

'Catholic Night' at Petco Park Presents Opportunity to Evangelize

By Denis Grasska

SAN DIEGO — When it comes to evangelization, Jesus wants you to step up to the plate and take your best swing, even if that means striking out from time to time.

For those who find that intimidating, Catholic Night at Petco Park presents a simple, non-threatening and enjoyable way to accomplish that task.

Now in its fifth year, the local Catholic community's annual outing to a San Diego Padres baseball game is all about joyfully witnessing to the faith in a public setting and inviting others — including non-practicing Catholics and even non-believers — to be part of the family, if only for one fun-filled evening.

This year's Catholic Night will be on Friday, July 26, when the Padres take on the San Francisco Giants at 7:10 p.m.

Those who purchase their tickets at padres.com/catholic will receive a free, limited-edition Padres baseball cap commemorating "Catholic Night." A representative of the Catholic community is expected to deliver the game ball to the pitcher's mound at the start of the game, and live crowd shots of those seated in the specially reserved "Catholic Night" sections of the stadium will be shown throughout the night.

"It's up to us as a community to show up, be strong, show our pride ... and to really go there with an evangelical heart, know that you are the face of Christ in that ballpark for that one night and know that that's a powerful thing," said Kimberli Halpin, who first proposed the idea of Catholic Night and has organized the event each year with the diocese's approval.

Halpin recalled Jesus' promise to be present wherever two or more are gathered in His name,



CATHOLIC NIGHT: St. Brigid parishioners with their pastor, Msgr. Steven Callahan (bottom left), are seen enjoying Catholic Night at Petco Park in 2017.

and she noted that last year's Catholic Night drew more than 1,700 people, including Bishop Robert W. McElroy and Auxiliary Bishop John P. Dolan.

"Let's use that great prayerful moment," urged Halpin, who each year brings to the game Miraculous Medals and pamphlets on how to pray the rosary, ready to offer them "very gently, softly and lovingly" to anyone who expresses interest.

John J. Ohle handles all of the logistics required to bring Our Mother of Confidence parishioners out to the event, including chartering a bus for the occasion.

The Catholic hats and T-shirts worn by attendees, he said, represent "a very visible demonstration of that pride" of being Catholic.

"Folks feel comfortable approaching others, asking them what parish they are from," said Ohle, who added that Catholic Night is also a stress-free experience for fallen-away Catholics and non-Catholic guests.

"There are no rituals to follow," he said. "Just come and enjoy yourself."

Msgr. Mark Campbell, pastor of Our Mother of Confidence Parish, agrees.

"At our parish, we emphasis radical hospitality and try to get the message out that all are welcome here," said Msgr. Campbell, who will be attending with his parishioners for a fifth year. "Catholic Night at Petco offers an invitation to folks to come just as they are and to enjoy fellowship with Catholic folks of all ages."

Five years in, Catholic Night at Petco Park is already accomplishing its mission of opening minds and softening hearts.

About seven months after the first Catholic Night, as she was waiting in line for confession, Halpin was approached by a woman she had never met before, who hugged her and tearfully shared that her husband had recently attended Mass for the first time in 30 years — something the woman credited to his positive experience at Catholic Night.

Last year, Halpin invited to the game a long-time friend who isn't even convinced that God exists. She said he was initially reluctant to attend an event where he expected to be judged and "Bible-thumped."

But, after the game, he expressed surprise at the warm reception he had received and was impressed by the joy that his new Catholic acquaintances seemed to exude. Halpin said he told her that they had "evangelized through their love," letting him know that he was welcome but not exerting any pressure to convert.

Msgr. Campbell shared that three civilly married couples who attended the game with his parish group at the invitation of friends have had their marriages convalidated in recent years at Our Mother of Confidence Church.

Lisa Mortiz, a member of St. Martin of Tours Parish in La Mesa, also has a story to tell.

"We have had a great experience every time we have attended Catholic Night at Petco," said Moritz, for whom this will be her fourth time. "It is wonderful to see people from so many different parishes. The best part is being able to share a Catholic experience even with family members who no longer attend Mass."

She shared that her 28-year-old son accompanied her last year and sat next to Bishop Dolan.

"He came away impressed with how easy it was to talk with [the bishop] and how down-to-earth he is," Moritz said. "My son is not back to Mass yet, but that night planted the seed and God is definitely working in his life."

For more information, visit www.sd-catholic.com/catholic-night-at-petco or contact Kimberli Halpin at kimberli@sd-catholic.com. Halpin welcomes photos and stories from this year's and previous years' events.

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