

[Culture](#)



Fr. Jayson Landeza receives a personalized Oakland A's jersey, signed by the players, from the team's manager, Mark Kotsay. Laneza, pastor of St. Benedict and Divine Mercy parishes in Oakland, California, has been an A's fan since 1970. (Jayson Landeza)



by Jayson Landeza

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I'll never forget the summer day in 1970 when, at 9 years old, I walked through the tunnel beneath the seats and got my first glimpse of the stunning green hue of the infield grass at the Oakland Coliseum, home of the Oakland Athletics.

Fifty-four years later, on Sunday, Sept. 22, I showed up at the Coliseum and headed for a different spot: the windowless room in the bowels of the park usually reserved for the team's press interviews. I carried my vestments, chalice and altar cloth to transform the room into a chapel.

Celebrating Mass for A's players and staff, along with Catholics attached to the visiting teams, has become routine for me for most of the past decade. But this time was different: It was the last Sunday home game before the A's left Oakland, and the last time I'd be saying this special Mass.

It wasn't the same as the church closings that have afflicted so many Catholics in recent years. But it was difficult, almost like a funeral Mass.

A's Manager Mark Kotsay summed things up for the San Francisco Chronicle: "There was a last Mass this morning at the Coliseum, (with) Father Jay. There was a lot of emotion, there was a lot of power in that room this morning from people that invested their lives here and are rooted here."

To this day, nothing makes my heart jump like the sight of that infield grass.

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For most of the country, the grand finale of the baseball season is just getting started, as the cross-country World Series pits the Los Angeles Dodgers against the New York Yankees. But for many of us in Oakland, baseball came to a sorry end last month.

The A's are moving to Las Vegas. And since their new ballpark won't be ready until the 2028 season, they'll play in a minor league park in Sacramento — nearly 100 miles from the Coliseum — in the meantime. It's a wrenching departure, especially for A's employees who will lose their jobs. But also for many of my friends and parishioners. And for me.

As a native of Berkeley, California, I began life as a San Francisco Giants fan, cheering on Willie Mays, Willie McCovey and Juan Marichal. When the Athletics moved from Kansas City to Oakland in 1968 I moved my allegiance to the team next door rather than rooting for the team across the Bay. I faithfully followed the exploits of my new team, especially during the 1972, 1973 and 1974 seasons when the A's were World Champions, winning three straight World Series titles.

Since my first in 1970, attending A's games has brought me much peace over the last half century. To this day, nothing makes my heart jump like the sight of that infield grass. I endured many cold summer nights in my \$2 seat at Wednesday games, donning a pair of long johns to ward off the bitter breezes from the Bay. Over the years, a priest friend and I attended at least a game a week during the season. The late Fr. Dan Danielson would hold a transistor radio to his ear, listening to the game on the radio, while I took in everything live in the seat next to him.

During the past few years, I often went to games just to clear my mind. Yes, I followed the action on the field, but I also brought homily prep material. I returned emails. I composed articles for the Sunday bulletin. Sometimes, I even brought a Kindle to read a book while enjoying the surroundings.



Fr. Jayson Landeza celebrated his final Mass for the Oakland A's Oct. 22 as the game played its final Sunday home game at the Oakland Coliseum. The team is leaving the city for Las Vegas. (Jayson Landeza)

Most Major League Baseball teams have a Catholic priest assigned to work with the organization to ensure that Sunday Mass is available for the home team. I've been lucky to serve as the unofficial Catholic chaplain/priest for the A's. One of my parishes (St. Benedict in Oakland) is a seven-minute drive from the players' entrance to the Coliseum.

When I was asked to step into the role, it was a dream come true. But it wasn't a dream without challenges. I had to balance Sunday morning Masses in the parish with those at the Oakland Coliseum with the A's. This became more difficult when Jesuit Bishop Michael Barber assigned to me another parish with two worship sites in addition to St. Benedict.

The ministry of Sunday Catholic Masses for MLB teams is coordinated by Catholic Athletes for Christ, an umbrella organization that connects with MLB organizations to ensure that Sunday Masses are available for Catholic players and front-office staff, as well as visiting players and their travel staff. Often broadcasters from the opposing team (and the As) would attend.

Depending on my availability and that of the players, staff and organization, it wasn't unusual for me to minister to other sacramental needs, such as baptisms. I was also available to hear confessions or provide pastoral counseling for members of the A's organization. Depending on whether I had Mass back in the parish, I also ministered to the visiting team's pastoral needs as well.

Over the past few months, as the reality of the A's departure became more apparent and with the final home game fast approaching, my role extended beyond the press room (where we celebrated Sunday Mass). My credentials enabled me to attend the games and wander throughout the Coliseum, where I encountered fans, stadium workers, first-responders, numerous parishioners (past and present) and lifelong friends. Common sentiments were sadness and mourning, along with a bit of anger, frustration and confusion. I spent much of my time in the stands listening to memories of A's players and highlights of classic moments in the team's history, as well as absorbing the pain of loss many A's fans felt.

As happens in many major league cities, Oakland-area Catholic parishes, schools and organizations often purchased tickets in bulk to celebrate an occasion or as an outing. I would often find out their connection to the Diocese of Oakland and pay them a visit, so that they could see that a Catholic priest is associated with the A's organization.

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But my primary focus was always on those who attended the Sunday Mass when the Athletics were at home in Oakland. Over the years, our A's parishioners included, among others, broadcasters Vince Cotroneo and legendary A's catcher Ray Fosse. Current team manager Mark Kotsay faithfully attended our weekly Mass, as well as the organization's vice president for stadium operations, David Rinetti. He served as the team's liaison with the production team for "Moneyball," the screen adaptation of Michael Lewis' book about the A's then General Manager Billy Beane. Rinetti, a graduate of local East Oakland Catholic schools, was the catalyst in enabling Sunday Mass to be celebrated at the Coliseum during baseball season.

At the last Sunday Mass for the Oakland Athletics, A's skipper Mark Kotsay took me aside before Mass to present me with a team jersey, featuring my name across the back, signed by the players. It is now framed in my parish office, lovingly displayed like a shrine to a lost loved one.

Because in truth, with the A's gone, Oakland will never be the same. And neither will I.

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