News



Pallbearers walk with the casket of Los Angeles Dodgers legend Fernando Valenzuela during his funeral Mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles Nov. 6, 2024. (OSV News/Robert Gauthier, pool via Los Angeles Times)

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Los Angeles — November 11, 2024
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Just as Fernando Valenzuela tipped his eyes to heaven during his famous windup when he pitched, so did the hundreds of faithful who flocked to his funeral in Los Angeles at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels Nov. 6.

But as Father Jim Anguiano, vicar general of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, said during his Mass homily, that glance to heaven is no longer needed.

"Fernando no longer has to look up, nor does he have to look down," Anguiano said. "Fernando is alive and present in our hearts and in our lives. Any time we feel that he is not with us, all we have to do is turn to our hearts and to our lives to recognize his presence."

Valenzuela died Oct. 22 at age 63. Hailing from Mexico and nicknamed "El Toro," he became a pitching sensation with the Dodgers beginning in 1981. That year, he burst onto the scene beginning with an unexpected Opening Day start and finishing with both the Rookie of the Year and Cy Young awards — and pitching the Dodgers to a World Series victory over the New York Yankees.

"Fernandomania" was born.

Over the next nine seasons with the Dodgers, Valenzuela was credited with inspiring several generations of Latinos nationwide to take great interest in baseball, especially among Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. His no-hitter during his last season with the Dodgers in 1990 only capped his legend.

"Every time he took the mound, he was taking it for his faith, his family, his team and his country," said Mike Scioscia, former Dodgers catcher and teammate of Valenzuela, during his eulogy. "He held that burden from the first time he pitched in the Major Leagues to his last time."

Besides Scioscia, other notable attendees included actor Edward James Olmos, former teammates Orel Hershiser and Rick Sutcliffe, former Dodgers Justin Turner

and Nomar Garciaparra, former Dodgers owner Peter O'Malley, Dodgers president and CEO Stan Kasten, and Jaime Jarrin and José Mota, who worked alongside Valenzuela as the Dodgers' Spanish-language broadcasters.

In their eulogies, both Scioscia and Valenzuela's son, Fernando Jr., spoke of the pitcher's human side, often humorous, when he wasn't in the spotlight. Scioscia spoke of Valenzuela snaring teammates' ankles with a little lasso he carried, and some lighthearted moments featuring their language barrier.

"Everyone that knows Fernando knows that little wry smile he had, that laugh, I can still hear it," Scioscia said. "I would talk to him in Spanish and he'd look at me, like, 'What did you say?' I'd repeat it. He'd shake his head and go, 'Mike, your Spanish is terrible.' I said, 'Fernando, it's about the same as your English, so I guess we're in the same boat.'"

Only a few days ago, Scioscia felt Valenzuela was still pranking him after his wife called to say all their TVs had mysteriously switched to Spanish.

"Honey, you know who that is," Scioscia told his wife. "That's Fernando."

"I know that's a sign. I know like I'm standing here that Fernando is up there, is letting us know he's doing well."

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Fernando Jr. tearfully recalled that his father was a man of few words, and was as humble, loving and full-hearted as he appeared to be. He vowed to remember the values his father taught him: Be on time, be respectful and work hard in all you do.

"He never asked for anything," Fernando Jr. said. "I don't think he ever asked anyone for anything in his life. He always liked to give everything to everyone."

"I want to be like Fernando Valenzuela and the way he treated everyone around him," he added. "And I think we can all aspire to be like him."

Victor Fernandez said he and Fernando shared a close bond over the years, and that he was the godfather to several of Valenzuela's family members.

"The experiences that I lived with him, I haven't lived with anyone else," he said.

Although Fernandez said losing Valenzuela is one of the most "painful" experiences of his life, he will now seek refuge in the company of Valenzuela's family and in his fond memories of the ballplayer, like Valenzuela's love of "lengua," or beef tongue, and shrimp ceviche dishes and the many times they celebrated New Year's Eve together.

"We were family," he said.

That family-style connection to Valenzuela was the reason several of his fans showed up for the funeral Mass, many sporting blue Dodgers hats and No. 34 jerseys.

For Martin Pacheco, 56, his father played in a baseball league started by Mike Brito, the scout who famously discovered Valenzuela. He was a preteen when Valenzuela captured his attention.

"Having baseball blood in you, you appreciate a player like that," Pacheco told Angelus News, the LA archdiocesan news outlet. "He was the greatest. I saw him grow as I was growing. He was a hell of a pitcher, a great teammate. I really loved him."

Janette Gill, wearing her blue Dodgers sweatshirt, was attending the funeral with her mom, Betty, from Echo Park.

"We just wanted to pay respects to one of the greatest," she said. "We grew up watching the Dodgers here. We're just fans."

For Marcus Borjon, 43, growing up in East LA, Valenzuela showed that anything was possible.

"We scratch and claw and climb and look up to the heavens too," Borjon said. "Fernando's a part of that. He's a part of our life. This is like family so we had to be here."

The Dodgers winning the 2024 World Series was bittersweet. Just before the playoffs started, the Dodgers announced that Valenzuela was stepping away from his Spanish-language radio duties to focus on his health.

Valenzuela died just three days before the Dodgers hosted Game 1 of the World Series at Dodger Stadium. Just over a week later, the Dodgers clinched their eighth World Series championship and celebrated their victory with a parade in Los Angeles

scheduled for Nov. 1, what would have been Valenzuela's 64th birthday.