

Baseball's appeal grabs priests, women religious

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Depending on where you attend Sunday Mass, your homilist might be:

•A former clubhouse boy for a minor-league baseball team.

•A great-nephew of a one-time New York Yankees owner.

•An October traveler who attended all seven World Series games one season.

And parishioners of Holy Ghost Church in Gates have even found the Toronto Blue Jays working their way into homilies on those weekends when Father Kevin E. McKenna speaks.

"The people kind of enjoy it. Often times, after Mass, people will come up to you to talk about their favorite baseball team," said Father McKenna, diocesan chancellor, who lives at Holy Ghost.

Father McKenna has been a Blue Jays fan since their debut season in 1977. He travels each year for games at the SkyDome, often accompanied by Father R. Richard Brickler, pastor of Rochester's St. Boniface Church and the new director of ministry to priests.

One of Father McKenna's most memorable experiences was attending three World Series games during Toronto's championship runs in 1992-93. For one of those contests, a friend arranged tickets for Father McKenna through Los Angeles Dodgers broadcaster Vin Scully.

"He was so gracious," Father McKenna recalled of his meeting with Scully in a Toronto hotel lobby. "I asked if I could give him something, and he said, 'Say a prayer for me and my family.' I said, 'I'll say a novena for you!'"

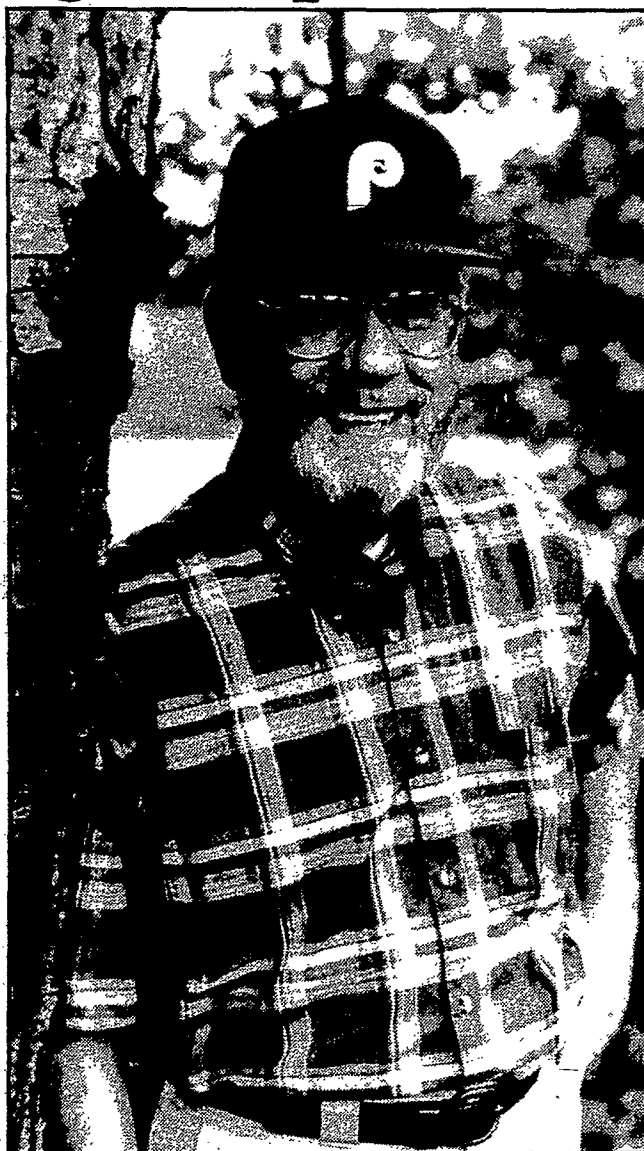
Another World Series buff is Father Robert J. Downs, pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Moravia. A longtime Pittsburgh fan, he was present at every game of the 1979 World Series between the Pirates and Baltimore Orioles — won 4 games to 3 by the Pirates.

"I try to plan my annual vacation in October, in case any team I have an emotional attachment to makes it into the World Series," said Father Downs. In addition, he has season tickets for the Auburn Astros who play in brand-new Falcon Park.

Father Robert M. Egan, pastor of St. Anthony's Church in Groton, also looks forward to visiting the Auburn facility as soon as his schedule allows.

"I like baseball very, very much. The only trouble is, I don't get to see it much," said Father Egan.

Even so, he has a few minutes each day to keep up-to-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Father Philip J. Billotte said he "watched every bit" on TV of the Philadelphia Phillies' 1980 World Series win over Kansas City.

date through the morning newspaper. Yet this plan was foiled last August when the major-leaguers went on strike.

"You couldn't read the box scores over breakfast," Father Egan lamented.

In Chemung County, an occasional figure at Elmira Pioneers games is Father Joseph P. McCaffrey, pastor of

the St. Anthony's/St. Patrick's cluster in Elmira. Meanwhile, Father Christopher E. Linsler, pastor of the Roman Catholic Community of St. Casimir and St. Charles Borromeo, is a big fan of Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda.

The Philadelphia Phillies are the top choice of Father Philip J. Billotte, pastor of the Naples/Prattsburg Roman Catholic Community.

"I was from Pennsylvania and my uncle always used to listen to Phillies games on the radio," Father Billotte explained.

In the mid-1950s, Father Billotte spent four years as clubhouse attendant for the Corning Red Sox. He got to know several future Boston Red Sox, not to mention countless other players who never rose above the minor-league level.

"That was a rough time for a lot of the guys. A lot were homesick," Father Billotte recalled. "I'd sit there and listen to them; it was all I could do."

Minor-league baseball also holds strong appeal for women religious, according to Sister Barbara Hamm, RSM. She enjoys watching Rochester Red Wings each summer, as do several other Sisters of Mercy of Rochester.

A Red Wing fan since the 1940s, Sister Hamm has mixed feelings about the club's planned move from Silver Stadium to Frontier Field in 1996.

"I do enjoy (Silver) stadium, but I also have some anticipation of seeing what the new one is going to be like," said Sister Hamm, principal of St. Louis School in Pittsford.

Ironically, an order priest in the diocese with blood ties to baseball royalty is not even a big follower of the sport.

Father Nelson J. Ruppert, OFM Cap., is the great-nephew of late Yankees owner Colonel Jake Ruppert, who presided over the Bronx Bombers during the Babe Ruth era. The priest recalls attending Yankees games as a child growing up in New York City.

As he grew older, however, "I knew nothing about baseball because I was in Rome for 13 years (1968-81)," explained Father Ruppert, pastor of Interlaken's St. Francis Solanus Church and Ovid's Holy Cross Church.

One priest who has been rooted to the Yankees non-stop is none other than Bishop Matthew H. Clark — much to the chagrin of Father McKenna, whose beloved Blue Jays vie in the American League's East Division against New York.

"I've tried to work on (Bishop Clark's) conversion, but have not been successful," Father McKenna quipped.

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