

On Ravens' Sundays, shrines, Masses within easy walking distance for fans

Joe Flacco may be relying on the downfield "Hail Mary" pass to Torrey Smith this NFL season, but the real thing – attending Mass before or after Ravens' games, along with devotion to the Blessed Mother and the holy Eucharist – is within easy reach of everybody at the stadium.

Practicing Catholics, and anyone else who finds comfort in the sanctuary of a Catholic church, have the choice of more than a dozen shrines and parishes in the vicinity of M&T Bank Stadium, as well as every MTA light rail stop en route to the gridiron.

One of the closest parishes back in the day – the World War I-era St. Joseph of West Lee Street – is as long-gone from Baltimore as Johnny Unitas' blue horseshoes on a white helmet.

Here, however, are a half-dozen good bets – all less than three miles from the 50-yard line – to keep the faith, starting with nearby shrines.

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Cathedral and Mulberry Streets

About 1.7 miles from the stadium, America's first cathedral is one of the great jewels of the Premier See.

A National Shrine, Marian Shrine and National Historic Landmark that was designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe – architect of the United States Capitol building – the Basilica opened in 1821 and serves as co-Cathedral of Baltimore with the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland. It is widely regarded as one of the world's greatest examples of neo-classical architecture.

A complete restoration of the Basilica to its original design was completed in November 2006. Tours can be scheduled through the basilica website, baltimorebasilica.org/.

Sunday Mass times are 8 a.m., 10:45 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

St. Jude Shrine

308 N. Paca St., just above Lexington Market

Another sanctuary less than two miles from M&T Bank Stadium, St. Jude Shrine – formerly the parish of St. John the Baptist – is one of the best-known places in the world to petition the Saint of Hopeless Causes.

Operated by the Pallottine Fathers since 1917, the shrine offers Mass and quiet reflection, and beckons pilgrims from up and down the East coast, particularly on bus trips.

If you are lucky, you may bump into Mary Portera, the longtime “rectory lady” of the shrine (she was baptized there), whose labors made the St. Jude gift shop something spectacular. After more than 90 years as a cradle Catholic, Miss Mary’s memory remains sharp enough to tell you who lived in each house along Paca Street when FDR was president and which of the old Baltimore Colts were practicing Catholics.

One of the better-known parishioners was the great Baltimore sportswriter John Steadman, who served as an usher up to the time of his death in 2001.

Sunday Mass times are 8 a.m., 9 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.

Shrine of St. Alphonsus

St. John Neumann Shrine

114 W. Saratoga St.

The historical Lithuanian parish in Baltimore, St. Alphonsus is 1.6 miles from the stadium and its 71,000 purple seats. It prides itself as being the parish where St. John Neumann served as pastor from 1851-52 and where Blessed Francis X. Seelos was pastor from 1854-57.

Within walking distance of the basilica and around the corner from what was once Baltimore's Chinatown on Park Avenue, St. Alphonsus is also home to a weekly Tridentine Mass, offered each Sunday at 11:30 a.m.

Its other Sunday Masses are at 8:30 and 10 a.m.

St. Mary's Spiritual Center and Historic Site

600 N. Paca St.

About a mile-and-a-half north of the ballgame, St. Mary's is one of the most historic sites in Baltimore, either religious or secular.

This is the original site of St. Mary's Seminary, established by the Society of St. Sulpice in the late 18th century at the invitation of Bishop John Carroll. It became the first Catholic seminary in the United States, one of the many Catholic-American firsts to occur in Baltimore.

The grounds are a wonderful spot for quiet reflection and are also home to the Mother Seton House, the Federal-style building where Elizabeth Ann Seton – the first American to be canonized – established a boarding school for girls in 1808. The Visitor Center features five panels that trace the timeline of historic events at the site. For more information, visit stmarysspiritualcenter.org/index.html or call 410-728-6464.

Catholic Community of South Baltimore

This congregation shares three historic church buildings within a short distance from one another: Holy Cross, Our Lady of Good Counsel and St. Mary, Star of the Sea.

The closest place to receive Communion is Holy Cross, a mere mile from M&T Bank Stadium, at 108 E. West St. A close second is St. Mary Star of the Sea, 1.17 miles away at 1400 Riverside Ave.; with Our Lady of Good Counsel a little over two miles distant at 1532 E. Fort Ave., near Federal Hill.

Sunday Mass times are 11 a.m. at Our Lady of Good Counsel and 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. at Holy Cross.

St. Leo the Great

227 S. Exeter St., Little Italy.

St. Leo's – famed for its annual ravioli dinner and street festivals honoring St. Anthony and St. Gabriel, is two miles east of the Ravens' house.

One of the last of the old-school neighborhood parishes, St. Leo attracts old-timers who live around the corner and the great-grandchildren of the parish's founding families, who come in from the suburbs for Mass and catching up with friends.

William Matricciani grew up next to the rectory on Exeter Street. Each Sunday during the NFL season, the Mount St. Joseph High School graduate leads old friends to their seats as an usher at the 9:30 a.m. Mass before leaving to root for the Ravens.

Of note to sports fans: St. Leo was the parish of the incomparable Orioles and Colts broadcaster Chuck Thompson – whose work was honored by the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown – until his death in 2005.

Sunday Mass times are 9:30 and 11:30 a.m.

Transfiguration Catholic Community

775 W. Hamburg St.

A mere half-mile from M&T Bank Stadium, this is absolutely the most convenient place for a Ravens' fan to attend Sunday Mass. Established in 2004, it is similar to the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, as Transfiguration united a trinity of former independent parishes in southwest Baltimore: St. Jerome, St. Martin and St. Peter the Apostle.

The pastor is the Missionaries of St. Paul Father Augustine Inwang.

Sunday Mass is at 10 a.m.

Rafael Alvarez is author of "First & Forever, The Archdiocese of Baltimore, A People's History" (Editions du Signe, 2006).