



LECTURES & PAPERS

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Believing in Baseball: The Religious Power of our National Pastime

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Baseball has always enjoyed a special appeal in our land. Its legendary lore is played out with every season. Its cultural ideology remains on public display in scholarly studies and seminars, in literary creations and Hollywood productions, and in the historical icons that draw people again and again to a quaint village in upstate New York.

In 2001 baseball demonstrated an even more profound connection to the American psyche. The season came to a temporary halt due to the tragic acts of terrorism inflicted on our country on September 11. When the games resumed, playing fields became places of civic pride, featuring patriotic ceremonials and prayerful silence before the first pitch, and heartfelt chants of “God Bless America” during the seventh inning stretch. But the emotionalism on display before and during the games runs much deeper through baseball, down to the very core of who we are as spiritual beings.

As Roger Angell noted in his reflections upon the momentous events of that season’s end, our national pastime can have mystifying power:

Baseball as melodrama, with the winning or tying runs arriving in sudden reversal in the bottom of the ninth inning, is the way children or non-fans expect the games to go, but when it happened three times in this World Series, including the finale, it was the hardened fans and the players and coaches, and even the writers, who were dumbfounded, exchanging excited glances and shaking their heads after the latest stroke of the unlikely.¹

Yet baseball's widespread appeal is not to be found simply in the drama that takes place on the field during particular games or even a specific series. The charm that baseball holds in our social consciousness is neither accidental, in the quirk of timing that brought destruction to our cities during the pennant races, nor circumstantial, in the heroic exploits of all-star caliber plays and players. Rather, baseball exhibits a religious power, the force of which can, if we believe it, restore the character of our American culture.

How does baseball manage to hold sway over our individual lives and our collective character? Exploring the link between baseball and American life requires, first of all, a particular understanding of what "culture" is. In an address to the United Nations, Pope John Paul II calmly but boldly claimed that all culture "is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life. The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God."² If that be the case, how does baseball approach God? Can a mere sport, even one as sublime as this, approximate the divine?

Many authors have already weighed in on these other-worldly questions, expressing a diversity of viewpoints on the connection between religion and sport. But the question of God remains virtually unanswered, as Joseph Price concludes:

Although religions do not necessarily involve the worship of "God" or "gods," they do orient their followers toward an ultimate force or pantheon of powers, whether personalized as "gods" or whether identified in abstracted ways ... One of the primary

challenges for religious studies scholars who undertake theological analysis of sports is to identify within sports a source of ultimate powers for evoking and inspiring radical transformation among participants and spectators.³

This essay seeks to take up the challenge, at least in a preliminary way. First, we will peruse the various connections between religion and baseball suggested by other scholars. Then we will consider a paradox that constitutes what may be the essence of the religious power of baseball. Finally, we will suggest some implications about how belief in the power of baseball impacts our American culture, particularly in light of the September 11 tragedy.

The Connections: Religion and Baseball

Baseball is more than a game. It's a religion.
(Umpire Bill Klem)

Whether referring to sport, in general, or baseball, in particular, scholars have attempted to substantiate the supernatural character or dimensions of the game. Some speak of baseball *as* religious; others boldly claim it *is* a religion. A review of the literature suggests no fewer than nine ways in which to elucidate baseball's connection with the divine.

Sociologist Harry Edwards concedes that American sports are a *quasi*-religion, with ideas and images typically related to this realm.

Superstar athletes correspond to religions' gods and deceased players serve as saints; the coaches and executives who sit on boards and commissions and make and interpret the rules are like religious patriarchs and high councils; the reporters and broadcasters who chronicle sports events and tabulate their statistics are like the scribes of religious traditions; sports trophies and memorabilia are like religious icons; the formally stated beliefs that are commonly accepted about a sport are like religious dogma; sports stadiums and arenas are like houses of worship; and halls of fame ... are religious shrines. Finally, he identifies the faithful or devoted fan of sports with the true believers of a religious tradition.⁴

In terms of religion and *popular culture*, the movie *Bull Durham* enshrined belief in “the church of baseball.”⁵ Reflecting the reality of this metaphor, David Chidester claims that, “(a)s the ‘faith of fifty million people,’ baseball does everything that we conventionally understand the institution of the church to do.” The national pastime “ensures a sense of continuity in the midst of a constantly changing America, through the forces of tradition, heritage, and collective memory.” It also “supports a sense of uniformity, a sense of belonging to a vast, extended American family that attends the same church.” Like religion, “baseball represents the sacred space of home ... and the sacred time of ritual.”⁶

More than just a pop culture version of religion, American sport, according to sociologist James Mathisen, represents a veritable *folk* religion. Drawing on the features described by cultural anthropologists, he suggests three specific ways in which sport manifests itself as a folk religion: its ideological dimension (with a distinctive set of myths, values and beliefs), its cultic practice (through rituals and various collective observances), and its historical character (in heroes, records, and other traditions).⁷

