

**Homily for the Mass of Christian Burial for  
Stanley Mikita**

**August 14, 2018**

**Notre Dame Church  
Clarendon Hills, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The great baseball player and manager of the New York Yankees and New York Mets, Yogi Berra, was quoted as saying, “Always go to other people’s funerals; otherwise they won’t go to yours.” So it is good to see so many people here for the funeral of Stanley Mikita, because he was the kind of person who always showed up for other people!

On behalf of Bishop Daniel Conlon, Bishop of Joliet, Father David Medow, Pastor of Notre Dame Parish, Father Daniel Brady, and in my own name, I offer my heartfelt condolences to the family of Stanley Mikita: Jill, his wife of 55 years; their children Meg, Scott, Jane Gneiser and her husband Scott, and Christopher and his wife Jennifer; their grandchildren, Emily & Erin Johnson, Hannah & Lily Mikita, Charlie, Billy & Tommy Gneiser, and Kayla & Megan Mikita; Stan’s brother, George, and sister

Viera of Slovakia, and his sister, Irene Palkovic of Toronto, Canada. I also extend my sincere sympathies to the Wirtz family and to the entire family of the Chicago Blackhawks—management, players, alumni and fans. His loss is felt keenly by all of you who called him husband, father, grandfather, son, brother, uncle, teammate, friend, and Hall of Fame hero.

I am not going to dwell here on his illustrious hockey career. You all know the highlights as well as I: Stan played his entire 22-year career with the Blackhawks and led the team to the 1961 Stanley Cup. A four-time Art Ross Trophy winner (1964, 1965, 1967, 1968) as the National Hockey League's leading scorer, Stan Mikita is the Blackhawks all-time franchise leader in points (1,467) and games played (1,394). He is second in franchise history in goals with 541. Mikita also was awarded the Hart Memorial Trophy as the Most Valuable Player in the NHL and Lady Byng Memorial Trophy for sportsmanlike conduct in 1967 and 1968.

His Blackhawks career began in the 1958-59 season and he played through the 1979-80 season. He had his No. 21 sweater retired on October 19, 1980 and was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1983. Mikita was named Blackhawks ambassador on March 7, 2008.

All of that is well-known and for which he is internationally renowned. My focus at this Mass of Christian Burial, however, is not so much on Stan Mikita the great hockey player, but Stan the Man, who was a great human being.

Although I watched Stan Mikita play hockey at the Chicago Stadium when I was a young boy, I first met Stan in person, appropriately enough, in church, when he and his wife Jill attended the wedding of my cousin, Gail Gray, and her husband, Rick Kuebel, on July 16, 1977. Rick's sisters, Mary Beth and Barb, were babysitters for the Mikita children. They are here today with their brother, Lee Kuebel. I am told that Stan used to visit the Kuebel house for Italian food and play pool with Mr. Kuebel. Stan eventually got summer jobs for Rick and Lee Kuebel when he lived in Elmhurst. The Kuebel's uncle, Dr. Louis Seno, and his wife Marie, used to rent apartments in Hillside to a lot of the players when they were first settling into the league. When Stan first came to the Blackhawks, he ended up living with the Seno family, due to no availability with the units. One of the cousins, Steve, stood up to Stan and Jill's wedding. The Kuebel and Seno families made Stan part of their families in those early years.

My cousin Gail used to babysit for Pat and Jackie Stapleton. Pat Stapleton, who is here today too, was a defenseman for the Blackhawks. I mention all this to show how tight-knit the hockey community is and how Stan and Jill forged relationships in the community that have stood the test of time.

After my passing encounter with Stan and Jill at my cousin's wedding, I did not get to know them and their family very well until ten years ago when Pope Benedict XVI came to the United States in April 2008. I was then and continue today to serve as Chairman of the Bishops' Advisory Board of an organization called Catholic Athletes for Christ. The Founder and President of Catholic Athletes for Christ contacted me to say that there would be representatives from all of the major sports at the Papal Mass and wondered if I could find an appropriate person to represent the world of hockey. As I asked around for recommendations, the name that kept coming up was Stan Mikita, not just because he was a Hall of Fame hockey player, but also because was a good family man who attended Mass every week and gave a lot back to the community.

So, I got Stan's cell phone number and called him. I introduced myself by saying that I had been a big fan of his ever since I watched him

play hockey when I was a little boy. He came back with, "Wait a minute! You're a bishop and you watched me play hockey when you were a little boy? Just how old are you?" I assured him that I was just a few years younger than he, but especially remembered the Blackhawks winning the Stanley Cup in 1961 when I was almost nine years old.

I then explained the purpose of my call and asked if he would represent the hockey community at the Mass with Pope Benedict at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. He immediately said that he and Jill would be thrilled to go, but wanted me to know something that might be a problem. I asked, "What's that?" Stan explained how he was born in what was then called Czechoslovakia, was adopted by a family in Canada, and was baptized and raised in the Lutheran faith. He wondered if that would raise an objection to his attending the Mass. I said, "Not at all. I am sure that the Holy Father would be quite happy to have you attend the Mass." But I noted that there would probably be some media attention about him attending the Mass and he might be asked why someone with a Lutheran background would be attending a Mass celebrated by the Pope.

