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The Salesian Sisters greet players prior to Game 1 of the NBA Finals basketball series between the New York Knicks and the San Antonio Spurs, Wednesday, June 3, 2026, in San Antonio. (AP/Eric Gay)

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San Antonio — June 5, 2026

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Victor Wembanyama stepped off the court for a moment before Game 1 of the NBA Finals, accepted greetings from a handful of well-wishers in San Antonio Spurs jerseys, then bowed his head to join them in a quick prayer.

They're the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco.

On game nights, they're called the Spurs Nuns.

New York has Ben Stiller, Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan among its superfans; San Antonio has a group of nuns who wear Spurs jerseys over their habits. It's a relationship that goes back at least 20 years or so, and to the sisters it makes perfect sense.

"We're serving the poor and the young," said Sr. Bernadette Mota, the director of the department of mission advancement for the Salesian Sisters. "And in order to reach the young where they're at, you have to love what they love and then they'll love who you love. So, we have that affinity with the Spurs because it gives us an avenue to do our mission with the young people that we serve."

This tale started in a most unique way.

As the story goes, a couple decades ago, some of the retired sisters — who happened to be native Texans and big Spurs fans — would watch the games on television or listen on the radio, some even doing so while hospitalized. They would cheer for all the players, and for coach Gregg Popovich. But Popovich would sometimes seem a bit angry on the sidelines, prompting some of the sisters to reach out with letters.

"They would write to Coach Popovich and let him know when they thought he was doing great and let him know when he lost his temper — but they were really supporting him," Mota said. "He's the one that actually responded back to them, thanking them for their support for him and for the Spurs. It was really just a very organic conversation that started all of this."

Yes, it's true: The nuns would scold Pop for bad behavior.

"They would, in a nice way, in a very nice way," Mota said. "They'd be like, 'Coach, you lost your temper there, come on, we're praying for you, you can do better.'"

Popovich and the Spurs have kept a relationship with the sisters since. Popovich's late wife Erin, who died in 2018, also had close ties to the sisters and their work. It has been a mutually beneficial relationship; the Spurs love having the sisters at games, and the story of what the nuns do when they're not watching basketball has led to many people offering to help their mission.

"We've had a number of individual people reach out and they've been donating anywhere from $10 to $100 and we've had a few ones who have larger capacity reach out, too," Mota said. "All of this is divine providence, God's gift, because we're actually very much in need. Our mission, we rely on the generosity of people who are our partners and collaborators in our mission."

The sisters aren't the only fan group that the Spurs have embraced. This season also brought the Jackals — a group that was envisioned by Wembanyama with hopes of simulating what happens in European soccer matches, with organized chants, drumming and the like throughout the game.

The nuns pray. The Jackals chant "Olé, Olé, Olé."

Different approach, same intentions.

"I've known for years that the Spurs community had this strength in them," Wembanyama said. "Now to finally see it being channeled into something organized and efficient and effective, it's a great joy."

Joy. That's the word the sisters use as well.

It was certainly noted by those around the Spurs that the sisters gave Luke Kornet a special blessing during the Western Conference finals and he came up with an incredible chasedown block midway through the fourth quarter of Game 7 in Oklahoma City, helping to ensure that San Antonio would win that game and earn this finals trip.

Divine intervention? Maybe.

It's also not lost on the sisters that Pope Leo XIV's prayer intention for June is on the value of sports and how they can promote peace and respect across the globe.

"I don't know if his people who helped him out in terms of creating prayer intentions were also in tune with what's going on with the sisters and the San Antonio Spurs," Mota said. "Maybe, maybe not. I have no idea. But I just thought it was pretty

awesome that his prayer intention for June is for sports."

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