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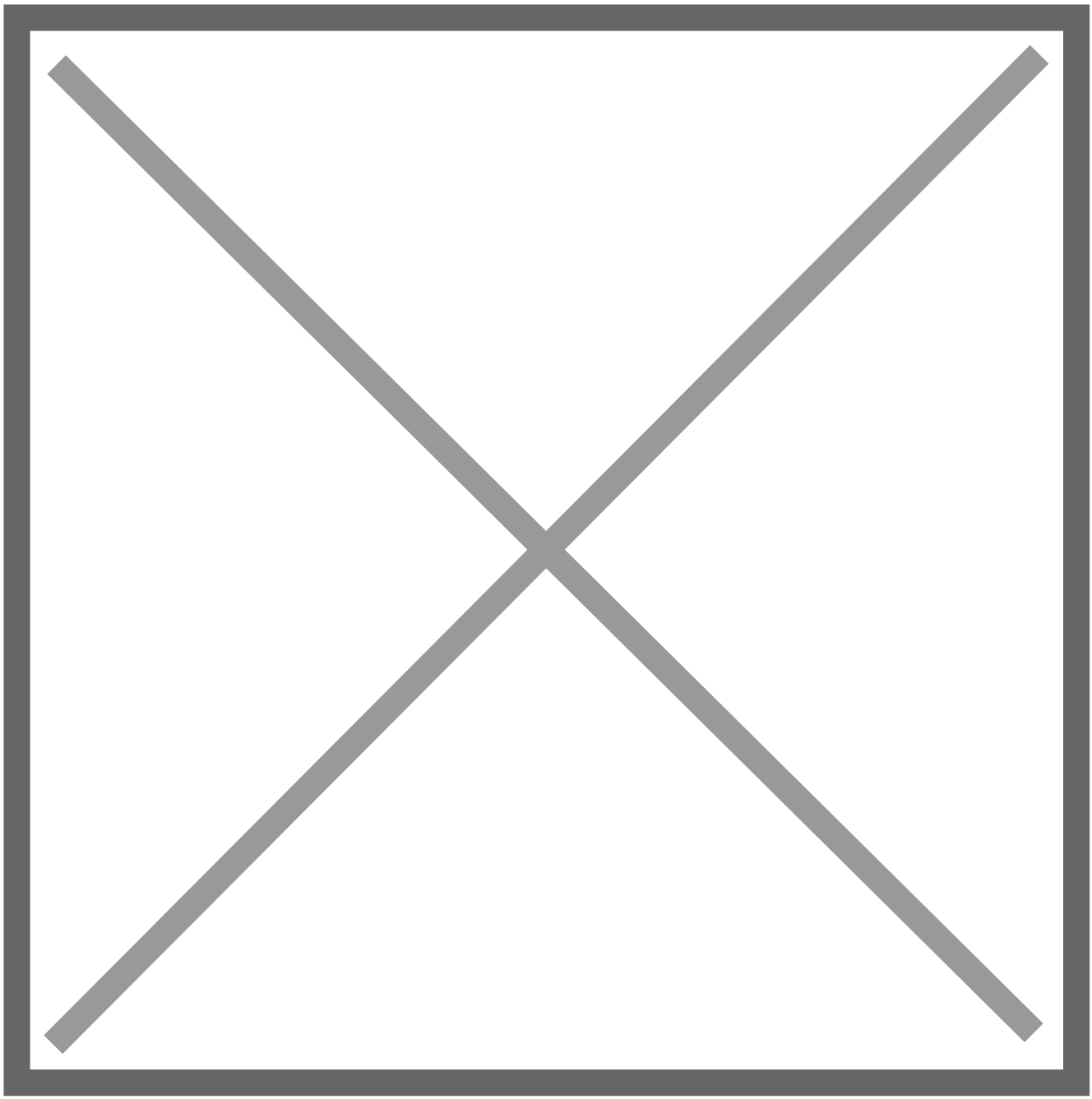

Fernando Mendoza, quarterback for the Indiana Hoosiers, becomes emotional after winning the Heisman Trophy at Lincoln Center in New York City Dec. 13, 2025. Mendoza, a Catholic who frequently credits his faith in God and Jesus Christ for his success, incorporates daily Mass and Bible studies into his routine and gives glory to God in post-game interviews, as he did in his Heisman acceptance speech. (OSV News/USA TODAY Sports/Reuters/Heisman Trust/Todd Van Emst)

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As he waited for the announcement of who would win the Heisman Trophy — awarded to the best college football player of the year — Dominican Fr. Patrick Hyde turned to one of his fellow friars and said, "I have never been so invested in the outcome of an award."