Amplifying the focus on ritual and observance, historian Catherine Albanese discusses sports as a manifestation of *cultural* religion. On the one hand, sports, like religious ritual, establish a cultural sense of order. They “create an ‘other’ world of meaning, complete with its own rules and boundaries, dangers and successes.” In doing so, they “have helped Americans fit a grid to their own experience in order to define it and give it structure.” On the other hand, sports, like religious adherence, provide a cultural norm for behavior. “If the ball field is a miniature rehearsal for the game of life, it tells us that life is a struggle between contesting forces in which there is a winning and losing side.” Within this framework, sports inculcate the idea that

“success depends on teamwork” and promote the virtues of “loyalty, fair play, and being a ‘good sport’ in losing.”⁸

Along similar lines, church historian Christopher Evans treats baseball specifically as our *civil* religion: “At the center of baseball’s symbolic power there resides a unique language of civil religion, proclaiming that the game can redeem America and serve as a light to all nations.”⁹ Crowned as the national pastime due to the convergence of several historical factors in the nineteenth century, “the kingdom of baseball” embodies three predominant themes of liberal-Protestant thought: a strong vision of social progress, the values of healthy masculine recreation, and the virtues of Christian democracy. Thus displaying truths of Christian faith, “baseball encapsulated Protestant hopes to usher in the kingdom of God in America.”¹⁰

More generally, the philosopher Michael Novak emphasizes the deep-rooted impulses and built-in proclivities that make of sport a *natural* form of religion. As “creations of the human spirit, arenas of the human spirit, witnesses to the human spirit, instructors of the human spirit, (and) arts of the human spirit,” sports play out the cosmic struggle with fate – that mysterious complex of danger, contingency, and chance that attends all our lives. Through standards of expectation and demands of discipline, sports encourage the pursuit of excellence that is essential to human flourishing. And sports model the social value of interpersonal affiliation by creating a sense of belonging, whether on a team or in a community.¹¹

In keeping with the notion of a natural human quest, a religious analysis of sports also considers *psychological* experience. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi posits the concept of flow – “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” – and suggests that in sporting activities “players and spectators cease to act in terms of common sense, and concentrate instead on the peculiar reality of the game.” This reality provides religious

significance to sports in as much as “they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable.”¹² This optimal experience can be considered religious, following William James, in as much as it involves “feelings, acts and experiences of individual men [and women] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” Applied to baseball, we could suggest that our national pastime engenders an “enchantment” with the eternal, as it also offers us the “enthusiastic temper of espousal” of our American way of life. Especially evident after the terror that hit our home, baseball, like religion, has allowed us to expunge at least some of our fear and to carry on with what is good and right about our lives.¹³ Adopting the thought of Christopher Lasch, we might say that baseball engages the mythic constructs of a psychodrama; through a suspension of disbelief it plays out the archetypal patterns of human existence, though not in a life-or-death manner.¹⁴

Consideration of archetypes leads to a *mythopoetic* understanding of the religious significance of baseball. Anthropologist Charles Springwood identifies three factors by which baseball tugs at the heart and soul of its adherents. First, its pastoral setting displays its essence: “baseball has always been linked in both real and imagined spaces as a manifestation of rural landscapes and bucolic dreams.” Second, its unique relationship to space and time discloses its romantic allure: “the game eludes the constraints of time, unfolding at its own pace, theoretically without end, given the possibility of extra innings. Space, too is uniquely configured, with each park and stadium enlivened by its own, often idiosyncratic set of features and dimensions.” Third, its seasonal flow contextualizes its existential embrace: “Of all the major American sports, only the baseball season unfolds much as life does, emerging from

sleepy winters to a springtime of new dreams and optimism. It persists through the summer months, offering a reliable companionship, before it leaves all too soon.”¹⁵

This poetic significance finds material form in the *architectural* glory associated with baseball. On the one hand, well-known places like Wrigley Field and Fenway Park are revered for their long-standing association with the hallowed traditions of baseball (whether for “friendly confines” or a “green monster,” respectively). So, too, newer arenas, like Oriole Park at Camden Yards, evoke the supernatural ideal of beauty in the very midst of contrived urban sprawl.¹⁶ On the other hand, baseball’s historical shrine – the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY – functions in many ways as a cathedral for baseball: its noble brick facade,¹⁷ its nave-like structure with an elevated central window and holy alcoves and a planned extension (apse), and its numerous “relics” all lead people who visit there actually to talk in whispers!¹⁸ Following his own “pilgrimage” to the Hall, Thomas Boswell wrote: “In Cooperstown, you find yourself wondering, what does baseball believe in or stand for – if anything? That weekend I decided that baseball believes in reality and stands for moderation and insight in the face of that reality.”¹⁹

In the end, sports in general, and baseball in particular, disclose a religious dimension to reality in as much as they offer a concrete means by which to realize the deepest desires, needs, and potential of human existence and thereby give order and meaning to our lives. Concluding that sports function as an “actualized myth, or experiential narrative,” Jesuit educator Mark Bandsuch summarizes the athletic spirituality attendant upon these views of sport and religion:

The sacred and the profane, the holy and the ordinary, God and humanity all come together in sports, providing a lived experience in which one’s spirituality, whatever it is, can be modeled, accessed and nurtured. As a lived metaphor analogous to but not a substitute for traditional spirituality and formal religion, sports offer insights into the experience of the transcendent, the excellence of human ability, the impact of beliefs on actions and morality, the benefits and responsibilities of community, the role

of ritual, the importance of language, the sacredness of houses of worship, the importance of history and tradition, and the dynamics of discipleship.²⁰

