

On March 31, 1931, a little over an hour into a bumpy Transcontinental and Western Airways Flight 599 from Kansas City, Missouri to Los Angeles, the right wing of the plane snapped off. All 8 passengers on board were killed in the ensuing crash.

Among them was Knute Rockne, the legendary coach of Notre Dame.

He was coach of the Fighting Irish for 13 years, and today is still one of the most well known coaches of the game. In his 13 years at the helm of the Fighting Irish, he guided the team through 3 championship seasons, winning the Rose Bowl in 1925. As coach he was known as "the maker of men," a nickname which described the way he treated the players. He approached them with a level of respect which affected the whole team and in turn, his players changed him.

He was born in Norway in 1888, and immigrated to America with his parents. His record at Notre Dame was 105-12-5, making him the winningest coach in college football. He revolutionized the game by popularizing the forward pass.

When the victims of the crash were discovered, it was found Rockne was holding a rosary, which still exists to this day, held by a descendent of the priest who baptized Rockne. Included as well is a small prayer book found tucked inside Rockne's personal bag, with an inscription inside the front cover written by Father Vincent Mooney, Class of 1916: "A loyal friend, May the blessings of God descend upon you and yours and remain forever."

It might not be too surprising to find religious items among the coach for a Catholic university, but Rockne was actually raised as a Lutheran. He came to Notre Dame's campus in 1910, earned a degree in 1914, and developed an interest in Catholicism. Fr. Mooney, who was himself a baseball player at Notre Dame before he became a priest, was Rockne's coach. Mooney would baptize Rockne privately on November 25, 1925, the day before a tough game against Northwestern. Mooney finished the ceremony by giving Knute a rosary, the one found in the crash that Rockne always carried with him.

An inspiration for Rockne was his players who took their faith seriously. Rockne rote that he used to be impressed by the sight of his players receiving Holy Communion every morning, and that he finally made it a point to go to Mass with them on the morning of the game. He said it probably looked odd for the general public to see the team rush off to Mass as soon as they got off the train when in town for a game while the coach went to the hotel. So at first, if just for appearance, he went to Mass on game day.

Worried about a big game while out east, he got up early and sat in the hotel lobby alone with his thoughts. It was 2 or 3 a.m. and Rockne was talking to some bellboys in conversation. However about 5 or 6 a.m., while pacing the lobby of the hotel, he suddenly ran into two of his own players who were heading out. Knute asked where on earth they could be going at such an hour. He went back to the lobby where he wasn't seen, but kept seeing player after player in pairs go out, and finally got near the door to

question the next player who came along. Each one said they were going to Mass, and so Knute joined them. He wrote that even though they didn't know it at the time, they were making a big impression on him, and when he saw all of them walk to the Communion rail to receive, and realized the several hours of sleep they had sacrificed to do this, he understood what a powerful ally Jesus was in their lives. And he said then he himself saw the light, and knew what was missing in his life, and later on had the great pleasure of joining them at the Communion rail. Soon after that he talked to several priests who gave him books to read about the faith.

On November 21, 1925, the day after his baptism, Knute Jr got in line for his First Holy Communion. He whispered, as his dad was with him, "Daddy you know you can't come with me only Catholics receive Communion." But when both knelt, Fr. Mooney whispered in his year "Everything's all right Junior; your dad was baptized yesterday."

After Mass the older Rockne went to Cartier Field where the team rallied for a come-from-behind 13-10 win.

In the years that followed, Knute would live out his faith, becoming a spiritual leader for his teams and the campus community. His faith was reflected in his last act as he reached for a rosary and sought comfort in prayer. The rosary was found by the first responders and given to Knute's wife, Bonnie; years later she gave it to the family of Fr. Mooney. Each subsequent holder of willed it to another relative.

Years later, Coach Gerry Faust, who wasn't as successful as Rockne with a record, and was coach from 1981-1985, would also be open about his Catholic faith, spending many days at Catholic school fundraisers, and who would tell anyone who would listen to him about his Catholic faith and love for our blessed Mother. Loui Holtz would also do the same thing.

A truly great coach, but also someone who realized that in life, there are more important things than even national championships, and that is getting to heaven.

In this week's readings, we hear of how the number of disciples continues to grow, and Peter says that we are "chosen and precious in the sight of God" and challenges us to be "built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer special sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." What the players on Knute's team knew, and what Knute came to know, is that this happens in so many ways as Mass.

