



Baseball star's pitch to students: Be prepared for faith challenges

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ST. LOUIS, Mo. (CNS) – St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Jeff Suppan wowed his fans one day when he wasn't even on the mound. The pitcher who is among the stars of the World Series leading Major League Baseball team received a standing ovation from more than 400 youths and adults following his talk on how he lives out his Catholic faith as a professional baseball player and in his daily life.

Suppan spoke at St. Joseph's Academy in Frontenac. The event was sponsored by the Parent Network of Catholic High Schools.

The Cardinals hurler – who was named most valuable player of the National League Championship Series against the New York Mets – encouraged the middle school and high school students "to keep Jesus No. 1" in their lives.

"I try to put Jesus in front of everything I do," Suppan said. He added that he lets Jesus "really lead me and not try to do it on my own."

On Oct. 26, Suppan allowed three runs in six innings, leaving the game behind 3-2. The Cardinals came back to win 5-4 and take a 3-1 lead in the best of seven series, which St. Louis can wrap up here on Oct. 27.

The right-hander pitched two strong games in the previous round, limiting the Mets to one run and five hits in 15 innings, hitting a rare home run and getting the win in Game 3 and helping the Cardinals to prevail in Game 7 in New York.

Suppan told the youths that as Catholics they will be regularly questioned about their faith. Now, he said, is the time for them to gain a good foundation.

"You need to know why you believe in what you believe in because you will be challenged" by others, particularly other Christians, he said.

That has been his experience, Suppan said. Growing up in California, he attended St. Bernardine of Siena School in San Bernardino and Crespi Carmelite High School, an all-boys Catholic school in Encino.

At 18, he signed to play baseball right out of high school and never went to college. It was his first time away from family and friends. Drugs,

promiscuity, sex and pornography were readily available. He turned to God for help.

At the encouragement of a friend, he began to seriously study his faith so he could be better prepared to defend it.

"People always ask me why I believe what I do. And the only response I had was 'because I believe.' My biggest challenge was to learn, to take my formation and learn more about why I believed. ... I believed 100 percent, but I had to learn why."

A priest he met in Boston got him going to confession regularly. He found that the more he went to confession and examined his conscience, the more he felt Jesus was helping him "carry the load." Suppan said he encounters Christ in confession and receives grace to help overcome future temptations.

Suppan also spoke about the importance of the Eucharist, attending Mass and taking part in eucharistic adoration.

He told the crowd, "I love going to Mass. Nothing about Jesus is boring to me. ... Because Jesus sacrificed for me, it's the least I could do."

Now in his 12th season in the majors, Suppan noted that playing sports is good preparation for life. "I always made baseball practice. That's discipline, and you can apply that to your faith and many areas of your life. That dedication and fortitude that I learned going through rough times, I've applied that to my life as a Christian."

Prayer, he said, also plays a big role. He tries "to remain in prayer. When I struggle, I pray. When I'm not struggling, I pray," he said, noting that he keeps a rosary in his ballpark locker.

"Pray to your angel," he told the crowd. "Use your angel's help. I always actually ask for the protection of my angel. I think it's important because there's a big battle out there going on over us. You guys may not see it, but just remember, pray to your angel for protection."

During his talk he showed a 16-minute home movie of his November 2005 visit to the Vatican, where he met Pope Benedict XVI, and to Assisi, Italy. He also took several questions from the audience, even drawing laughter with tongue-in-cheek responses. Asked what his favorite pitch was, Suppan replied, "A strike."