

Mention the name “Babe Ruth” and pretty much anyone can tell you he was one of the greatest players to ever play the game of baseball. He was also known for his larger-than-life personality and, of course, launching balls into the bleachers at Yankee Stadium.

But one of the most powerful photos I’ve seen of him was taken less than two months before his death in on June 13, 1948. In the photo, which won a Pulitzer, you see a frail looking Ruth using a bat to support his body, as he was dying from cancer. It was a moment of honor for him at Yankee Stadium.

No photo though can show one’s soul. And shortly before he died, he penned a letter that spoke of a man who had learned much from life and also knew that while cancer might take his body, it would never take his soul. He recognized that while his body caused him to be as he was in that photo, his soul was that way too - and something could be done about it before he died, and what was to reach out to a loving God who was there for him. The letter, published in the Christian magazine Guideposts, reads:

Don’t get the idea that I’m proud of my harum-scarum youth. I’m not. I simply had a rotten start in life, and it took me a long time to get my bearings.

Looking back to my youth, I honestly don’t think I knew the difference between right and wrong. I spent much of my early boyhood living over my father’s saloon, in Baltimore—and when I wasn’t living over it, I was in it, soaking up the atmosphere. I hardly knew my parents.

St. Mary’s Industrial School in Baltimore, where I was finally taken, has been called an orphanage and a reform school. It was, in fact, a training school for orphans, incorrigibles, delinquents and runaways picked up on the streets of the city.

I was listed as an incorrigible. I guess I was. Perhaps I would always have been but for Brother Matthias, the greatest man I have ever known, and for the religious training I received there which has since been so important to me.

I doubt if any appeal could have straightened me out except a Power over and above man—the appeal of God. Iron-rod discipline couldn’t have done it. Nor all the punishment and reward systems that could have been devised. God had an eye out for me, just as He has for you, and He was pulling for me to make the grade.

As I look back now, I realize that knowledge of God was a big crossroads with me. I got one thing straight (and I wish all kids did)—that God was Boss. He was not only my Boss but Boss of all my bosses.

Up till then, like all bad kids, I hated most of the people who had control over me and could punish me. I began to see that I had a higher Person to reckon with who never changed, whereas my earthly authorities changed from year to year.

Those who bossed me had the same self-battles—they, like me, had to account to God. I also realized that God was not only just, but merciful. He knew we were weak and that we all found it easier to be stinkers than good sons of God, not only as kids but all through our lives.

That clear picture, I'm sure, would be important to any kid who hates a teacher, or resents a person in charge. This picture of my relationship to man and God was what helped relieve me of bitterness and rancor and a desire to get even.

I've seen a great number of "he-men" in my baseball career, but never one equal to Brother Matthias. He stood six feet six and weighed 250 pounds. It was all muscle. He could have been successful at anything he wanted to in life—and he chose the church. It was he who introduced me to baseball. Very early he noticed that I had some natural talent for throwing and catching. He used to back me in a corner of the big yard at St. Mary's and bunt a ball to me by the hour, correcting the mistakes I made with my hands and feet.

I never forget the first time I saw him hit a ball. The baseball in 1902 was a lump of mush, but Brother Matthias would stand at the end of the yard, throw the ball up with his left hand, and give it a terrific belt with the bat he held in his right hand. The ball would carry 350 feet, a tremendous knock in those days. I would watch him bug-eyed. Thanks to Brother Matthias I was able to leave St. Mary's in 1914 and begin my professional career with the famous Baltimore Orioles. Out on my own ... free from the rigid rules of a religious school ... boy, did it go to my head. I began really to cut capers.

I strayed from the church, but don't think I forgot my religious training. I just overlooked it. I prayed often and hard, but like many irrespressible young fellows, the swift tempo of living shoved religion into the background.

So what good was all the hard work and ceaseless interest of the Brothers, people would argue? You can't make kids religious, they say, because it just won't take. Send kids to Sunday School and they too often end up hating it and the church.

Don't you believe it. As far as I'm concerned, and I think as far as most kids go, once religion sinks in, it stays there—deep down. The lads who get religious training, get it where it counts—in the roots. They may fail it, but it never fails them.

When the score is against them, or they get a bum pitch, that unfailing Something inside will be there to draw on.

I've seen it with kids. I know from the letters they write me.

The more I think of it, the more important I feel it is to give kids "the works" as far as religion is concerned. They'll never want to be holy—they'll act like tough monkeys in contrast, but somewhere inside will be a solid little chapel. It may get dusty from

neglect, but the time will come when the door will be opened with much relief. But the kids can't take it, if we don't give it to them.

I've been criticized as often as I've been praised for my activities with kids on the grounds that what I did was for publicity. Well, criticism doesn't matter. I never forgot where I came from. Every dirty-faced kid I see is another useful citizen.

No one knew better than I what it meant not to have your own home, a backyard, your own kitchen and ice box. That's why all through the years, even when the big money was rolling in, I'd never forget St. Mary's, Brother Matthias and the boys I left behind. I kept going back.

As I look back those moments when I let the kids down—they were my worst. I guess I was so anxious to enjoy life to the fullest that I forgot the rules or ignored them. Once in a while you can get away with it, but not for long. When I broke training, the effects were felt by myself and by the ball team—and even by the fans.

While I drifted away from the church, I did have my own "altar," a big window of my New York apartment overlooking the city lights. Often I would kneel before that window and say my prayers.

I would feel quite humble then. I'd ask God to help me not make such a big fool of myself and pray that I'd measure up to what He expected of me.