Despite the numerous and varied reflections on sport as religion, scholars also assert that a strict identification between the two is ultimately misguided. As James Mathisen admits, “sport, especially at national or international levels, may look like civil religion ... (but) as Americans know and practice it, it is a common, everyday phenomenon with little sense of a civilly religious transcendence or elitism.”²¹ Edwin Cady rejects the connection more emphatically, claiming that athletic contests, no matter how big the game may be, are only metaphorically religious, “at best, sort of sacred.”²²

Beyond the general connections between sport and religion, and notwithstanding the legitimate critiques, our specific question remains: in part or in whole, what is it about baseball that is “like” religion or “sort of sacred”? Previous attempts to answer this question have focused almost exclusively on the human dimension. Whether popular, folkloristic, cultural, civil, natural, psychological, poetic, or even architectural, the many spiritual explanations of baseball all seem to center on how it functions for human awareness, both individual and collective. What is missing, though, is an investigation of its divine dimension, its relation to an ultimate source of power as essential to religious understanding. Identifying what that transcendent power is, and how it can transform American culture, now becomes our task, the completion of which requires a properly theological analysis.

The Essence: Baseball’s Paradoxical Power

*Baseball seems to have been invented
solely for the purpose of explaining all other things in life.*
(Roger Angell)

Part of the difficulty in linking religion and baseball has to do with definitions – not of baseball, but of religion! Surveying the many approaches to the study of religion, Thomas Idinopulos offers a working definition that suffices for our project. He speaks of religion “as energy, faith, a vision of transcendence, and the will to live in relation to it.” In this manner, religion is not relegated to any particular form, either in terms of identifiable denomination or scholarly classification; rather, it emphasizes transcendence as the dimension common to all peoples of religious faith. In this understanding, regardless of how the concept may be further explained, “transcendence is experienced as a creative advance, linking past to present, one generation to another, offering a vision of the creative and redemptive good that gives hope and a sense that life is worth living.”²³

In its essence, then, religion encompasses two realities: a transcendent reference (“God”) and an ultimate meaning (“truth claims”), the latter involving an understanding about human life that impels its adherents to a certain way of living. And if, as we suppose, culture is about how people approach the mystery of God, then it is in and through the cultural realities of our existence that this transcendent God is made known and that our lives are directed toward fulfillment. In other words, the “culture of belief” is what connects the power of God above with the life of us here below.

At the risk of oversimplification, let us flesh out some details of a religious understanding of the world, here from the perspective of Catholic theology. The divine dimension includes, as transcendent reference, the God who reveals himself to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God, as Father, stands over and above the order of the world as its creator, the one whose eternal design has been enfolded in the material reality to which all things are subject. Yet this transcendent God is no distant divinity; rather, God remains engaged in the world through providential acts.

First and foremost among these is the incarnation of God, the Son, in the person of Jesus the Christ, whose redemptive life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven are foundational to the Christian religion. This same God, as Holy Spirit, continues to remain active in the world through the institution of the Church and the sacramental realities of our existence (e.g., birth, growth, nutrition, healing, and vocation).

On the human level, a religious understanding of the world posits that the ultimate meaning of life is to be found in relation to this trinitarian God. Created by God, human beings have an inalienable dignity, whose theological locus is the uniquely free will with which humans are endowed. In our daily existence, though, we grapple with our having fallen from God, in as much as each human life is characterized by that fallibility and finitude known theologically as “sin.” Nevertheless, human beings remain called to communion with God, in an eternal destiny that begins here on earth and finds its ultimate and complete realization in an afterlife (“heaven” to theologians).

Within this admittedly sketchy presentation of a theological understanding of the world, the question of baseball’s place can now take the field. How does our national pastime offer an “answer” to the mystery of God? We can suggest four aspects of baseball that parallel the dialectic religious realities of transcendence and immanence, finitude and beatitude.²⁴

In the first place, baseball approximates the *transcendence* of God in what may be called its eternal contours, where there are “squares containing circles containing rectangles; precision in counterpoint with passion; order compressing energy.”²⁵ Numerous authors, from philosophers to Renaissance historians, have alluded to baseball’s distinctive engagement with space and time. The playing field itself signals the eternal: its foul lines extending without end horizontally, its foul poles reaching to the heavens vertically. And, at the center of this field (at

least in terms of the action) are two focal points for the sacred significance of the sport: the pitcher's mound, which some have likened to the cosmic mountain, a place where the sacred begins to be revealed,²⁶ and home plate, "the source of the macro dimensions, the point of reference for all the medium and the larger geometric shapes, the only shape on the field that does not figure the eternal and universal outlines and meanings of square and circle ... the center of all the universes, the *omphalos*, the navel of the world."²⁷ All in all, as Tom Boswell puts it, "Baseball does its best to create a perfect universe in microcosm within the real world. ... But then baseball doesn't claim to be heaven. Just the best available approximation – for a few people, for a few years at a time."²⁸

