

Bears chaplain looks forward to Super Bowl Mass

ROMEDEVILLE, Ill. - Amid the media hype at Super Bowl XLI Feb. 4 in Miami, at least eight players and coaches from the Chicago Bears were expected to spend about 30 minutes on bended knee the morning of game day as Scalabrinian Father Nick Marro, Bears chaplain, celebrated Mass at the players' hotel.

While his homilies obviously reflect the Gospel of the day, he said, he also considers who is in the congregation.

For the players, he adapts his message to promote leading a good Christian life in a materialistic world filled with temptation.

"Once they take their helmets off, they may be big but they're young men," Father Marro told the Catholic Explorer, newspaper of the Joliet Diocese.

Father Marro, pastor of Santa Lucia-Santa Maria Incoronata Parish in Chicago, has been the Bears chaplain since the 1985 season.

In a telephone interview with the Explorer, he recalled how he initially fumbled when the Bears organization recruited him to be chaplain.

The priest said he first thought the request for his services was a practical joke. Father Marro remembered asking, "Do you want me to quarterback too?" He said he quickly realized the Bears representative was not joking, but rather asking him to celebrate the Mass held at the hotel where the Bears stay on game day in Chicago and to provide blessings for players on the field during the game.

During the regular football season, the morning Mass on game day always includes a petition "for good results," he said.

If a player comes to the priest's bench seat during the game and asks for a blessing, he said, it's often offered with the intention of a safe game on both sides of the ball.

Over the last 22 years, Bears' wins and losses have prompted Father Marro to tell

the Monsters of the Midway, “Maybe you ought to change and get a rabbi.”

But the faith of the McCaskey clan – the team’s majority owners – has never wavered, he added. He repeated a petition the late Ed McCaskey, former president of the team, used to offer during Mass: “In your prayers, remember the Bears.”

In previous seasons, the chaplain has traveled with the team to games in the Midwest, including Detroit, Green Bay, Wis., and Minneapolis. But the traveling schedule of the 72-year-old priest has slowed down a bit in recent years. Now, he’s more likely to attend just the home games.

But for the Super Bowl he made plans to drive to Miami and left Chicago Jan. 29.

Father Marro’s predecessor as chaplain was Father Don McLaughlin, a priest of the Joliet Diocese who currently is pastor of St. Michael Parish in Wheaton.

For the priest, who was the Bears chaplain throughout the 1983 and 1984 seasons, the Super Bowl matchup of the Bears against the Indianapolis Colts was “a dream for me.”

He is an Indianapolis native, and while he planned to be cheering “Go, Bears,” he said, “if the Colts win, that will be OK.”

He told the Explorer that when he was chaplain and celebrated Mass before Sunday home games, he would recruit then-head coach Mike Ditka to read the Scripture passages. At the time Father McLaughlin was associate pastor at St. Alexander Parish in Villa Park.

The road to his stint as chaplain started with his friendship with Bob Thomas, at the time the kicker for the Bears. They met in the early 1980s. Father McLaughlin, then a seminarian, was serving an internship at St. Margaret Mary Parish in Naperville, where Thomas was a parishioner.

A few years later, Thomas called upon the young priest to tackle the job of chaplain for the Bears.

Father McLaughlin described his stint with the Bears as “great fun.” He said he was

thrilled he had the opportunity to talk with Bears players who are now legendary, including the late Walter Payton and Jim McMahon.