In December, 1946, I was in French Hospital, New York, facing a serious operation.

Paul Carey, one of my oldest and closest friends, was by my bed one night.

"They're going to operate in the morning, Babe," Paul said. "Don't you think you ought to put your house in order?"

I didn't dodge the long, challenging look in his eyes. I knew what he meant. For the first time I realized that death might strike me out. I nodded, and Paul got up, called in a Chaplain, and I made a full confession.

"I'll return in the morning and give you Holy Communion," the chaplain said, "But you don't have to fast."

"I'll fast," I said. I didn't have even a drop of water.

As I lay in bed that evening I thought to myself what a comforting feeling to be free from fear and worries. I now could simply turn them over to God. Later on, my wife brought in a letter from a little kid in Jersey City.

"Dear Babe", he wrote, "Everybody in the seventh grade class is pulling and praying for you. I am enclosing a medal which if you wear will make you better. Your pal—Mike Quinlan.

P.S. I know this will be your 61st homer. You'll hit it."

I asked them to pin the Miraculous Medal to my pajama coat. I've worn the medal constantly ever since. I'll wear it to my grave.

While only a few achieve the level of fame that the Babe did, all of us can follow the same path that he did, in that we find success in a career or a lifestyle, and that we also develop habits that ultimately only give us short-term pleasure. In Ruth's case, his womanizing and drinking were well documented. In the end, we all end up on the outside like Ruth in that photo as our bodies betray us. But also in the end, if we are not careful, we end up with a soul that is also empty. Ruth though apparently opened his eyes to the reality that what mattered most wasn't how to hit the ball, but rather the life lessons that he learned all those years ago from Brother Matthias, which is why he returned to his faith and found God right there waiting for him, ready to welcome him back. For you and me, this week's readings remind us of our need for God and that when we return to Him, His love is always there to bring life once again to our souls.

In our first reading from Zephaniah, we are given a message of hope. The prophet, writing just before the time the people were exiled to Babylon, speaks of how they should not be discouraged for the Lord is in their midst, a mighty savior, and how he has removed the judgment against them. In fact earlier in the book, he writes of future disaster for Israel for turning away from the Lord. But the choice does not lead to destruction. Rather there is judgment and accountability, but also hope. For one is coming, as John tells us in the Gospel, who will baptize with fire. And this Jesus, as Paul says in the second reading, is the God who becomes sin for us, and who is with us always.

This theme of rejoicing and hope is the theme of the day as we mark this Gaudete Sunday or "Rejoice" as Christmas draws near. But it also reminds us of too of the central part of Christianity, which is God winning the victory over sin and death, and why it is so important to reach out to this God who is love, for Jesus has gone all the way down that we might be all the way up.

And so with that in mind, as we prepare for Christmas in just over a week, it's worth doing some self-inventory and reaching out to God who is truly present and never abandons us.

For one, remember that God loves you unconditionally, apart from our success, our popularity or wealth. As Father Henri Nouwen wrote, "Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death - can take that love away." My sense is that

peace must have filled Babe Ruth as he laid in a New York hospital preparing for surgery.

Once one realizes that though, it's important to respond. Ruth acknowledges in his letter he's made mistakes, and then he opens himself up again to God's love. It can be painful at times to acknowledge our own shortcomings. But it's also important for true growth when we take a look at what sins are in our life, or work to find the sins of omission, because we also want to grow as people, not just be content with where we are at. This is what we call cooperating with grace. So we look at all aspects of our life, how we treat people, what we do at home, or how we spend our time and we ask ourselves where am I lacking, and where do I need to grow.

And lastly, we spread joy. Certainly there is the joy of Christmas get-togethers and celebrations, but I'm talking about the true joy that comes from a relationship with the God who is love. As the Babe put it, give kids "the works" as far as religion is concerned but give that to all people. In the home, it's so important to stress to kids how God matters so much. There are so many kids who get the message that school or sports or vacations are at a higher level than God, as the family skips Mass for these things or never thinks much about faith formation. As Babe said in his letter, he didn't know the difference between right and wrong as a kid, because until Brother Matthias came along, no one taught it to him. How many kids and adults alike are in the same situation. They are given the wrong message. Well if that's the case in your family or one you know, re-prioritize. If you know folks who are away from the Church, invite them to Mass. Look for ways to evangelize by talking about the faith or praying for others. And of course evangelize through the testament of your life.

In a little over a week, we'll be gathered here for Christmas Mass and needless to say we'll likely be pretty full. At the 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve we will be very, very full. A cynic might say "where were these folks last week" but I'm always happy to see a great turnout. Do I wish the crowds on Christmas were there each week? Of course. But I know that the reason they are there is because Babe Ruth is right: inside all of us is a chapel where we can encounter God, it's just in some the door doesn't get opened as often as it should. We don't want to acknowledge it, but just like in that photo of a gaunt Babe Ruth using a bat as a cane in the twilight of us life, that happens to us all, and sin certainly does that to a soul. It would be depressing were it not for the fact that God's love for us has no end, which is why He sends us His Son not just in a manger, but continually in our lives, on our altars and in the sacraments. So wherever you are at in life, open the doors to your heart and let in this God who love, and rejoice for you are loved by Him. This God has gone all the way down into the depths of sin so that we may be brought up to Him. Let's rejoice in that, and once we open the doors of the chapel in our hearts, help others who may be lost to do the same, helping them to find the greatest gift possible: a relationship with the God who is love, which is the reason why we rejoice.