Within these eternal contours, baseball also embraces our *immanence*, in its engagement of the created world of human action through a non-stop quest for perfection. In the activities of what many regard only as a game are to be found expertly honed skills woven into a pattern of analysis, determination, execution, reaction, and reflection – a "repetitive ritual demonstrating the human condition caught between entropy and stasis."²⁹ But neither naturally given, nor even drug-enhanced, physical traits make all-stars. Nor does mere effort rule the day. Consider pitching and hitting, which display with uncanny certainty the truth that humans are not created perfect. For the former, control is an issue with every pitch, never a sure thing from inning to inning, game to game, and throughout a career. For the latter, technique is no guarantee of success, as even the best practitioners fail more than half the time. In his reminiscences on one batter's lifetime .239 average, Tom Boswell candidly underscores what is at stake in the search for success in baseball: "Bernie Allen taught me that when good effort is met with repeated failure, that isn't bad luck. And it doesn't mean that, deep down, you're winning. It means that, deep down, you haven't figured out the goddamn game."³⁰ Thus befitting our contingent, and

therefore limited condition as created beings, the quest for perfection, indeed just for winning, in baseball is endless; it represents a constant, though frustrating, reality that remains unfathomable.

Recognizing our creatureliness, baseball captures, indeed highlights, the realization of human *finitude* in what might be called a “spirituality of imperfection.” Its historical tradition memorializes failures and flukes:

Merkle’s Boner; Snodgrass’s Muff; the 1919 Black Sox and “Say it ain’t so, Joe”; three Dodgers on third; Hank Gowdy’s mask; Lombardi’s snooze; Mickey Owen’s missed third strike; Kubek taking a bad hop in the throat; Bernie Carbo, Elrod Hendricks, and Ken Burkhart in the weirdest home plate ballet ever; and Bill Buckner as The Human Croquet Wicket ... Baseball, with its unpredictabilities, complexities, and chances for mental lapses, turns inglorious gaffes into epics of defeat.³¹

Baseball’s statistics include “error” as a significant part of the truth of the game, leading former commissioner Fay Vincent to comment that “We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often – those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players.”³² And the seasonal misadventures in baseball reinforce that yearning for more and for better that characterizes our life’s quest. Roger Angell expresses well this realistic awareness: “Everyday baseball ... is stuffed with failure and defeat, overflowing with it, and for most of us who have followed the game over a distance, losing more and more appears to outweigh the other outcome as the years slip by, and at the same time deepens our appreciation of the pastime.”³³ In sum, the heartbreak of baseball contributes to its appeal and alludes to its religious significance. As former commissioner Bart Giamatti concedes, with reference to a season-ending loss by his beloved Red Sox: “It breaks my heart because it was meant to, because it was meant to foster in me again the illusion that there was something abiding, some pattern and some impulse that could come together to make a reality that would resist the corrosion; and because, after it had

fostered again that most hungered-for illusion, the game was meant to stop, and betray precisely what it promised.”³⁴

Notwithstanding the limitations it reveals to us, or perhaps because of them, baseball also entices us with the prospect of communion that theologians refer to as *beatitude*. It engenders a longing for hope and for joy, which Commissioner Giamatti articulates with poetic eloquence:

To take the acts of physical toil ... and to bound them in time or by rules or boundaries in a green enclosure surrounded by an amphitheater or at least a gallery (thus combining garden and city, a place removed from care but in this real world) is to replicate the arena of humankind's highest aspiration. That aspiration is to be taken out of the self. It is to be for a moment in touch, because common pleasure is so intense, with a joy that cannot be described because language has limits and can finally say what is *not*, but falters before an experience which so completely *is*.³⁵

The inner core of this experience, in baseball, resonates with the actions that begin and end at home plate. The story of human aspiration and joy that baseball narrates there in act is

the story of going home after having left home, the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply needs to find. It is the literary mode called Romance. ...

Romance is about putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder. It is about restoration of the right relations among things – and going home is where that restoration occurs because that is where it matters most. ...

If baseball is a narrative, an epic of exile and return, a vast, communal poem about separation, loss, and the hope for reunion – if baseball is a Romance Epic – it is finally told by the audience. It is the Romance Epic of homecoming America sings to itself.³⁶

And this song has become a never-ending siren's call. The cyclical flow of baseball's season gives a temporal aspect to our joyful aspiration. We wait hopefully for it in anticipation of spring training. We rejoice in it with every win and wonder where it has gone with every loss. We long for its fulfillment in the World Series. And even when that championship escapes us,

no matter how many times in succession, it is only temporary – until we escape the “void” that is the off-season³⁷ and begin anew the quest for baseball beatitude.

In sum, baseball does give experience to the transcendent dimensions of human life that are fundamental to a religious understanding of the world. In its shapes and by its actions, the game itself makes reference to eternal realities. Through the exploits of its players, especially their own and their teams’ failures, it discloses profound truths about life that constitute ultimate meaning. But where, specifically, is religion’s God in this sport? What is the ultimate power at work in this game that can, if believed, bring about the transformation of our lives?

