly believe in Christ's presence and feel such an honor to receive it." For baseball players, the goal of the season is to win the World Series in October. Sweeney believes his team is talented enough to make the series but he knows that, win or lose, something special awaits him in November.

Players from around the league plan to make a pilgrimage to meet with Pope Benedict XVI in an effort to bring Catholic values into Major League Baseball.

"I spoke with (St. Louis Cardinals pitcher) Jeff Suppan, and he said meeting the pope (last November) was a life-changing experience," Sweeney said. "Getting on his knee and kissing the pope's ring changed him forever. I want to experience that."

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