At my first parish after Easter, Holy Name of Jesus, we had a Mass appeal if you will right at Easter; we put up posters of parishioners with a quote over the photo. The campaign was "Mass: It matters" and people shared why it mattered to them. The hope was that it would challenge people a bit to come back the following week. The pews were not as full on the 2nd Sunday of Easter as they were on Easter, but I do think the campaign had an impact. And I think about that statement a lot, for just last week at our parish council meeting the topic came up of how many come to Mass. Each week it is about 800 to 900 people; the same it is at most all parishes out there in terms of the

ratio of weekly attendees to total parish members. For us about 35% or so of the total number of registered people regularly come to Mass.

Now the question is, to again borrow from Blessed Carlo Acutis who I quoted last week, who are so few people at Mass? He knew that people just weren't aware of all that happens there. But even for us who go, we might not think about how Mass is meant to impact us and why it's so important.

First and foremost, this is where we encounter God. In our Gospel, at the last Supper, Jesus in saying "I am the way the truth and the life," Jesus affirms His divinity; think of it as "I am God who am the Way the Truth and the Life." The disciples are worried and wondering what's next; Philip has a reasonable request in asking to see the Father, but Jesus tells him that in seeing the Son, he has seen the Father, again re-affirming His divinity. Jesus is the high priest; the priests of old would go into the Temple and offer animal sacrifices as a way of atonement, a way of offering up part of creation back to God. Jesus though is the Sacrificial Lamb, offering the perfect sacrifice. Jesus wants to bring about our salvation and give the disciples, and us too, this salvation and peace. God reconciles us to Himself through the death of the Son. And in the resurrection, which we share in too as Jesus says in my Father's house there are many dwelling places, we too arise with Jesus. Mass gives us a glimpse of heaven, but also helps us to get to heaven. For it's at Mass that we reflect not just on a teacher or a philosopher, but God Himself. Where we reflect on Jesus' love for us, but are also fed by Him. For through meditating on His word, and most importantly in receiving Holy Communion, we are saved from our sins, and are able to become better people.

So how do we get the most out of Mass? I'd suggest three key things: 1) let God speak to you by being fully engaged; 2) be fed by God and 3) feed one another.

With that first part, letting God speak to you, I'd again go back to the second reading: "...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." Note that when we come to Mass, we aren't here to be entertained. This isn't a concert. Rather we come to listen, and let God speak to us, but also to fully engage. Remember through our baptism, we are all priests too - the people join with the celebrant, joining their prayers and sacrifices at Mass. Just like those who went into the Temple, the priests of ancient times, we go into the Temple too to exercise our priesthood and grow closer to God.

With the second part, we are fed by the Eucharist. Jesus knows we need a reminder that He is with us, and as such we are not given just a symbol, but Jesus Himself. We present again the sacrifice of Good Friday on the altar. It's why we are silent and ring the bells at the consecration, at those powerful words "given up for you." Where we gaze again and again upon the wafer and the chalice that the Holy Spirit transforms through our prayers into the Body and Blood of Christ. This is Jesus saying to you I love you, and I am with you. This is Jesus saying "let me take away your sins." This is Jesus saying "you are not alone." Through the Eucharist, we can have our hearts not be troubled. We can bring our sins, our problems, are situations to Jesus and be helped by Him. But just as we eat several times a day and inevitably get hungry again, so too is it

with our journey through life - we need God to continually feed us, which He does, at Mass.

And lastly, we look for ways to feed one another. They didn't know it, but Rockne's players were doing that for him. Seeing those young men get up so early, because being with the Lord was so important to them, it had such a deep impact on Rockne that he not only joined them that day, but started learning more about the Catholic faith and then becoming Catholic himself. Knute then passed on the faith by becoming a spiritual leader to others, and speaking about his faith. Through our willingness to speak about the faith, and to do actions of love and mercy for others like the deacons in the first reading, we too feed one another. When we are in the right place, having been fed by God, we can then feed one another with the love of God, as opposed to feeding the world the wrong things, such as saying to our families and kids or others what matters most is your bank account, how much power you have, how far you go at school, how many trophies you get. All of these things turn to dust and pale in comparison to what matters most, coming to know the God who is love. When Jesus says the believers in Him will do greater things than He, He refers to all of us, the body of believers, and all the work that has been done in evangelizing and spreading the Gospel and helping the needy - all of it done as a way of living out the faith. What amazing things we can do when we take the commission to feed one another seriously.

Jesus, in saying "where I am going you know the way," is a verse I reflect on a lot at funerals, often talking about the person's life in the context of they knew where they were going too because they followed Jesus there. The same is true for us, for heaven is truly what eye has not seen and ear not heard in it's beauty and in the joy that awaits us. The problem is in life, we can get sidetracked. Football is great, but far more important is getting to heaven and winning the game of life, which Jesus helps us to do. So let's never forget all the happens at Mass, making it a core component of our lives, being fed and feeding a hungry world.