The answer is paradoxical ... and that is precisely the point! For baseball enthusiasts, “It is this paradox – the obdurate difficulty and the steely demands of the game that lurk beneath its sunny exterior – that entrances us and makes us care.”³⁸ For fans also of theology, the paradox of religion challenges us and makes us think and act in new, some would say revolutionary, ways.

The revolution of religious thought lies in its fundamental reversal of the ways in which we normally approach human realities. Christian teaching, for example, gives voice to the paradox in a variety of now familiar sayings from the mouth of Jesus:

“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”

(Gospel of Matthew 19:21)

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.”

(Gospel of Luke 22:25-26)

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed

your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

(Gospel of John 13:13-15)

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

(Gospel of John 12:24-25)

What these religious teachings seek to inculcate is a hard-to-accept truth: the way to true happiness, should we desire it, is to consider and treat another person as more important to me than I am to myself. Believing this paradox, and putting it into practice, requires a personal conversion – a deliberate and conscious choice to go against one's natural inclination to self-preservation and self-promotion and instead seek the well being of others. It is, in short, an adherence to “sacrifice” as a way of life. And therein lies baseball's distinctively religious power.

Usually overt (by means of a bunt), often supposed (in a fly ball that scores a runner from third base),³⁹ or occasionally undetected (in the ground out the moves a runner from second to third) – the sacrifice as a specifically designated play is unique to baseball. Other athletes may engage in a similar process (e.g., football linemen who block); other games may include comparable moves (e.g., “sacrificing a pawn” in chess). But only baseball formally acknowledges the value of the sacrificial act by conferring statistical recognition upon its successful completion, the batter not being penalized with a failed at bat and actually being credited if his sacrifice leads directly to a run batted in.⁴⁰

Nor is the baseball sacrifice merely a linguistic convention. It is part and parcel of the strategic action of the game. Though perhaps originally invented as a trick play (credit for which is attributed to Dickey Pearce in 1866),⁴¹ the bunt is now considered a fundamental ploy designed to help manufacture runs. Some detractors speak derisively of this simple stroke, but a

sacrifice play remains an especially advantageous strategy when trying to win the close game, as made evident recently by the New York Yankees in two different World Series.⁴²

But not all in baseball are believers! Some managers have built their winning ways without the sacrifice. “[Earl] Weaver, the Baltimore Orioles’ legendary manager, was famous for favoring ‘pitching and three-run homers.’ ... Weaver eschewed the stolen base and the sacrifice bunt, reasoning that the former wasn’t worth the risk and the latter wasn’t cost-efficient.”⁴³ And baseball’s dons of dignity have bestowed Hall of Fame glory on only three players (Eddie Collins, Willie Keeler, and Tris Speaker) among the top ten career leaders in sacrifice bunts.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, as a staple of baseball strategy, the sacrifice likewise pertains to the religious truth of the sport. As one unidentified source puts it, “if hardball is the body of the game, the bunt is its soul.”⁴⁵ The sacrifice reveals the importance in baseball of action over personality,⁴⁶ of executing the play and getting the job done over heroic feats of power and superstar status. In baseball, as in life, humility is a true virtue. Batters aspire to hit, but teams only win by scoring runs! Born of managerial conviction, baseball’s sacrifice is intended solely to benefit the common good. Thus does it embody baseball’s essentially religious character, for “(t)he willingness to subject personal preferences to the good of the team constitutes the basic religious aspect of team sports.”⁴⁷

The power of sacrifice remains paramount to a religious understanding of life in this world. The redemptive act of God becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus, and his subsequent death on the cross at Calvary, exemplifies the value of sacrifice from a divine viewpoint. On the human side, sacrifice constitutes a noble use of freedom; to choose freely to place one’s own concern secondary to the good of another is not a loss of freedom but its ultimate exercise. As

such, the sacrificial act represents an embrace of that finitude that characterizes our lives. Baseball welcomes this finitude when it is obvious to all that the sacrifice play is coming, and in the fact that each time the batter is clearly willing to be put out. But in doing so, he promotes the good of the others, and as a result is welcomed back into the dugout with congratulatory cheers for having selflessly and successfully done something that, hopefully, will be of benefit to the team.

Sadly, the sacrifice in baseball seems on its way to becoming a lost art.⁴⁸ These days, highly paid professional athletes all too often seem utterly incapable of performing well a task they learned (or should have) as amateurs in Little League. And today's spectators, unlike true fans, appear unable to appreciate its fundamental value and purpose; desiring lots of "action" to keep their attention, they dismiss the bunt as far too obvious and patently dull and downplay the statistic as meaningless to a team's success. In both cases, however, the mistaken posture is also a metaphysical lapse, as these and similar viewpoints fail to see baseball in terms of what it really is.⁴⁹ That very failure – the inability to recognize, accept, and submit to the paradox of sacrifice – marks our continuing struggle in life. But believing in baseball, and the religious power of sacrifice that it embraces, makes possible a transformation that our human culture still needs. The post-9/11 games became the occasion for realizing this.

