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Former Chicago Bears coach Mike Ditka pauses to talk with the media following a private memorial service

Former Chicago Bears coach Mike Ditka pauses to talk with the media following a private memorial service for the late Chicago Bears running back Walter Payton Nov. 5, 1999. Ditka, who was open about his Catholic faith, died on Oct. 9, 2026, at 86. (OSV News/Reuters/Sue Ogrocki)

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Mike Ditka, the Hall of Fame football player and fiery coach who led the Chicago Bears to their only Super Bowl championship, died Oct. 9 at age 86. His family announced his death, remembering him not only as a football legend but as "the heart of our family."

Known as "Iron Mike" and "Da Coach," Ditka built a reputation on toughness, discipline and an unmistakable intensity. Yet beyond the stadium and the sideline, he spoke with striking directness about another defining force in his life: his Catholic faith.

"I am so grateful for the Roman Catholic faith with which I was raised," Ditka said in a 2018 interview with OnePeterFive. "My dad didn't go to church, but my mom was a

terrific Catholic — a fervent convert to the faith — and always saw that we went to Mass and Catholic school."

For Ditka, reportedly a member of the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic faith was not an incidental part of his upbringing. It was a gift from his mother, rooted in the sacraments and the discipline of Catholic education. Growing up in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, he attended St. Titus grade school, staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph. He served as an altar boy throughout grade school and occasionally served Mass while attending the University of Pittsburgh.

He remembered the religious sisters who taught him as demanding, but formative.

"I wouldn't trade that for anything," he said.

That gratitude remained evident decades later. Ditka spoke candidly about the importance of the sacraments, particularly Confession and holy Communion, and lamented what he saw as a decline in religious commitment.

"That's just why Confession matters," he said. "You gotta own up to what you do."

His words carried the same bluntness that made him famous in football.

"Well, if you take God out of your daily life, that's scary," he said in the interview.

He is survived by his second wife, Diana, and his four children from a previous marriage that ended in divorce. Funeral arrangements were not immediately available.

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Ditka's toughness was no act confined to the coaching box. Drafted by the Bears in 1961, he helped Chicago win the NFL championship in 1963. He later played for the Philadelphia Eagles and Dallas Cowboys, earning five Pro Bowl selections and becoming the first tight end inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, in 1988. He helped Dallas win Super Bowl VI as a player and later won another Super Bowl as an assistant coach with the Cowboys.

His greatest public triumph came after he returned to Chicago as head coach in 1982. The 1985 Bears went 15-1 in the regular season before overwhelming the New

England Patriots, 46-10, in Super Bowl XX in January 1986. The victory secured the franchise's only Super Bowl title and made Ditka one of the defining figures in Chicago sports history. He was twice named NFL Coach of the Year during his tenure with the Bears.

The football world remembered a fierce competitor and a leader whose demanding style matched the physicality of the game. But Ditka's public reflections on faith revealed a different dimension of his character: a man unembarrassed to credit his mother, his Catholic schooling and the sacraments for shaping his life.

"It's beautiful what she gave me, in the faith," Ditka said in his OnePeterFive interview. "I believe every bit that the church teaches. Confession matters. Communion matters."