



Chapter Five

THE BOX

Think again of the boy on that sheet of ice with skates, a stick, a crushed can, and a few twigs marking off the goal; to know that he is playing hockey is to know that there are *on-ice* rules in hockey. Instead of giving a detailed list of the on-ice rules, however, let's turn to what happens when these are broken. When a skater breaks the rules, penalties are assessed. Depending on the severity, *major* or *minor* penalties are imposed. Upon receiving a penalty, the skater goes to *the box*.

Let's say that again: there are *major* and *minor* penalties in hockey and the skater goes to the *box*. *Major* and *minor* and the skater goes to the *box*. I'll pause right here to see if this reminds you of anything. Major, minor, and the box. Mortal, venial, and the *box*. Another name for the box in hockey is the 'sin bin'. Ah! Hockey is so *very* Catholic.

If a skater has to do time in the box, he does his time in the box. In all of hockey history there is no evidence of any skater ever thanking the referee for pointing out the penalty, and then explaining to the ref that he has decided not to do the time now—instead he will save it up and do the penalty time all at once...during Lent. Wow! I wonder how that would go over with the referee? If it were on film it would certainly make every sportscast highlight reel. Then everyone could have a good laugh. "What an idiot! Save it up for Lent—who ever heard of such a thing? Not in hockey."

If a skater has time in the box, that time starts immediately. Any skater refusing to do time is excused from the game. Time is served individually; there may be more than one skater in the box at a time, but skaters are serving their penalties separately. Time in the box is done *individually* and *immediately*.

Perhaps there could be some emergency in hockey that would necessitate the whole team taking time in the box together. But in all of hockey history, there has never been mention of this—all together in the box, for all the penalties received in a game or season—it has never happened. Though everyone has to do his own time in the box, penalties still affect everybody.

In hockey, there are five skaters and one goalie per team that can be on the ice at a time. When a given team has all five skaters and the goalie on the ice at once, they are considered to be playing at *full strength*. Time in the box removes a skater from the ice, and no skater from the bench is sent in to replace the missing skater. This is considered skating *shorthanded*.

Upon receiving a penalty, a skater forces the body, the team, to play shorthanded. Upon completion of the penalty time, however, the skater returns to the ice. If no other skaters are in the box, the team is now skating at full strength. In certain situations, penalty time ends if the opposing team scores against the shorthanded team. This event also returns the shorthanded team to full strength.

At the Minnesota Gopher games, after a penalty is over, the announcer says, “The Gophers are at full strength.”

The crowd responds, “They always were!”

I once told this to my friend Fr. Paul Murray. He gasped and whispered, “Yes. Say it again.”

“The Gophers are at full strength.”

“They always were.”

“Yes, that’s it, that’s confession.”

After penitents have done their time in the *box*, they are at full strength. God’s forgiveness is *complete*. The offense is gone; in a sense, it is as if it never happened. There may still be *temporal* consequences,

however, that need to be remedied. Spiritually, the sin may be gone, but the consequences of the sin may remain.

In hockey, penalty time is considered complete when time runs out on the penalty or, in some cases, when the opposing team has scored. The offense is past, the time in the box is done, and all has been forgiven. But because of the penalty the skater forced the body to play shorthanded. When the skater returns to the ice, these temporal consequences remain and must be remedied. The team is tired from having to play one skater short, thereby increasing their workload against the opposing team. If the penalty ended because the team was scored against, the temporal consequences of this are no small matter. But the penalty has been fully expiated in the box and it is as though the team has always been at full strength.



“The Gophers are at full strength.”

“They always were.”

Imagine if, for even one day, we as the Church played at full strength! If each of Her members were in a state of grace, the world would be transformed.

There is no shame in the box. You are not at your worst when you are in the box. You are at your worst when you are sinning. One might even say that you are at your best when you are in the box. You come humbly before Christ. You tell the Divine *Referee* your transgressions and you are met with Mercy Himself.

If you have time to do in the box, do your time in the box. Don't make the team play shorthanded because you are afraid of the box. The box is just a part of hockey, and it is just a part of the Church. Go do your time in the box.

“The Church is at full strength.”

“She always was!”