



Marquette University basketball chaplain Jesuit Fr. John Laurance cuts the net in Madison Square Garden after the Golden Eagles men's basketball team won the Big East Tournament in 2023. (Courtesy of Marquette Athletics)



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In 2023, the Marquette University Golden Eagles men's basketball team won the Big East Tournament. As is the custom, the Milwaukee school's players celebrated by cutting down the net. They had some help. Jesuit Fr. John Laurance, the team's then 84-year-old chaplain, also climbed the ladder, scissors in hand, at New York's Madison Square Garden.

Since 2015, Laurance has been present on the bench at the team's home and away games. "Present." It is a word he uses often when describing his role at the Jesuit university.

In an interview with the National Catholic Reporter in the lead-up to the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, the Roman Catholic priest explained that, at its core, being present means being there for the players. Even if it's a "quiet presence," he says. It is about talking to the players and encouraging them. "I know it sounds very minimal," Laurance remarks, but his focus is on the impact.

The presence of a basketball team chaplain also provides a reminder "of the relationship that all things have to God," Laurance tells me. "The ultimate value of just winning," he explains, "is seen within the larger value that there's more going on here than just deciding who is the better team."

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Without hesitation, "presence" is the first word that Richard Rock, chaplain of the St. John's men's basketball team since 2013, uses when I ask him his job description at the university in Queens, New York. It means being "relatable and approachable" to the players, Rock tells me in an interview. It is important that "they know you care."

Rock, 79, tells NCR that he also uses his presence to remind the team of the school's inspiration: St. Vincent de Paul, the 17th-century French priest and founder of the Vincentians who dedicated himself to serving the poor.

In addition to organizing community service, the Vincentian priest describes the prayer that he does with the team before every game. He tells the players to "never forget the poor and homeless that live in the different cities where we play, because they have a name, they have a face and they have a history."

Several other institutions of higher education bring spirituality to the hardwood. Basketball team chaplains can be found at Gonzaga University, University of Notre Dame, Villanova University, Providence College and others.

Laurance and Rock sat courtside when the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament got underway last week (March 18). Both schools saw early exits, with neither team advancing to the Sweet 16. For the players, basketball is about winning. But it falls to these men of the cloth to be there when things don't turn out as hoped.

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Two days before we spoke, Marquette lost a game by two points in overtime. Laurance shares that he had just seen one of the players and he "complimented him on the good game that they played. That was my way of saying, 'Hey, it wasn't all a loss. You invested yourself and there was something very good that came out of it, even though the final outcome wasn't a victory.' "

He knows that there is a right time and place to provide such support. I suggest to Laurance that the time to explain to the players, that there's more to life than just winning basketball games, is not in the locker room five minutes after a loss.

"No, it isn't," he says chuckling. "I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be in the locker room very long."

"They're all about winning," Rock says. "And when they lose, they get down." His job, he says, is to help the players "move on from that."

Rock is also there for athletes following injuries. "How do you pick yourself up?" Rock asks. "For us, it's a faith-based belief that you're going to make it, through the support of God, prayer, your friends and your church."

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Not all of the players have strong religious backgrounds, some aren't Christian and a chaplain on the team's bench is a new experience. "They've very positive" about it,

Rock says. "Even with the prayer."

Laurance acknowledges that some "might be a little nervous that I am going to start pushing religion on them, which I never do. ... I'm a guest in their world."

No doubt, for some fans, God and sports coincide when they are praying for their team to win or a player to make a clutch free throw. Is there any benefit to doing that? Doesn't God have more important things to worry about? I asked Laurance for his perspective.

The Marquette chaplain doesn't seem convinced that fans' prayers can alter the trajectory of a basketball. But he doesn't dismiss the idea either. You don't know what God sees as important, Laurance explains. "There is a spiritual connectivity that you have," he says. "So for [someone] to pray for [the player] to make that free throw, you can't tell me that the prayer doesn't give [the player] a little extra [help]."

Whether God watches basketball games may be unknown; but, for Rock, one thing is for sure: "Talent is a God-given gift," he constantly reminds the players. "Every day when they wake up they need to be thankful for that gift. Not only as individuals but as a team with our coaches and our staff."

At the end of my interview with Laurance, I asked him to describe cutting down the net a couple of years back. He chuckles as he recalls the experience.

"I didn't do any coaching and I didn't do any playing," he tells me. "So, for me to be invited to do this ... it was quite an honor."

"I cut a very little piece," he says.