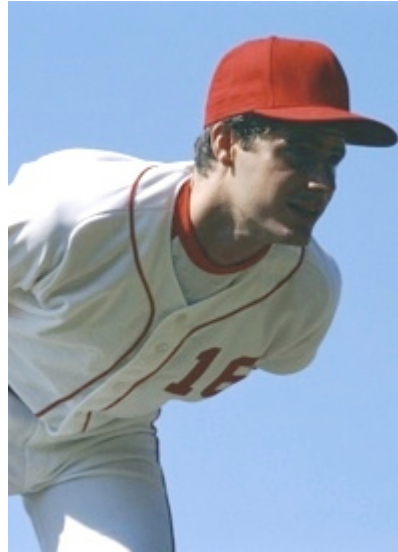




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 31, 2011

“Church of Baseball” Back in Service

Thank God it's Thursday. Not just any, ordinary Thursday. This Thursday is special. This is a great day in the lives of millions of Americans, though you won't find it designated a holiday on your calendar. It is not too much of a stretch to call it a holy day for those more familiar with a scorecard than a Psalter, for whom the "bread of life," is a bun holding an overpriced hot dog. Today is Opening Day of the 2011 baseball season and many will be attending what Annie Savoy has called "the Church of Baseball."



For those who have never met or have somehow forgotten Annie Savoy, she is one of many colorful characters in one of the best of all baseball movies, *Bull Durham*. She is also the narrator heard from at various points in the story, most notably at the very beginning when Annie, played by Susan Sarandon, announces: "I believe in the Church of Baseball."

She has, she assures her audience, tried other religions, including all the major and even some of the minor ones. She has, indeed, cast her bread of faith on many waters and it all came back as soggy bread: "I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan," she recalls. And, lo and behold, she even "gave Jesus a chance," a tryout, you might say, in the Savoy league. "But it just didn't work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me."

Now here we must take issue with Annie's poetic license. The Lord did not come to bring us guilt. That would be redundant. "Coals to New Castle," as the English say. The world has had an abundance of guilt from pretty close to the beginning. The Lord came to take away our guilt, as the Old Testament prophets as well as the New Testament evangelists do testify. Isaiah's tribute to the "Suffering Servant," we may recall, was not the manager of last place baseball team, but the very Lamb of God, also known as the Scapegoat. "All we like sheep have gone astray, everyone hath turned aside into his own way: and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

Besides, if Annie Savoy wants to avoid guilt, the Church of Baseball is the wrong house of worship. Baseball abounds in guilt. Just ask Red Sox manager Terry Francona, who before he came to Boston and led the Red Sox to two World Series championships, managed through four long and losing seasons in Philadelphia, where he heard such loud and frequent catcalls from the Phillies fans that he began to think his last name was "You ____" Well, never mind. Just ask any relief pitcher who ever blew a four-run lead in the ninth. Or a starter who spotted the opponent four runs in the top of the first. In the latter category, I remember most vividly Reggie Cleveland, who pitched for Boston in the 1970s.

On one otherwise bright and sunny Saturday, Reggie Cleveland started a game at Boston's venerable Fenway Park and pitched to exactly four batters. And in that short span he accomplished a rare feat. He had pitched the cycle, giving up one of everything — a single, double, triple and a home run. At that point Red Sox manager Don Zimmer decided he had enjoyed as much batting heroics by the visitors as he could stand in one inning, so he emerged from the dugout and made his usual, slower than



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groundhog walk to the mound, while another pitcher hurriedly completed his hasty warm up throws in the Boston bull pen. Then Zimmer more or less thanked Mr. Cleveland for his contributions to American League batting averages and slugging percentages and informed the pitcher his day's work was over.

Cleveland appeared to be giving the manager an argument, no doubt demanding to know why he was being lifted after facing only four batters. Now it is an unfortunate fact of life that you can't overhear a conversation between a manager and his pitcher when you're sitting in the bleachers. But it can be fun to imagine one. Zimmer might have told Cleveland what Hall of Fame manager Leo Durocher recalled telling one of his pitchers who demanded to know why he was being taken out of a game just because the opposing team was lighting up the scoreboard with hits and runs. It was, Durocher explained with unusual patience, because the infielders were married men with children at home and he didn't want any of them to get killed by a line drive.

So Cleveland made his way to the dugout amid a generous hailstorm of boos, jeers and Bronx cheers from the Fenway faithful. He went to the shower knowing tomorrow would be another day. Whether he perceived that as an opportunity or a threat, we couldn't tell. But on the very next day, the Boston starter faltered in the early going and Cleveland, whose start the previous day was so short-lived it could almost be counted as an additional day of rest, was the first man up in the bullpen.

Now among the burdens borne by Boston pitchers is the proximity of the bullpen to the bleachers. Cleveland was warming up right in front of us, well within shouting distance of leather-lunged fans. And among those who greeted him that day was a little white-haired lady, with whom I had enjoyed some conversation an hour or so earlier as we stood in line at the gate to the bleachers. She was, it seemed, a kind and gentle soul, who even had kind words to say about players on the visiting team. Of all the denizens of the bleacher section, which can sometimes resemble the bar scene in *Star Wars*, she seemed the least likely to erupt with a shower of burning brimstone aimed at pitchers in the wrath of the angry bleacher gods. But that was before she spotted Cleveland.

"Oh, Jellybelly!" she growled in scorn as the pitcher stood, removed his warm up jacket and began to stretch and throw. "Jellybelly!" she roared at Cleveland, who would not be allowed to forget that the baggage he was carrying included a few extra pounds above his belt buckle. "Jellybelly, you were no good yesterday, what makes you think you'll be any good today, JELLYBELLY!" she screamed. I actually felt sorry for poor Cleveland. It must be tough to hear that kind of greeting just for showing up for work. I'm not sure, but I think I felt sorry, too, for that woman's husband if he had not already died in self-defense.

We are, indeed, most blessed in knowing that God is more forgiving than most baseball fans. "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime," said the heavy-hitting Psalmist of the ancient Palestine League. Today is a day for rejoicing at the opening of another major league baseball season. We are on a roll, fans. As of this moment, neither your team nor mine has lost a game in nearly six months. The baseball standings have reappeared in our daily newspapers and right now we are all tied for first place. But in the days and weeks and months ahead, we shall know the tribulation that "worketh patience" — or wrath if we let it. When a team is in a slump — in some cases, a season-long slump — communicants in the Church of Baseball would do well to remember the words of the Apostle. We are "persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." (II Corinthians 4:9). We are, therefore, "Rejoicing in hope. Patient in tribulation. Instant in prayer." (Romans 12:12).

Saint Paul would have made a great Red Sox fan.



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Maybe even a Cubs fan.



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