

Don Shula, NFL's winningest coach, remembered for his deep Catholic faith

As the winningest coach in NFL history, a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the only coach in NFL history whose team completed a perfect season, Don Shula's legacy on the sidelines is unmatched. Off of the field, Shula has an expressway, two restaurants, a football field and an endowed chair of philosophy at John Carroll University named for him. But according to those who knew him well, it was his integrity and fidelity to his Catholic faith that led Shula to become the type of man worthy of those memorials.

Shula, who spent 33 years as a head coach in the NFL – the last 26 with the Miami Dolphins – died May 4. He was 90 years old.

In his 1995 book "Everyone's a Coach: Five Business Secrets for High Performance Coaching," Shula wrote about leadership and living each day to the fullest. "I never worry about win totals," he wrote. "They're a byproduct of hard work – of doing our best every day, every week, every year."

Shula's best included attending daily Mass. He credited his family with imparting the Catholic faith to him. He attended St. Mary's Catholic Elementary School in Painesville, Ohio, where he was raised in a family of seven children. His father joined his mother as a Catholic on their wedding day and held a job in the fishing industry for \$15 a week, later working at a rayon plant outside of Cleveland. "Attending Mass and looking to God for guidance aren't just habits for me," Shula wrote. "It makes a real difference to me when I start off each day by giving thanks and asking for help from God."

In an interview with Our Sunday Visitor, Archbishop Thomas

Wenski of Miami shared an anecdote about the coach, former Dolphins owner Joe Robbie and a former Miami archbishop.

“Shula and Robbie – both Catholics – had a terrible falling out and stopped talking to one another,” Archbishop Wenski said. “The sportswriters were saying that Shula might be leaving for another team. Archbishop Coleman Carroll found out and called them. ‘I need to see you in my office,’ he told them both. When both men showed up – I guess at different times, because one did not know the other was there – they were taken each to a different room. Archbishop Carroll had called a press conference for that same day. When the press were all assembled, the archbishop walked into the room and asked a priest to get Robbie and another priest to get Shula. Both found themselves in the middle of a press conference. The archbishop barked at both, ‘Shake hands.’ They did, and the press took pictures. Then, the archbishop declared the press conference over. Shula stayed in Miami. That shows how the Archdiocese of Miami has been an integral part of our South Florida community, helping all of us not only to do well but to do good.”

Years later, Archbishop Wenski was sitting next to the coach at a fundraising event that Shula was hosting, and he asked Shula if the story actually happened. “He confirmed that it was true,” Archbishop Wenski said.

Archbishop Wenski said Shula was a man of integrity. “He was disciplined and had his life in order, and daily Mass was part of that. By making Mass a priority, it set a direction for his other decisions so that even when traveling, he would figure out how to get to Mass.”

Shirley Sandusky, the widow of John Sandusky, a former Dolphins assistant head coach, told Our Sunday Visitor that on game days, Shula arranged a Mass as well as a general Christian fellowship service for non-Catholics. Families were always welcomed to attend.

“It was a humbling experience to see these tough football players and their coaches sharing their trust in the Lord,” Sandusky said. “When we traveled to London, Germany, Japan, etc., there was usually a priest that flew with the team. Don and my husband used to laugh about how God didn’t pick sides on a Sunday, but they weren’t going to miss Mass. They embraced not only football, but the love and unity of the glory and importance of our holy Mass.”

Tom Monaghan, founder of Domino’s Pizza, Ave Maria University and Ave Maria School of Law, and also the former owner of the Detroit Tigers, met with Shula on multiple occasions, including when the coach visited Ave Maria in 2011 to speak to the school’s football team at the first practice of the program’s inaugural season. “However,” Monaghan told Our Sunday Visitor, “I am most grateful for the impact he had on my life before I ever met him.”

In 1972, Monaghan read that Shula, who had just finished the first and only perfect season in NFL history, was a daily communicant. “I was impressed and inspired by this, because I knew he had an extremely demanding schedule,” Monaghan said. “If he was not too busy to set aside time for daily Mass, how could I be? So his example inspired me to become a daily communicant. I hope that his deep faith is remembered as much or more than his accomplishments as a coach.”

Father Juan J. Sosa, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Miami Beach since 2010, where Shula was a parishioner, anointed him on the day he died. “It was a wonderful experience seeing him surrounded by his family,” Father Sosa said. “He had no pain and was very peaceful. After the anointing, he went to sleep and died shortly after.”

Shula had been very involved in parish life, Father Sosa said, often attending fundraising events for the Church and school where he and his wife had established a scholarship fund.

“He didn’t dwell on his accomplishments,” Father Sosa said. “It’s not what he did but who he was: a simple man, unpretentious and always willing to help others. You can have all the trophies you want, but it was who he was that was so significant.”

Shula’s funeral was at a private Mass on May 8 at St. Joseph Church, followed by burial at Our Lady of Mercy Cemetery in Doral, Florida. There will be a public memorial service at a later date.

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