

Father Bauer, Orioles' chaplain, goes to bat for God and the O's

Father John Bauer was looking for a cold drink on a hot day at the ballpark when God threw him a curveball.

It happened when the Baltimore Orioles' season ticket holder stepped up to a booth where designated drivers receive free soft drinks in exchange for not drinking alcohol at the game and giving a safe ride home to their friends.

The concession stand workers discovered this particular O's fan was a priest when they saw his driver's license showing a portly Redemptorist cleric in a Roman collar. One of them quickly popped the question: How would the amiable priest like to become the new chaplain for the Orioles?

Monsignor Martin Schwalenberg, the Orioles' longtime chaplain, had been ailing in recent months, they said, and was having difficulty getting through Mass. Would Father Bauer be willing to follow in the footsteps of a much-loved legend?

A few phone calls with Orioles' officials followed, and Father Bauer was suddenly the official chaplain for his hometown team.

Three years later, the "new" chaplain has become a familiar presence at Camden Yards - celebrating Masses for players, umpires and Orioles employees, giving advice, visiting with O's family members and offering whatever support he can.

Orioles cap and Roman collar

Always wearing his black clerics topped off with an orange-billed Orioles cap, the retired Army chaplain sees his latest role as that of a friend who can talk baseball with the best of them but who always "sneaks in the spiritual stuff."

"No one can ever replace Monsignor Marty," said Father Bauer, who was ordained 48 years ago, professing his religious vows as a Redemptorist a half century ago. Monsignor Schwalenberg, who died earlier this year, served more than four decades

as the Orioles chaplain.

“He was a great priest,” he recalled. “The guys just loved him.”

Before a recent Orioles game with the Kansas City Royals, Father Bauer prepared for his 9:15 a.m. Mass on the fourth floor of the red-brick warehouse that looms over Oriole Park. Slipping on a green camouflage chasuble from his years as an Army chaplain, the priest said he celebrates liturgies in the warehouse every Sunday when there’s a home game.

The Masses are for Orioles’ employees – ushers, attendants, administrators and more – who can’t get to their parishes during the baseball season. But they also attract players.

On this day, Kansas City infielder Mike Sweeney is the sole player at Mass. His muscular build, 6’3” frame and stylish tan suit make him stand out in the congregation.

“It’s one of the highlights of the year to come to Baltimore,” said Mr. Sweeney, a devout Catholic who often nodded his head during Father Bauer’s homily and who was joined by Royals broadcaster Ryan Lefebvre.

“Other than the Yankees, the Orioles are the only team I know of that has a Catholic chaplain,” he said. “I usually have to call a bellman and get a cab to find a church for Mass.”

Mr. Sweeney said it’s of the highest importance to make time for Mass.

“If the Lord is our savior and the Lord is number one like we claim, it’s important to start our day off right and be spiritually fed by Father Bauer,” said Mr. Sweeney, noting that he plans to talk to Kansas City officials about establishing a chaplaincy there.

A solid baseball priest

The affection shown to Father Bauer by a visiting player is more than matched by members of his home team. Everywhere the 76-year-old priest goes – whether it’s

traversing the underbelly of the stadium, strolling past lockers in the clubhouse, sitting in the dugout or chatting with announcers in the broadcast booth, someone calls his name and asks how he's doing.

"It's good to have him here," said Orioles first baseman Rafael Palmeiro, gently resting his hand on Father Bauer's shoulder as the two stood in the clubhouse before a game. "We always play on Sunday, so it makes it hard to get to Mass. It's good to have Father here for us."

Sidney Ponson, a stocky right-handed pitcher, said Father Bauer brings a reassuring presence when things don't always go the right way.

"I shake his hand every day for good luck," Mr. Ponson said with a laugh.

Not only is Father Bauer a good priest, he's also a solid baseball man, according to Sam Perlozzo, the Orioles' bench coach.

"His best advice is to score more runs than the other guys," said Mr. Perlozzo, sporting a wide grin.

Orioles broadcaster Fred Manfra, an East Baltimore native who grew up in Our Lady of Fatima parish, said everyone loves Father Bauer. But Hispanic players are especially fond of him. As a former missionary to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, Father Bauer speaks Spanish and understands Latino culture.

A few weeks ago, he distributed rosaries and Spanish prayer books published by the Redemptorists.

"He provides that consistency of seeing one face," said Mr. Manfra. "That's really important for the Latin players who are so far away from home."

From battlefields to the playing field

Showing interest in players' families and taking the time to be a good listener are the secrets to finding success as major league baseball chaplain, according to Father Bauer, who provides the sacraments and catechetical instruction to those who request them.

“The other day, I asked Lou Pinella (Tampa Bay Devil Rays’ manager) how his family was doing and he lit up like a Christmas tree,” the priest said. “I do it sincerely. They’re glad to have the chance to talk. It’s hard on them to be away for such long periods of time.”

Father Bauer knows something about having a ready ear. As a military chaplain, he had to be present for soldiers in difficult circumstances. During a year in Vietnam, he hopped helicopters to celebrate Masses throughout the central part of the country. He administered last rites to dying soldiers and saw men badly wounded in combat.

The priest said he approaches his sports chaplaincy in much the same way as his military vocation.

“Here it’s ballplayers,” he said, “there, it’s soldiers.”

In addition to celebrating Mass in the warehouse, Father Bauer usually holds a second liturgy for the umpires and a Communion service for players and coaches in the clubhouse.

A volunteer for God and the O’s

The lifelong O’s fan said he can relate to the players because he loves the sport with a passion. Growing up in Sacred Heart of Jesus parish in Highlandtown, Father Bauer was always playing on some baseball diamond in Patterson Park or other fields.

In the seminary, he was a catcher and shortstop. In the Army, he was a pretty good softball player.

“I think it helped some of the guys come back into the church when they could see a different aspect of the priest on the field,” said Father Bauer. “It goes a long way when they see a priest sliding hard into second base.”

In what is turning into a difficult season for the current crop of birds, Father Bauer said he believes the players are doing their best. He tries to keep their spirits high by joking with them and offering a handshake.

“It’s still a pretty high mood,” said Father Bauer. “I don’t see a depressed atmosphere. The worst thing is when they hear people calling into the radio saying get rid of this guy or get rid of that guy. That’s hard on the players.”

Although he receives no salary for his position as chaplain, the priest does get some nice perks. Father Bauer has free access to the entire stadium.

Asked if he sees any divine role in the way he became the Orioles’ chaplain, Father Bauer smiled gently, shook his head and touched the bright brim of his cap as if he were a manager contemplating a move on the field.

“I volunteered a lot of time in the Army,” he offered. “Maybe this is just one of those gifts that God is giving back.”

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