Stan replied, "Well, I guess I would say that my wife and I were married in the Catholic Church, my children were all baptized Catholic

and raised Catholic, and I attend Mass in a Catholic church every week. Come to think of it, I guess I would say that I am more Catholic now than Lutheran!" So, Stan and Jill came to Washington and attended Mass with the Pope.

While we were in Washington, I got a chance to chat with Stan and Jill, and they told me the story of how he went from being one of the most penalized players in the National Hockey League to being the least penalized player the following year with only twelve minutes in penalties, for which he won the Lady Bing Trophy for good sportsmanship, along with the Art Ross Trophy as the league's leading scorer and the Hart Memorial Trophy as the Most Valuable Player in the NHL.

Jill started the story by telling how Stan was playing on the road one night and she was watching the game on television with their young daughter, Meg. As the game progressed and Stan was getting penalty after penalty, their daughter Meg asked Jill why Daddy had to sit by himself all the time in that box instead of on the bench with Uncle Bobby, Uncle Kenny and Uncle Ab, referring to Blackhawk players Bobby Hull, Kenny Wharram and Ab McDonald. Jill responded, "Why don't you ask Daddy when he gets home?"

Well, that's exactly what happened. Stan then picked up the story, telling how, when he got home from the road trip, his daughter asked him why he always sat by himself on one side of the rink while his buddies sat together on the bench. Stan resolved then and there that he needed to change his ways since he was giving a bad example for his children.

Our friendship grew from that visit for the Papal Mass in Washington, D.C. In May of 2010, the Mikita family asked me to give the invocation for Stan's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party at Butterfield Country Club. I was happy to do that and, as I was leaving after dinner, I invited Stan and Jill to come to Springfield for the Mass for my Installation as the new Bishop of Springfield the following month on June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Stan started to hem and haw, saying he would have to check their schedule. Jill responded with an elbow to Stan's ribs that was as sharp as anything Gordie Howe would have delivered, saying, "Stan, it's a Tuesday afternoon! What do we do on Tuesday afternoons?" Stan just shrugged and said, "I think we're coming."

So, when Jill asked me to be the main celebrant and homilist for Stan's funeral, I remembered that and thought, if I hesitated, I would hear, "Bishop Tom, it's a Tuesday afternoon! What do you do on Tuesday

afternoons?” We were speaking on the phone, though, so I didn’t have to worry about the elbow!

Actually, it is a tremendous honor to preside at this Mass of Christian Burial for Stanley Mikita, a great hockey player and a great man. Over the past few years since Stan was diagnosed with a form of dementia called Lewy bodies disease, I would visit him from time to time at the nursing home. One day I was there shortly after Christmas with Jill and Stan’s sister, Irene, who was visiting from Canada, but who, like Stan, was born in Slovakia. We couldn’t get Stan to respond much when we spoke to him in English, but when his sister spoke to him in Slovak and asked him to sit down, he immediately did so. When I made the sign of the cross to say a prayer, Stan crossed himself and sat quietly as we prayed. Although he could no longer express himself to us very coherently, I believe that he never lost his inner ability to relate to God.

The Gospel passage that we heard just a little while ago comes from the Sermon on the Mount and is called “The Beatitudes.” The word “beatitude” come from the Latin word *beatus*, which is usually translated “blessed,” but is sometimes translated as “happy.” In other words, Jesus

was saying that those who live according to the Beatitudes will indeed be blessed and happy.

For this reason, I would say that the most important day in Stan's life was not when he won the Art Ross Trophy as leading scorer, or the Hart Trophy as MVP, the Lady Byng Trophy or even the Stanley Cup. Nor was it even the bronze statue of Stan Mikita that was unveiled at the United Center in 2011. Those were indeed memorable moments, but the glory of all such accolades and accomplishments eventually fades with the passage of time.

I would say that the most important day in the life of Stanley Mikita was the day he was baptized and received the grace to live as a Christian. Many of the symbols we use in this Mass of Christian Burial are, in a sense, trophies of the Christian life, meant to remind us of the day of baptism. We started this Funeral Mass by sprinkling Stan's casket with holy water to remind us of his baptism. A white pall was then placed on his casket as a reminder of the white baptismal garment that symbolizes putting on the life of Christ. The paschal candle next to Stan's casket recalls the candle that is presented to a newly-baptized Christian, as a reminder that Christ is the

light of the world and we are called to keep the flame of that light burning brightly for others to see.

Stan Mikita lived in a way that went beyond his own self-interest and reflected the light of Christ. Whether it was founding the Stan Mikita Hockey School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, attending a fundraiser for the Chicago Legal Clinic to support legal services for the poor, or coming to the wedding of his babysitters' brother, Stan Mikita knew that true happiness comes from going beyond yourself and giving of yourself to others.

Last week after Jill called me to say that Stan was dying and the end would come soon, I offered a "Mass for the Dying" for Stan's intention. Specifically, I prayed that Stan would have a happy death. After Stan passed away last week, Jill told me that just before Stan breathed his last breath on earth, a big smile came over his face. I am grateful that our prayers were answered and that Stanley Mikita indeed died a happy death.

As we share in this Eucharist, we pray that Stan may live happily with God forever, sharing in the heavenly banquet of His eternal kingdom.

May God give us this grace. Amen.