The Implications: A Culture of Belief in Baseball

*Next to religion, baseball has furnished a greater impact
on American life than any other institution.*

(President Herbert Hoover)

Baseball's important role in reflecting and contributing to American culture has been acknowledged throughout our country's history. From Walt Whitman's confession in 1888

(“base-ball is our game: the American game: I connect it with our national character”) to Jacques Barzun’s famous assertion in 1954 (“Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball”), the sport’s cultural influence has been studied by scholars of every stripe and accepted by citizens of every age.⁵⁰ Affectionately and correctly do we call it our national pastime. How baseball fulfills this role has been expressed eloquently by John Thorn:

Fundamentally, baseball is what America is not, but has longed or imagined itself to be. It is the missing piece of the puzzle, the part that makes us whole ... a fit for a fractured society. ...

Yet more than anything else, America is about hope and renewal. And gloriously, so is baseball, pulsing with the mystery of the seasons and of life itself.

This great game opens a portal onto our past, both real and imagined, comforting us with intimations of immortality and primordial bliss. But it also holds up a mirror, showing us as we are. And sometimes baseball even serves as a beacon, revealing a path through the wilderness.⁵¹

Recognizing its religious power, we might also suggest that what baseball provides can now prove transformative for a society recently torn asunder by the evil of terrorism.

Baseball’s “fit” with American society has often been explained in terms of its *sociological* function. On the one hand, it has served as a “badge of Americanism” by which players and fans alike have come to be inculturated into this country’s way of life – its values of individualism and democracy, its virtues of competition and merit.⁵² On the other hand, baseball has long been associated with a promise – “the American dream” – in as much as it reflects our nation’s greatest aspirations and insists, with each game and every season, that realizing this dream is possible for all.⁵³

But today there is more. The terroristic acts that violently and tragically interrupted the 2001 season left in their wake of destruction a heightened sense that our society – indeed, our very humanity – has now been threatened. As a nation, we have achieved much in the realm of

economic success and security. But, as the smoking collapse of the World Trade Center graphically depicted, riches and wealth cannot ultimately satisfy our human longings, because material things do not endure. The human heart remains restless, seeking instead a more lasting joy that transcends the vicissitudes of everyday life. Moreover, America is now, perhaps, more anxious than ever before. Witnesses to such an unprovoked and widespread experience of innocent death, we have been confronted with the stark reality of our own finitude, and the realization that our merely human efforts and achievements are no longer absolute, indeed never were.

In light of this new fracture suffered by our society, earlier analyses of the *nostalgic* function of baseball may today seem more pertinent, even compelling. For George Grella, “baseball recollects an earlier and calmer time.... Suggesting a pastoral vision of peace and harmony, it feeds both our memories and our dreams, our sense of the past and our awareness of the future.” William Fischer reflects on baseball’s perennial potential: “What could better reaffirm our long-held values than a game rooted in purity and romance? ... What better way to expand our increasingly limited world vision than by loving a game which is a soulmate of the imagination?” And Charles Springwood suggests that baseball helps “to legitimate a longing for the past ... [and perhaps even a] nostalgia for longing itself – the longing to long, the feeling that feeling as such will enable us to feel some alternative to the numbness of the everyday.”⁵⁴

But baseball does more than dream of the future or memorialize the past. With its particularly religious power, it provides the cultural link that enables us to transform the present. Believing in baseball, and in the sacrifice essential to this sport, we are able once again to emulate divinity and affirm humanity in ways reflecting what Pope John Paul II says about the world’s changing cultural horizon:

If the future is uncertain, one certitude remains in our minds. This future will be what people make of it, with their responsible freedom, sustained by the grace of God. ... Man can seem hesitant today, at times hindered by his own past, anxious about his future, but it is also true that a new person is emerging with a new stature on the world scene. His profound aspiration is to affirm himself in liberty, to move forward with responsibility, to act on behalf of solidarity.⁵⁵

To believe in sacrifice is to affirm our liberty – freely choosing to place ourselves “out” so as to advance the “runner” that is our neighbor. To believe in sacrifice is to move forward with responsibility – recognizing that our human dignity as “players” accords each and every one of us a role to fulfill in society’s well being, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant that role may appear to be. To believe in sacrifice is to act on behalf of solidarity – doing our part to contribute to the winning score rather than seeking personal aggrandizement, with the awareness that it is in and through our right relations with one another on the “team” of humanity that we find glory for ourselves.

If, as Joseph Price claims, “(t)he ultimacy or holiness of the religious experience derives from its location, not in a remote realm of transcendence, but in a sense of alterity generated by the freedom and beauty of the sports activity itself,”⁵⁶ then the act of sacrifice discloses a truly religious power that is to be found not only in the game of baseball but in the sport of life.⁵⁷ Whatever form it takes – bunt, fly ball, or grounder – the sacrifice evokes a transformation of the participant from self-centered star (with potential for a hit or home-run) to humble team player (actualized in moving the runner into scoring position or all the way home). Though often un- or under-appreciated, the sacrifice can inspire a transformation of the knowing spectator from enthusiastic seeker of power and prestige (encouraged by Sportscenter highlights) to humble knower of right and good (delineated, perhaps, only in statistics and box scores). Such a transformation is radical, in as much as it requires a change in approach to the game, of baseball

and of life. But this transformation can also be redemptive, in as much as it helps create a new reality that allows us to see and to become part of something bigger and better.

