

Professor analyzes if Montreal Canadiens are a hockey team or religion

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Since January 2009, Olivier Bauer has pioneered the world's first course examining the link between hockey and religion. As a professor at the Université de Montréal's Faculty of Theology, he also just compiled and coauthored a textbook examining the Canadiens as a religion, "La religion du Canadien de Montreal" (Fides, 2009).

Professor Bauer says analyzing hockey fervour is very appropriate as the Montreal Canadiens celebrate a milestone. "What better time to discuss this than on the year of the Canadiens' 100th birthday," he says.

In English, the Montreal Canadiens are referred to as the Habs, but in French the legendary hockey team is often known as the Sainte-Flanelle (the Holy Flannel). The nickname of its new young goaltender Carey Price is Jesus Price and he is thought to be the savior of the team.

Canadiens fans also talk about the ghosts of the old Montreal Forum. French-Canadian broadcaster Ron Fournier is the prophet and his listeners are disciples. All these religious connotations intrigued Bauer.

"If the Habs are a religion should we fight it because it's a form of adulation?" asks Bauer. "Or should we use it to highlight that certain values transmitted by the Habs can correspond to Christian values?"

Bauer has long been a hockey fan himself. He won several medals as a goaltender for the University of Neuchâtel hockey team in Switzerland. But he knew of the Habs long before he came to Quebec: "For me, it was the reference. I grew up with this idea of Sainte-Flanelle even if I didn't fully comprehend what it meant. Once I got to Montreal, I realized it was an expression, but also a reality."

But is the correlation with religion unique to the Habs? "There are others, in other sports, but not

many," says Bauer. Other researchers have studied baseball in the United States and soccer in South America and Europe.

According to Bauer, passion in Montreal is particularly intense. "People visit the Saint Joseph's Oratory to pray on game days. And Carey Price wears a cross behind his mask," he says.

Bauer's course is being taught in three parts with the help of invited Swiss Professor Denis Müller, an ethicist and theologian specialized in soccer. The first part of the course addressed relics. For instance, some people believe to have been cured from disease after touching the jersey of Hall of Famer Maurice Richard.

The second part is addressing rituals. For instance, are there similarities between a game and a religious mass? The third and final part will address pastoral questions.

On the Web:

About the Université de Montréal:

www.umontreal.ca/english/index.htm

About Olivier Bauer: www.ftsr.umontreal.ca/faculte/...s/bauer_olivier.html

About the book, "La religion du Canadien de Montreal" (Fides, 2009):

www.fides.qc.ca/livre.php?id=322

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