



Pittsburgh Steelers safety Troy Polamalu dives to tackle Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Darrell Jackson in the first quarter of the NFL's Super Bowl XL in Detroit in February. Mr. Polamalu exudes a gentle, humble spirit, said Father David Bonnar, pastor of St. Bartholomew Parish in the Pittsburgh suburb of Penn Hills, who has celebrated Mass for 10 years before home games with Steelers players and coaches. (CNS photo/Reuters)

Faith runs deeper than a pre-game prayer

Catholic NFL players keep onfield heroics in perspective

By GINA MAZZA HILLIER
Catholic News Service

PITTSBURGH - Pittsburgh Steelers strong safety Troy Polamalu is not an NFL superstar who happens to be a man of faith. Just the opposite; in his heart, he is simply "a Christian with a passion for Jesus."

Football, Mr. Polamalu said, "gives me confirmation of how I can carry out my faith. It's my way to glorify God."

And while he views his team's 2006 Super Bowl win as "really beautiful and a blessing," Mr. Polamalu says "success in football doesn't matter. Success in anything doesn't matter. As Mother Teresa said, God calls us not to be successful but to be faithful. My prayer is that I would glorify God no matter what and not have success be the definition of it."

"Knowing Troy and how he carries himself, he brings light to the team," offensive lineman Alan Faneca told the Pittsburgh Catholic, the diocesan newspaper. "Everybody respects that?"

Mr. Polamalu exudes a gentle, humble spirit, said Father

David Bonnar, pastor of St. Bartholomew Parish in the Pittsburgh suburb of Penn Hills, who has celebrated Mass for 10 years before home games with Steelers players and coaches.

"Since his arrival in Pittsburgh, he has been a permanent fixture at Mass. Even with all of the fame and success, Troy remains committed to the Christian faith," Father Bonnar said. "And if he has changed in any way, he has just become even more humble and spiritual. I have found him to have both the strong contemplative sense of Mary and the fierce active sense of Martha."

Raised in Tenmile, Ore., the youngest of five children, Mr. Polamalu attended Catholic grade school and was steeped in the Polynesian culture of reverence for family, Church and personal honor.

"I believe that I'm the same person on and off the field. I live my life with a passion, and that includes how I play. Obviously, football calls for physical contact, but that's just part of the game," Mr. Polamalu said.

He offers Jesus' time on earth as an example. "Look at the passion for life that He lived as portrayed in the Stations of the Cross - that fight that He had in him, as well as the love He shared with others. There's no difference."

Indeed, what sets Mr. Polamalu apart is his knack for keeping love at the center of his sport. "Football, in general, has it backwards," he said. "They think this inner anger, this hatred, is what drives football and becomes the physical aspect of the game. But love overcomes all things. My love to glorify God through my playing will far outweigh anybody's hate for me."

For New York Giants kicker Jay Feely, an unmistakable moment of clarity solidified his Catholic faith and revealed his true mission in life.

Mr. Feely's epiphany occurred Jan. 1, 1998, in Pasadena, Calif., just hours after his college football team, the University of Michigan Wolverines, defeated Washington State 21-16 to win the Rose Bowl, capping a perfect 12-0 national championship season.

"Football, in general, has it backwards. They think this inner anger, this hatred, is what drives football and becomes the physical aspect of the game. But love overcomes all things. My love to glorify God through my playing will far outweigh anybody's hate for me."

- Troy Polamalu

The raucous post-game celebration at the team's hotel that New Year's Day was just a noisy backdrop for Mr. Feely's encounter with a 10-year-old boy who was dying of a brain tumor. The boy's mother had brought him to meet the kicker after the game.

In the week leading up to the Rose Bowl, Mr. Feely had volunteered to speak with inner-city kids as part of a community outreach program. This woman had attended Mr. Feely's speaking engagement, where he discussed his Catholic faith. Inspired by the presentation, she sought him out to speak with her son.

"He knew he was very ill," Mr. Feely told the Catholic Advocate, newspaper for the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., recalling his impromptu meeting with the boy. "I told him God had a purpose for him; that God has a plan for everyone."

Mr. Feely and the boy connected, albeit briefly, amid the hoopla in the hotel lobby. Mr. Feely recalled seeing a visible, remarkable difference in the boy's appearance and expression - evidence that Mr. Feely's words somehow had touched a chord.

"I think about the impact I had on that little boy," said Mr. Feely, who was second in the NFL last season with 148 points. "That was my moment of clarity. It solidified my faith. That was when I understood my life as a man, how I could use football to affect people's lives in a positive way. God gives us different gifts."

For former Minnesota Vikings backup quarterback Mike McMahon, a lifelong Catholic, his test of faith came during his junior year in college, as starting quarterback for Rutgers University in New Jersey.

"I blew my shoulder out and tore my rotator cuff," he told The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, at Vikings training camp in Mankato, Minn. "I had to go to surgery. Everyone I talked to said, 'That's it. It's your throwing arm. You're done. Your career is over:'"

Then, the day before surgery, his father, Robert, suffered a heart attack and was told he would need a quadruple bypass. He ended up at the same hospital as his son.

"My mom (Patricia) was running up and down floors," Mr. McMahon said. "His surgery was 100 times more serious; mine was 100 times more painful. That's what the doctor said. It was one of the most painful experiences I've ever gone through. After, the pain was unbearable. I had to sleep in a recliner for three months straight, sitting up



New York Giants kicker Jay Feely, a Catholic, says a 1998 encounter with a 10-year-old boy dying of a brain tumor was an epiphany that made him realize how he could use football to affect people's lives in a positive way. Mr. Feely is seen celebrating his game-winning field goal against the Eagles in Philadelphia during overtime NFL action in Philadelphia Dec. 11. (CNS photo/Reuters)

because I couldn't lay back because of the pressure."

The pain got so bad he would call his parents crying in the middle of the night. He had trouble concentrating in school and had to drop classes. On top of that, there was the nagging question of whether he would ever play again.

Mr. McMahon said he questioned God and his faith but never abandoned either. Inspired by his grandfather, Edward Zilian, who battled cancer for years before finally succumbing the same year as Mr. McMahon's surgery, he worked aggressively to rehabilitate his shoulder. The following season, he was back in the lineup, and went on to play for the Detroit Lions, Philadelphia Eagles and the Vikings prior to

being dropped this fall.

"I wouldn't have been able to make it through if it wasn't for having faith in God," Mr. McMahon said. Six years later, he continues to draw upon his faith. He carries a rosary with him and prays three prayers every day: the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Memorare, which he recited from memory while standing near the practice field.

Mr. McMahon's father taught him the prayer when he was in high school, and he has said it daily since.

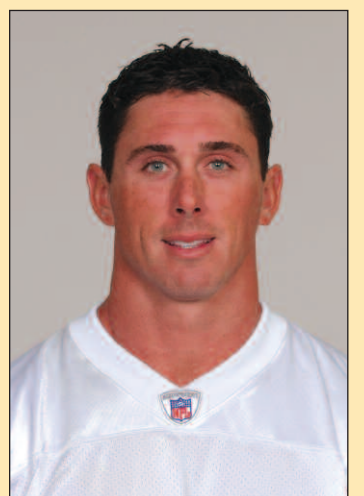
Contributing to this story were Michael C. Gabriele in East Rutherford and Dave Hrbacek in Mankato.

Memorare – Player's daily prayer

The Memorare is a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. From the Latin "remember," the Memorare is traditionally ascribed to the founder of the Cistercians, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Former NFL player Mike McMahon recites it daily, along with the Our Father and the Hail Mary.

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help or sought thy intercession, was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful yet sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen.



Mark McMahon