This, perhaps, is why baseball was the ideal forum for our cultural response to the evil that struck our land last September. Beyond turning baseball stadiums into massive places of worship, baseball became the site and the strategy by which to restore a sense of humanity to our actions and goodness to our lives. As George Grella puts it: “Like the greatest works of art, the game suggests to man his godlike potential; it reveals to him ... the transcendent capabilities within his life, his spark of divinity.”⁵⁸ Why did America celebrate so passionately, in general, and so prominently, at ballparks, the police and fire personnel who responded to the scenes of tragedy? Because we know that the sacrifice they demonstrated for the sake of others makes them far greater heroes than even our best all-star athletes. They realized in life and death the religious power that our national pastime shows forth in a game. They should make believers of us all.

¹ Roger Angell, “Can You Believe It?” *The New Yorker*, 26 November 2001, 80.

² John Paul II, “Discours à l’Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies,” 5 October 1995, n. 9; *Documentation Catholique* XCII (1995) 920.

³ Joseph L. Price, “An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion,” in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed. Joseph L. Price (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 228.

⁴ Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1973), 261-22; summarized by Price, 218-219.

⁵ Provoked by this opening soliloquy on the mouth of Annie Savoy: “I believe in the church of baseball. I’ve tried all the major religions and most of the minor ones. ... I’ve tried ‘em all, I really have, and the only church that truly feeds the soul, day in, day out, is the church of baseball.”

⁶ David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘N Roll,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, eds. Bruce D. Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 221-222.

⁷ James A. Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion: Examining a Test of Its Strength,” in *From Season to Season*, 144-147.

⁸ Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982), 321-322.

⁹ Christopher Evans, “Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story,” in *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*, eds. Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog, III (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 15.

¹⁰ Christopher Evans, “The Kingdom of Baseball in America: The Chronicle of an American Theology,” in *The Faith of 50 Million*, 37.

¹¹ Michael Novak, *The Joy of Spirits: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, rev. ed. 1994), 158, 18-34. For a fuller treatment of his thought, see Philip Lawton, "Sports and the American Spirit: Michael Novak's Theology of Culture," *Philosophy Today* 20 (Fall 1976): 196-208.

¹² Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 4, 72. See also Andrew Cooper, *Playing in the Zone: Exploring the Spiritual Dimensions of Sports* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 20-47.

¹³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902 (New York: Modern Library, 1994), lecture II.

¹⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979), chap. 5; cf. Thomas L. Altherr, "A Swing and a Myth: The Persistence of Baseball in the American Imagination," in *Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and the American Culture (1989)*, ed. Alvin L. Hall (New York: Meckler, 1989), 64-67.

¹⁵ Charles F. Springwood, "The Mythopoetics of Place and Memory," in *Baseball as America: Seeing Ourselves through Our National Game* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002), 293-295.

¹⁶ In an essay entitled "Why Baseball," in *Baseball: An Illustrated History*, eds. Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns (New York: A. Knopf, 1994), John Thorn refers to Daniel Boorstin's claim that in our age "(t)he artificial has become so commonplace that the natural begins to seem contrived." What baseball in Baltimore provides, instead, is "an oasis of the uncontrived" (p. 61).

¹⁷ Altherr, 65: "Compared to several other halls of fame, which rely on more modern architecture, the red brick structure in Cooperstown exudes a dignity approaching the sacrosanct."

¹⁸ Insights from Alvin Hall, personal correspondence.

¹⁹ Thomas Boswell, "The Church of Baseball," in *Baseball: An Illustrated History*, 193. Cf. Evans, "The Kingdom of Baseball in America," 35: "... Cooperstown invokes for the baseball fan a feeling of transcendence, a sense that one has entered into a timeless realm of heroic deed and eternal bonds between parents and children."

²⁰ Mark Bandsuch, S.J., "Sports and Spirituality in Jesuit Higher Education," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* (Spring 2002); available at <<http://www.udmercy.edu/articles/bandsuch.htm>>. For other spiritual interpretations specific to baseball, see James Pernice, *Crossing Home: The Spiritual Lessons of Baseball* (New York: Alba House, 1993) and Michael O'Connor, *Sermon on the Mound: Finding God at the Heart of the Game* (New York: Bethany House, 2001).

²¹ Mathison, 141. See also his "From Civil Religion to Folk Religion: The Case of American Sport," in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1992), 17-33.

²² Edwin L. Cady, *The Big Game* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 93.

²³ Thomas A. Idinopulos, "What Is Religion?" *Cross Currents* 48 (Fall 1998): 366-380.

²⁴ In "The Metaphysics of Baseball," *America* 166 (April 4, 1992): 264, Clyde Crews notes "the frequent insistence [among commentators] that the sport encodes within itself much of the dialectic that marks the daily life of men and women on this fragile planet: individualism and community, quirkiness and predictability; wildness and control; realism and valor, venality and exaltation."

²⁵ A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), 85.

²⁶ Joseph L. Price, "The Pitcher's Mound as Cosmic Mountain: The Religious Significance of Baseball," in *From Season to Season*, 61-76.

²⁷ Giamatti, 86.

