News



Nuns cheer before the first half of Game 6 in the Western Conference finals NBA basketball playoffs series between the San Antonio Spurs and the Oklahoma City Thunder, Thursday, May 28, 2026, in San Antonio. (RNS/AP/Darren Abate)

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Just before the tip-off of a May 18 playoff game between the Oklahoma City Thunder and San Antonio Spurs, Fr. Danny Grover stood in a spotlight at center court holding a microphone.

"Strong and faithful God," the pastor of St. Matthew Catholic Church in Elk City, Oklahoma, began, "as we come together for this contest, we ask you to bless these athletes. Keep them safe from injury and harm. Instill in them respect for each other and reward them for their perseverance."

Then Grover asked God to be with the fans, too: "Help us to cheer on our teams with dignity. Lead us all to the rewards of your kingdom."

As he concluded his prayer, the crowd of more than 18,000 at Paycom Center in Oklahoma City responded with amens and cheers.

The Thunder ended up losing the game in double overtime. But win or lose, Grover said he relishes the opportunity to deliver the invocation, which he has been doing about once a year for the past eight years for the NBA team.

"I don't think you can ever have too much prayer," the Oklahoma City native said in an interview this week, noting that the prayer he read was adapted from the *Book of Blessings*. "We live in a godless time, and I've had Catholics and non-Catholics in the arena thank me, saying, 'We're so happy that you're praying.' "



Fr. Danny Grover, right, with his brother Matthew before the May 18, 2026, Thunder game at which he delivered the invocation. Thunder star Shai Gilgeous-Alexander signs autographs in the background. (RNS/Courtesy of Danny Grover)

The Thunder is the only NBA team to hold a public, ecumenical invocation before the singing of the national anthem and player introductions — a longstanding tradition that continues to confound basketball fans who live outside OKC.

This ritual originated during the 2005-2006 season, when the New Orleans Hornets (now the Pelicans) were displaced by Hurricane Katrina and played their home games in Oklahoma City. The Hornets' first owner, Baptist businessman George Shinn, introduced the prayer after his team joined the NBA in 1988. (He told The New York Times he prayed that the NBA would accept his bid and promised to honor God if it came to pass.) The Seattle Supersonics moved to Oklahoma City and rebranded as the Thunder before the 2008-2009 season, and the team kept the

tradition going.

Over the years, dozens of local faith leaders have given the invocation, including Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy, rabbis and Native American spiritual leaders. The speakers are instructed to keep their prayers short and nondenominational — meaning no mention of Jesus. It's unclear if leaders of other religions have been invited to give the invocation; the Thunder did not respond to requests for comment.

> 'God is a fan of humanity — not sports teams. He doesn't choose sides.'
> —Fr. Danny Grover
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Dan Mahoney, the team's vice president of broadcasting and corporate communications, told The Oklahoman newspaper in 2016 that Thunder fans are proud that theirs is the lone team to conduct an invocation.

"We feel people's faith is important to them," he said at the time. "It's an important part of their lives, and as they gather in our arena to support our team each night we feel it's appropriate to build in that invocation as a prayer or silent reflection or whatever they want it to be."

Seventy percent of Oklahoma adults identify as Christian, according to Pew Research Center, and 47% of them as evangelical Protestants. The state is often referred to as the "buckle" of the Bible Belt, and it's not uncommon for amateur sporting events to begin with a collective prayer.

Rabbi Vered Harris, the spiritual leader of Temple B’nai Israel, a Reform synagogue in Oklahoma City, has delivered the invocation a half dozen times, most recently before a May 7 conference semifinals game between the Thunder and the Los Angeles Lakers.

"It's booked through the entertainment department, and while I think that many of my religious colleagues would take issue with the idea of prayer being entertainment, I do think that there's an aspect of it that reflects our culture in Oklahoma," Harris said. "Faith is a part of so much of what we do, so for me it fits."

Harris said she spends time thinking about and writing a new prayer each time she is invited to give the invocation.

"What I'm trying to do is not necessarily represent Judaism or another religion, but invite everybody to think about the incredible skills and sportsmanship that it takes to be on that court," Harris said. "The determination that the teams show is also something that we can model in our own lives in terms of sportsmanship and playing fair in life."

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The NBA has long been a space where players have felt comfortable talking about and practicing their faiths. This season in particular provided several notable moments involving religious players.

This week, a group of nuns blessed Spurs forward and devout Catholic Luke Kornet before a game in San Antonio, video of which went viral. They were also seen cheering on the team near the floor, as live commentators drew attention to them on air. Spurs star Victor Wembanyama wore a thobe to Game 6 May 28 in honor of the Muslim holiday Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice.

Earlier in the season, Jaylen Brown of the Boston Celtics played while fasting during Ramadan and spoke on social media about how Islam has taught him discipline. And the Chicago Bulls waived guard Jaden Ivey after he criticized the NBA for promoting Pride Month, which he said goes against his beliefs as a Christian.

Basketball and Christianity have been intertwined since the sport's earliest days, said Paul Putz, director of the Faith & Sports Institute at Baylor University. James Naismith, who invented the game in 1891 while teaching at a YMCA training school in Massachusetts, was influenced by a 19th-century Christian movement that promoted physical fitness.



Paul Putz is director of the Faith & Sports Institute at Baylor University (RNS/Courtesy of Baylor University)

"The sport itself is very rooted in muscular Christianity, and in Naismith's vision for Christian witness and mission." Putz said. "When he applied to the school, he said that he wanted to 'win men for the master through the gym.' And out of that desire, he creates basketball." He added that YMCA missionaries helped spread the game around the world.

Many of the best American college and professional basketball players of the early 20th century were Jewish and Catholic. During the 1970s, an evangelical sports movement began to spread through college and professional sports leagues, leading to the creation of team chapel services, Bible studies and off-season retreats, said Putz, author of the forthcoming book *Jesus and James Naismith: A History of Basketball and Christianity from Origins to the NBA*.

NBA teams have embraced different ways to reflect the faiths of their players, owners and fans. The Atlanta Hawks introduced a pregame invocation during the 1970-1971 season, Putz said, but the practice was discontinued. For its first 16 seasons, the Dallas Mavericks played "God Bless America" in lieu of the national anthem — a decision made by the team's evangelical general manager, Norm Sonju.

For several years, players on the Milwaukee Bucks have formed a circle on the court after games to pray together. Players from the opposing team sometimes join the circle, as Golden State Warriors superstar and outspoken Christian Steph Curry did after a game last year.

Today, all 30 NBA teams have at least one volunteer chaplain who caters to the spiritual needs of the players, and every NBA arena has a designated area where players from both teams can gather before a game to pray.

On May 30, the Thunder will host the Spurs for a pivotal Game 7, with the winner to face the New York Knicks in the Finals. The odds favor the Thunder prevailing on their home court, but the outcome of this fiercely contested series is uncertain. But what is certain is that before the game, fans will stand with bowed heads as a local faith leader shares a few words of prayer.

"God is a fan of humanity — not sports teams," Grover, the Catholic priest, said when asked if he thinks the Thunder's recent success can be attributed to the invocation. "He doesn't choose sides."

Read this next: Meet the basketball-loving nuns who are taking the NBA playoffs by storm