

# Commentary: Swing for the fences

**By Father Matthew Buening**

My baseball coach asked the impossible of me and chances are yours did too.

"Keep your eye on the ball," he would say as the pitches whizzed by me.

In the Major Leagues, a pitch takes about 400 milliseconds to reach home plate. The problem is that whether you are a little leaguer or an elite athlete, most people tested have a reaction time of around 200 milliseconds. This means it is humanly impossible to see the second half of the pitch. You have to make up your mind to swing the bat after only seeing the first half of the pitch. I wonder, is having a certain faith also impossible?

St. John says very clearly, "No one has seen God." In Exodus, we also hear that no one can see God and live. We read in Isaiah that God is far above our imaginations and our understanding.

Yet we do see hints of God here and there.

Moses on the mountain sees God passing by and Elijah hears him in a whisper. How can anyone have certain faith if we can only see glimpses of God? How can anyone hit a baseball when they can never keep their eye on it?

Two psychologists, William Chase and Herbert Simon, developed what they called a "chunking theory" related to the experience one gains through practice, competition or repeated execution. Expert musicians, surgeons and athletes "chunk" information. David Epstein, in an article for Sports Illustrated, gives us a definition for chunking: "Rather than grappling with a large number of individual pieces, experts unconsciously group information into a smaller number of meaningful chunks based on patterns they have seen before."

The advantage of chunking information is you no longer strive to do the impossible. Instead of trying in vain to keep your eye on the ball, you look at its spin, the arm angle of the pitcher, his hand and a host of other things that can point you to where the ball will be when it crosses the plate even though you will never actually see it do so. So much of this is done without having to think about it.

Blessed John Henry Newman discovered something similar in those who have faith. Newman wrote in his famous essay, "A Grammar of Assent" that "life is for action." "If we insist on proofs for everything," he wrote, "we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith..."

Assumptions based on a multitude of converging facts are the source of every homerun. To describe this phenomenon, Cardinal Newman coins a phrase, "the illative sense."

While it is true that you or I have never seen God and our senses are hopelessly

defectui, that shouldn't keep us from making the decision to believe with all our hearts. Use your illative sense, recognize the many reasons to have faith, and swing for the fences.

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