

Packers' chaplain expects record Super Bowl crowd - at pre-game Mass

ALLOUEZ, Wis. - If the Super Bowl is anything like the National Football Conference championship game, Norbertine Father Jim Baraniak said he expected an overflow crowd.

The Packers' Catholic chaplain wasn't referring to the attendance at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas, but rather the Mass to be celebrated before the big game Feb. 6.

In Chicago, before the Packers beat the Bears Jan. 23, "everybody showed up. We maxed out the room," said Father Baraniak.

"It was just unbelievable," he added. "The Mass was full of energy. I felt nervous during the homily."

Father Baraniak, now in his 14th year with the team, has enjoyed an up-close view throughout the regular season and the playoff run. When the Packers play on the road, he watches the action from the visiting owner's box before making his way onto the field for the fourth quarter.

In addition to his ministerial duties, he assists in the locker room. Father Baraniak, pastor at St. Norbert College Parish in De Pere, is responsible for returning players' valuables from safekeeping after the game. The job was tougher this season with all of the injuries.

"Even at the end of the season, I had a hard time with all the new faces," he told The Compass, newspaper of the Green Bay Diocese. "Usually, after the preseason, by the first game, I know everyone. It was a guessing game at times this year. At the college, at the prison, in all the apostolates of which I'm involved, I take pride in getting to know people's names, so it's been difficult."

Father Baraniak, who also serves as sacramental minister at Green Bay Correctional Institution, credits Coach Mike McCarthy for keeping the team playing at a high level despite 16 players on injured reserve. His praise for the Packers leader, a Greenfield, Pa., native, extends beyond football.

“Coach McCarthy is one of the most decent people I know,” said Father Baraniak. “He has never forgotten where he came from. He treats people with decency and respect. He is not afraid to be a real man with his players, whether he’s talking X’s and O’s or his Irish Catholic faith.”

The pre-game Mass in Philadelphia on wild-card weekend featured a light moment with the coach. In celebrating the feast of Baptism of the Lord, a sprinkling rite was a part of the Mass.

“Whoever is first gets nailed and the priest gets the backlash,” said Father Baraniak. “Coach McCarthy always sits on the right side in the front seat. He was wearing a very nice suit and really got it. The entire congregation broke into laughter.”

In preparing for his Super Bowl Mass homily, Father Baraniak was seeking some assistance, saying he felt some pressure to deliver. He asked for suggestions through “You Make the Call” on his blog at <https://baraniak.blogspot.com>. He said he would read all the submissions and highlight portions to include in his homily.

“I want to challenge and affirm them, but it’s based on the readings of the day, so people need to keep them in mind,” said Father Baraniak. “Every Mass I have for the Packers is a celebration of the same readings everyone hears on Sunday. Their lives are parallel to the people in the pews. They have worries and anxieties, great hopes and dreams. How do the readings relate to their lives?”

The readings for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time were a good fit for Super Bowl Sunday, he added.

“Christ was calling the apostles,” he said. “We at the Packer Mass know each other by name. There is such a spirit, such a prayerfulness at the Mass. These are beautiful reflections, beautiful readings for the day.”

Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik, who headed the Green Bay Diocese from 2003

until he was named to Pittsburgh in 2007, said he was excited the Packers and Steelers advanced to the Super Bowl. Bishop Zubik, who is recovering from back surgery on Jan. 6, actually thought about this matchup before the start of the regular season.

“I was reading Sports Illustrated, the football preview issue, and it was predicted that the Packers and Steelers would make it and the Steelers would win a close game,” he told The Compass in a telephone interview.

“I didn’t know if it was going to happen, but I was rooting for it,” he added.

Bishop David L. Ricken, Green Bay’s current bishop, and Bishop Zubik agreed on a charitable Super Bowl wager. The bishop from the losing team planned to make a cash donation from his personal funds to Catholic Charities of the winning diocese.

Bishop Zubik added that, even if the Steelers didn’t become Super Bowl champions, it would still be a win for him because his other favorite team would take home the Lombardi Trophy.

“Both teams have fans that are very loyal and who know how to have a good time,” he said. “Both cities have people of faith. I will never forget the wonderful people of Green Bay and northeast Wisconsin, so I’m thrilled.”