

The Grand Finale

The Catholic Review

This wasn't the column I had planned - I changed my mind on Sunday, and I hope it doesn't get me run out of town.

I resisted several invitations to see the Yankees play the Orioles this past Sunday in the final game at the "House that Ruth Built" - obligations here, bedlam there, busy day here on Monday after a late night game in New York. I think I made a prudent decision.

Not so prudent was my chanced clicking on of ESPN during a Sunday afternoon break. An hour-long history of the 85-year-old stadium had to bring tears to the eyes of any baseball fan, much less this milk-fed Yankee-Bronx native. Memories cascaded from the images of spectacular catches, sports immortals living and dead, ninth-inning World Series come-backs, "the greatest game ever played," and a stadium throughout the years peopled with families who once upon a time could afford a major league baseball game.

The ESPN special on Yankee Stadium showed video images of the stadium farewells to a dying Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig and the post-9/11 first-ball pitch by President Bush in the midst of a 58,000 crowd which included countless firefighters and police, who days before breathed the death-filled smoke of the World Trade Towers.

Monument Park in center field will be transferred to the new stadium and will include memorials to the visits of Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. In 1965 I sat with several dozen cadets from West Point in an upper left field stand, awe-struck that a Pope would actually be celebrating Mass for the first time in the United States—and in Yankee Stadium, no less! As coordinator of Pope John Paul II's visit to New York in 1979, I had the run of the stadium. And just months ago, the privilege of vesting in the Yankee locker room prior to the majestic Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI. Somehow, New Yorkers have always thought it completely appropriate that popes, if not praying at St. Patrick's Cathedral, should

do so in the Cathedral of the Bronx.

Family and friends, too many now with God, passed in my mind's review during that emotional hour, and throughout the final game, late into the night.

An "emotional binge" some might call it. It was, on the other hand a grand bow to tradition, a recognition of the need for symbol in our life, and, in many cases, the importance of role models in all areas of public life, including sports. Pope Benedict XVI wisely observed that sports play an important role in teaching young people important lessons in life, including honesty, solidarity, and fraternity. "If practiced in respect for the rules, [sports] becomes an educational instrument and a vehicle for important human and spiritual values," the pope said, adding that sports have the ability to "contribute to building a society characterized by mutual respect, loyalty of behavior, and solidarity between peoples and cultures."

I have attended many games at Yankee Stadium in my lifetime and watched countless athletes both on New York teams as well as opposing ones, inspire in others precisely these qualities—mutual respect, loyalty, solidarity. Now, as athletes change from team to team with shocking regularity and the neighborhood stadiums of a simpler time are shuttered to make way for newer, shinier ones with more corporate luxury suites and personal seat licenses, I truly hope that the inscription on the old Memorial Stadium wall is as true for this nostalgic fan of baseball as it is for Baltimoreans who find themselves looking backward now and again with a tear and a smile: "Time will not dim the glory of their deeds."