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Reconciliation on the ball field

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Jun. 24, 2010

In my experiences of the sacraments, the Sacrament of Penance has always been the most difficult to understand and find good role models for. It has also been the most beautiful to see when it is done well.

There are so many moments in our lives and in our world that call for a deep need to practice this sacrament. We see oppression, violence, and negligence in personal relationships, national conflicts, and within the halls of politics, business and religion. The news outlets are flooded with politicians trying to direct morality within the family unit but cheating on their own spouses; business leaders are given awards for community service efforts while at the same time causing human destruction with their business decisions; and finally, we hear of our religious leaders committing horrible acts against children and other leaders covering for these sins.

Sinning is like breathing -- we all will be doing it while being here on earth. The trick is to not always breathe dirty air.

There is a great inability in our society to take responsibility for our own actions and to go through a conversion in our hearts and minds so that we don't commit the same mistakes again. It's difficult to find good role models for this when there are so many extremely bad examples of destructive behavior that inhibits God's ideals on earth. I look to sporting events for a microcosm on how to live well and succeed. For me, the sports section in any newspaper is what I read the most, only because every other section of the paper discusses heartache, corruption, violence and death. At least the sports section produces stories of triumph and victory on a daily basis.

In the last month, there have been some terrible instances of officiating that have changed a game's outcome and the fortunes of the athletes who are competing. In the ideal setting, the role of the official is to help facilitate the flow of a competition so that it is a fair match, and thus the outcome of the game comes down to the ability of the players.

Within the past couple weeks alone, we saw in the National Basketball Association championship the Boston Celtics blow a 3-2 lead to the Los Angeles Lakers. The Lakers pulled through to win Game 7 by four points in a physical, foul-laden game in which the Lakers shot 20 more free throws than the Celtics. After the deciding game in Los Angeles, Rasheed Wallace of the Celtics tried to enter the officials' locker room. The Celtics stated that this might have been Wallace's last game ever and he just wanted to thank the officials, but because Wallace had to be removed from the officials' locker room by security, I'd say his visit probably had more to do with his beef that the Lakers had 20 more foul shots that helped determine a championship. There were no comments from the officials on this disparity. I didn't really care who won this game, but was hoping that it would be determined by the players on the floor.

Just last week, the United States national soccer team fell behind Slovenia by two goals at halftime. They had one of their biggest comebacks ever to tie the game in the second half, and appeared to have won the game with about five minutes to go. The team's goal was waved off by an official because he called a foul on a U.S. player, much to the disbelief of the players on the national team. It's easy to read the scapegoating of this official now:

he has admitted no wrong on a play where no foul appears to have been committed in a game where rough play was allowed all game. The U.S. players are left without an outlet to address this and instead just fuel the blame on a rookie ref through the media.

These two examples are more common of human interaction and our inability to truly forgive the imperfection of humanity. Officials are going to blow calls and are going to play a big role in important games, even when they aren't supposed to. There isn't enough encouragement for officials to admit that they blew a call, and players are left without enough outlets to deal with the large role referees play in a game.

That all changed last month in Detroit.

Armando Galarraga of the Tigers was pitching a perfect game in the ninth inning against the Cleveland Indians -- a feat only accomplished about 20 times in over a hundred years of modern baseball. It's an experience that few pitchers are ever able to celebrate and is an elite accomplishment. With two outs in the ninth inning, Galarraga appeared to take a throw while covering at first base on a grounder, and complete the final out for his perfect game. However, first base umpire Jim Joyce missed the call, calling the runner safe and giving Cleveland its first hit of the evening. Replays showed that Galarraga and the ball beat the runner to the base. Human imperfection ruined his chance at a perfect game. Several Tigers, including manager Jim Leyland, were livid with Joyce's botched call. Almost immediately, the Web site www.firejimjoyce.com was launched, ridiculing his blown call.

It's obviously not uncommon for officials in any game to make a wrong call, either once during the game or to miss several calls in a game. What is rare is what happened next in Detroit.

Galarraga calmly returned to the pitcher's mound without arguing with Jim Joyce. He got the next batter out to complete the game. After the game, Joyce reviewed the replay and realized he made the wrong call. He went to the Tigers' locker room and hugged Galarraga, apologizing for messing up his chance at baseball immortality. Galarraga accepted his apology, telling Joyce and later the media that everyone makes mistakes. It was like watching a feel-good Disney movie and not a sporting event where it is so customary to blame the officials for all misfortunes.

After the game, Joyce drove a few hours to his mother's house in Toledo. He explained to her what had happened and they stayed up until 1:00 in the morning discussing his blown call before she turned in. Joyce slept maybe half an hour before he was back at the ballpark the next day to call balls and strikes in another Detroit/Cleveland game. Before the game, the manager Leyland had Galarraga deliver the lineup card to Joyce at home plate. Fans cheered. The owner of firejimjoyce.com turned his Web site into a pro-Jim Joyce site because if Galarraga could forgive this guy, then everyone could. If someone can own up to his mistakes, then he's probably not half bad of a human being. Polls in the last couple weeks have shown that Major League ballplayers think Joyce is the best umpire there is, and he just made the wrong call at the wrong time.

There is a lot riding on this experience. It could be a new precedent for officials to own up to the times when they make the wrong call. It could be a time for players, managers, and fans to forgive the referees, move on and play the next game. It is, after all, just a game. However, it's more than a game for so many dedicated fans around the world who watch the game and then model their own lives on this stuff in a search for role models. The experience of watching Jim Joyce and Armando Galarraga interact is one of the most beautiful illustrations of reconciliation.

In a world so broken, one hopes that this example will make its way into every Sunday school curriculum when teachers and mentors are struggling to explain the sacrament and make it relevant in the modern day. Jesus would be proud of the way that Jim Joyce and Armando Galarraga demonstrated the sacrament.

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