

Ground yourself in God

The old prospectors had a saying: “Gold is where you find it!” Apparently, so is spirituality. It’s especially amazing to find it “behind enemy lines.”

What am I talking about? In the Jan. 13 issue of the New York Times, there was an article titled: “A Defensive Anchor Walks a Spiritual Path.” It was an article about Troy Polamalu, a safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers, who broke Ravens’ fans hearts when he forced a Joe Flacco fumble during the season – a play that changed our season.

While it’s easy to vilify players on other teams, it’s comforting to know that Troy has a deep spiritual life. He made a pilgrimage to a Greek Orthodox Monastery on Mount Athos in Greece. It changed Troy’s life.

“While there, Polamalu witnessed humility and sacrifice in its deepest, purest forms and realized that for all of the differences, the spiritual path shared much with a Super Bowl journey. ‘Both require great discipline and a selflessness in the name of a greater good.’”

A book that Polamalu reads daily and quotes from freely is titled: “Counsels From the Holy Mountain” written by a Greek Orthodox Monk, Elder Ephraim, whom Polamalu describes as his spiritual doctor.

Here is one short quote: “The life of a man is a dream. In a dream, one sees things that do not exist; he might see that he is crowned a king, but when he wakes up, he sees that in reality he is just a pauper.”

Isn’t that a powerful quote? The deepest spiritual masters recognize that life is an illusion, much like Shakespeare’s famous line: “Life is sound and fury signifying nothing.”

Recognizing that life is but an illusion keeps Polamalu from taking himself too seriously. He doesn’t believe in individual awards in football, which is essentially a team sport.

He feels no hostility toward opponents. In an understatement, he said: "There are things that are deeper than football rivalries to me."

When he was asked if he might use football as a pulpit to preach a spiritual message he said: "I'd rather not talk at all to be honest with you." Again, the roots of all spiritual growth are grounded in silence. "Be still and know that I am God." In the stillness we know that God is real. We share an illusion.

As Troy left the locker room this particular day, the reporter noted that: "He kissed the three-inch framed photos of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, then crossed himself, repeating the sequence several times before tucking them into his backpack."

We humans are creating our world and our experience each day of life. Something is important because we think it is important. Someone once observed, "Notice how children ignore celebrities." They haven't learned yet to make such distinctions. Family and love are important to children. They haven't learned, yet, the illusions of life.

I'm writing this article before the Super Bowl. Many other stories may surface between now and then, but I hope this will have lasting meaning. In the midst of a violent sport, and in the midst of a too violent world, we need to find a quiet, still point. In the midst of the illusions of life we need to ground ourselves in the Ground of Our Being - which we call God.

Or, to put it more simply, stay close to Jesus and Mary, and all will be well!