



# Priest to the Players

*Professional baseball players and other athletes rely on priests for spiritual support*

by Steve Gust

IT IS NOT LIKELY that Holy Cross Father Wilfred “Willy” Raymond saw his priestly ministry taking him to storied Dodger Stadium when he was ordained, April 3, 1971.

Father Raymond, a member of St. Martin of Tours Council 14660 in Los Angeles, doesn’t serve the Dodgers for the perks of seeing Major League Baseball (MLB) games or hanging around the players and staff. He does it for one reason — serving the spiritual needs of those who otherwise may not receive the holy Eucharist.

This is a relatively new mission for Father Raymond, which began last year with a request from a visiting player, Mark Loretta. Loretta wanted to know if Mass was offered for players prior to a weekend game. It wasn’t, and that’s when Father Raymond got his call to Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles.

“The players are working on a tight schedule,” Father Raymond said. “Soon after Mass, there are team meetings, warm-ups and then the game itself.”

On Saturdays, when the Dodgers are in town, Father Raymond makes a short drive to the stadium to celebrate Mass for staff and players.

Players like Loretta, along with Andre Ethier and Juan Pierre, take turns as lector. There are other famous regulars among the Dodger congregation, too, including noted sportscaster Vin Scully and manager Joe Torre. For those needing the sacrament of reconciliation, Father Raymond is there for that as well.

But Father Raymond’s ministry with the famed baseball team is not the only hat he wears. He also serves as national director of Family Theater Productions in Hollywood. With a mission of entertaining and supporting families, the company has produced more than 800 radio programs and 83 television specials since it was founded by Father Patrick Peyton, a fellow Knight and Holy Cross priest, in 1941.

Some players outside of the Dodger family — Jeff Suppan of the Milwaukee Brewers and Mike Sweeney of the Oakland Ath-

letics — have participated in Family Theater Production’s “Rosary Stars,” a video program where celebrities reflect on the mysteries of the rosary. Father Raymond’s work has also brought him in contact with many other celebrities, whom he said face everyday struggles despite their fame and wealth.

However, MLB players in particular are working under unique circumstances.

“These guys are traveling six months out of the year,” Father Raymond said. That alone can be demanding, and poses risks and temptations. For others, even when they’re home, they’re living in an apartment in a foreign city.

In the off-season, Father Raymond offers spiritual retreats for players and others. He also hopes to continue his outreach to

Latino players to help them discover and rediscover the beauty of their Catholic faith. He stresses to players and their families that they should contact him whenever they have difficulties.

Finally, Father Raymond is working with Ray McKenna, founder of Catholic Athletes for Christ, to ensure that the spiritual needs of pro athletes are adequately met.

“We would like to make sure that Mass is offered to all players needing to receive the

Eucharist in all baseball stadiums,” explained Father Raymond.

Although millions will watch the Dodgers in person this season, Father Raymond has seen just one game. As a priest, he has other commitments, especially at his home parish, St. Monica’s Church in Santa Monica. Most of his parishioners there know not to ask him to get a player’s autograph.

“These are unassuming, regular guys and I won’t take advantage of them,” Father Raymond said. “I want these guys to know that I’m there for them when they need me.” ♦



*Father Willy Raymond stands with Los Angeles Dodgers players Mark Loretta, Andre Ethier and Juan Pierre after celebrating Mass for the team.*

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