²⁸ Thomas Boswell, "The Church of Baseball," in *Baseball: An Illustrated History*, 193.

²⁹ Altherr, 71.

³⁰ Boswell, 192.

³¹ Altherr, 66.

³² Francis T. Vincent, "Education and Baseball," *America* 164 (April 6, 1991): 373. In a commencement speech at Kenyon College, Vincent highlighted the larger truth reflected in baseball's errors: "... life rewards those who having failed, and having failed over and over, still manage to move on. It is the decision to try again that will eventually lead to a reward." Vincent's thoughts are specifically noted in the opening pages of Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam, 1994).

³³ Roger Angell, "Hard Lines," in *Baseball: An Illustrated History*, xxii. In this article, Angell notes the statistical fine line between winning and losing: "... the margin between those clubs, between best and worst, measures out down the years at a fraction over one run per game" (xxii).

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- ³⁴ A. Bartlett Giamatti, "The Green Fields of the Mind," in *Baseball: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Nicholas Dawidoff (Library of America, 2002), 493. Cf. John Kuenster, *Heartbreakers: Baseball's Most Agonizing Defeats* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).
- ³⁵ Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise*, 34.
- ³⁶ Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise*, 90-95.
- ³⁷ Jonathan Yardley, "Into the Void: Emptiness, Alas, Until Baseball Resumes," *The Washington Post*, 31 October 1983, C01.
- ³⁸ Angell, "Hard Lines," xxv.
- ³⁹ Cf. John and Don Zminda, "Can You Hit Sacrifice Flies on Purpose?" in *STATS 1993 Baseball Scorecard* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).
- ⁴⁰ In *The New Dickson Baseball Dictionary: A Cyclopedic Reference to More Than 7,000 Words, Names, Phrases and Slang Expressions That Define the Game* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999), Paul Dickson notes that it was not until 1954 that the ruling was changed so that a batter who hits a sacrifice fly is not charged with an official at-bat. The spurious and unsubstantiated reason they give for this change was "to help create a few more .300 hitters" (p. 426).
- ⁴¹ According to *The New Dickson Baseball Dictionary*, 92-93.
- ⁴² An eighth inning bunt by Chuck Knoblauch led to the Yankees' win in the first game of the 1999 World Series. A sacrifice by Scott Brosius helped the Yankees in the 2002 World Series to become the first team in postseason history to win two straight games when trailing after eight innings.
- ⁴³ Sean McAdam, "Where has the stolen base gone?" *Special to ESPN.com* (posted February 19, 2002). <espn.go.com/mlb/columns/mcadam_sean/1333246.html>
- ⁴⁴ Career sacrifice flies leaders have fared much better. Four of the top ten are already members of the Hall of Fame (Robin Yount, Hank Aaron, George Brett, and Brooks Robinson), with three of the others probably to be inducted when they are eligible (Eddie Murray, the all-time leader, in 2003; Cal Ripken in 2007; Paul Molitor in 2004).
- ⁴⁵ <www.wordwithyou.com/archives/3_31_99.htm>
- ⁴⁶ In "The Metaphysics of Baseball," *Philosophy Today* 20 (Fall 1976): 224, Roland Garrett argues convincingly that in baseball "the individual is not celebrated primarily in his effects as in these other sports, nor in his beauty or strength as in still other sports, but in his action."
- ⁴⁷ Price, "An American Apotheosis," 225.
- ⁴⁸ No active player appears in the list of top 100 career sacrifice leaders!
- ⁴⁹ Ted Cohen, "Objects of Appreciation: Early Reflections on Television, with Further Remarks on Baseball," in *Philosophy and Art* [Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, vol. 23], ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 34: "I say the same thing about the benighted soul who is bored by baseball. When a spectator is bored by baseball ... then he likely does not see baseball in terms of the kind of thing it is. This skewed view, I suspect, most often results from a mistaken sense of the units of possible interest."
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in *Baseball as America*, 35-37. See also a new work endorsed by the National Hall of Fame: Curt Smith (ed.), *What Baseball Means to Me: A Celebration of Our National Pastime* (New York: Warner Books, 2002).
- ⁵¹ Thorn, 58.
- ⁵² Harold Seymour, "Baseball: Badge of Americanism," in *Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture*, ed. Alvin L. Hall (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1990), 1-22; cf. Linda A. Kittell, "From Dreams to Diamonds to Dictionaries: Baseball as Acculturating Force," in *Cooperstown Symposium (1989)*, 203-219.
- ⁵³ Robert Elias, "A Fit for a Fractured Society: Baseball and the American Promise," in *Baseball and the American Dream: Race, Class, Gender, and the National Pastime*, ed. Robert Elias (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 3-33.
- ⁵⁴ Quoted in Elias, 18-21.
- ⁵⁵ John Paul II, "Address to Members of the Pontifical Council for Culture," 12 January 1990, #9.
- ⁵⁶ Price, "An American Apotheosis," 223.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. Joe Torre and Henry Dreher, *Joe Torre's Ground Rules for Winners: 12 Keys to Managing Team Players, Tough Bosses, Setbacks, and Success* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1999), chap. 12.
- ⁵⁸ Quoted in Elias, 23.