

Spring marks the opening of the “Church of Baseball”

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ANAHEIM, Calif. (RNS)—Megachurch pastor Rick Warren stood on the mound at Angel Stadium in Anaheim, Calif., and delivered his Easter Sunday pitch.

“Baseball is a game of numbers in which every player falls short of perfection,” said Warren, a best-selling author and pastor of [Saddleback Church](#) in Lake Forest, Calif. “Similarly, in life, while we have all had a few hits or scored a few runs, we strike out a lot.”

Whether we’re superstars or benchwarmers, God’s our biggest fan, Warren concluded.

Pastor Rick Warren preaches from the mound at Easter services for Saddleback Church at Anaheim Stadium in California. (RNS PHOTO/Scott Tokar/Saddleback Church)

To the 50,000 people who watched Warren’s “Sermon on the Mound,” the striking similarities between baseball and religious life were clear as a summer Sunday. But, as a sprint around the bases shows, Warren is just one of a number of preachers, scholars, players and fans who hears echoes of the ethereal when the umpire cries “Play Ball!”

To some, baseball, which F. Scott Fitzgerald famously called “the faith of 50 million people,” is revered as a religion in itself. It follows a seasonal calendar—begun this year on Easter Sunday—and builds towards a

crowning moment. Its players perform priestly rituals, its history abounds with tales of mythic heroes, and its fans study and argue about arcane information with the intensity of Talmudic scholars.

“Like a church, with its orthodoxy and heresies, its canonical myths and professions of faith, its rites of communion and excommunication, baseball appears in these terms as the functional religion of America,” writes religion scholar David Chidester of the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

Or, as Annie Savoy poetically puts it in the 1988 film *Bull Durham*, “The only church that feeds the soul, day in, and day out, is the church of baseball.”

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas, a fellow fan of the Durham Bulls, has written that “there are few things better that Christians can do in and for America than play and watch baseball.”

Shaun Casey, an ethicist at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, isn’t willing to go that far. But he does teach a class called “Church of Baseball” at Wesley.

During the weeklong class, students go to a baseball game, learn to keep score, and read a box score. In addition, they read Robert Bellah’s famous essay on America’s civil religion, watch [Ken Burns’ magisterial documentary on baseball](#), learn about Jackie Robinson’s integration as the first black player in the major leagues, and read how the St. Louis Cardinals beat the vaunted New York Yankees in 1964 by building a team that blended black and white players.

The point of the class, Casey, says, besides convincing students of the “divine blessedness” of the Boston Red Sox and St. Louis Cardinals, is to help seminarians think theologically about pop culture.

“It’s my belief that pastors ought to be able to interpret pop culture to their congregations,” Casey said, adding that ministers who know their way around a baseball diamond are equipped to “connect to the community and empower the people within their congregation to witness to the world.”

Some scholars say the national pastime is an integral part of the country’s civil religion—the secular events and places Americans invest with spiritual significance. Baseball’s civil rituals include having the president throw out the first pitch, as President Obama did in Washington on April 5, and singing the national anthem before games, which began during World War II.

William Herzog II, vice president for academic affairs at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, co-edited a book about baseball and religion called [*The Faith of Fifty Million*](#), which explores the sacred status of baseball in American culture.

Baseball is just a game, Herzog said. It doesn’t feed the hungry, or care for the sick, or settle disputes between warring nations. And yet, he says, there is something ineffably stirring and nearly transcendent about sitting in Boston’s Fenway Park and seeing the outfield where great players once roamed—the “great cloud of witnesses,” or “communion of saints,” if you will.

“There are a lot of things about baseball that tug at the heart strings,” Herzog said. “You don’t see that with any other sport.”