After all, Hyde has become a big fan of Fernando Mendoza, the star quarterback of the football team at Indiana University in Bloomington, where the priest serves as pastor of St. Paul Catholic Center on the school's campus and where Mendoza has attended Mass.

Hyde not only celebrates the football player that Mendoza is, he also appreciates the person Mendoza is and the way the quarterback embraces his faith in God.

So, when Mendoza was announced as the winner of the Heisman on Dec. 13 in a ceremony in New York City, Hyde rejoiced with the other friars watching the event on television.

"Watching Fernando win was so wonderful," the priest told The Criterion, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. "When good things happen to good people, it's a win for everyone. His speech was a testament to his hope and determination."

His speech was also an all-inclusive thank-you to all the people who have made a difference in his life, starting with the way he has begun nearly every post-game interview this season.

"First, I want to thank God for giving me an opportunity that once felt a world away," Mendoza said.

Seconds later, he added, "This moment is an honor. It's bigger than me. It's a product of a family, team, community and a whole lot of people who believed in me long before anybody knew my name."

Getting more emotional with each thank-you, he spoke with love about his teammates and shared praise for the fans who have supported him in his one year at Indiana.

Then his expressions of love turned toward his brother, the back-up quarterback at Indiana.

"And to my lifelong teammate, Alberto, my brother and closest confidante, the one I trust more than anybody to get through a tough day, tough play. I love you, bro," he said. "I love you and thank you for always giving it to me straight, no matter the circumstance."

His thoughts then turned to his teammates and coaches at Christopher Columbus High School in Miami, a private Catholic college-preparatory high school run by the Marist Brothers. "Thank you to coach Dunn and Christopher Columbus High School for giving me a home, a dream to follow and more importantly a brotherhood."

After thanking his coaches, including head coach Curt Cignetti, Mendoza focused on his parents and grandparents.

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"My family's unconditional love and belief kept me going and pushed me forward," he said. "These are people who (believed in) me long before football did."

The emotion poured from him as he talked about his mother, who has endured multiple sclerosis.

"Mami, this is your trophy as much as it is mine," he said. "You've always been my biggest fan. You're my light, you're my why and biggest supporter. Courage, love — those have been my first playbook and the playbook that I carry at my side through my entire life. You tell me toughness doesn't need to be loud, it can be quiet and strong. It's choosing hope.

"It's believing in yourself when the world doesn't give you much reason to. Together, you and I, are defying what people think is possible. I love you."

He next offered heartfelt words to his father.

"Papi, thank you for grounding me. Thank you for holding me accountable when it was tough. Thank you for reminding me that talent means nothing without discipline, without consistency. … You personified commitment. You picked all of us up whenever we needed it most."

Mendoza then shared a touching salute in Spanish to his parents and grandparents, who all came to the United States from Cuba.

"Por el amor y sacrificio de mis padres y abuelos, los quiero mucho. De toda mi corazon, de toda gracias." ("For the love and sacrifice of my parents and grandparents, I love you. With all my heart, thank you.")

All the thank-yous led to one last message that Mendoza wanted to share, a message about belief, dreams and the path to making a dream come true.

"This is an important one," Mendoza said. "I want every kid out there who feels overlooked and underestimated, I was you. I was that kid, too. I was in your shoes.

"The truth is, you don't need the most stars, hype or rankings. You just need discipline, heart and people who believe in you and your own abilities. I hope this moment shows you that chasing your dreams are worth it, no matter how big or impossible they seem."

Hyde was moved by it all.

"My favorite part was the overall message of hope, joy and humility," the priest said. "In particular, the way he spoke to and about his mother — and his message of encouragement and hope to those who are overlooked."