

Here comes the past, just when glory beckons

By Trevor Jensen
a Tribune staff reporter

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The past caught up with Stanislaw Wielgus as he was about to step into the most important role of his career.

Dressed in gold vestments, miter perched atop his head, Wielgus stunned the congregation at St. John's Cathedral in Warsaw a week ago with the announcement that he had resigned as its new archbishop. The pressure for him to step down had mounted amid allegations that, more than two decades earlier, he had worked with the country's communist-era secret police.

The past is like that, always there, always ready to muck up the present. For the Polish priest--and for a record-setting American baseball player--last week again showed yesterday is never quite gone.

Though Wielgus denied some of the allegations against him, he offered his countrymen a confession "to the mistake by me years ago, just as I have confessed to the Holy Father."

Closer to home, there was Mark McGwire, the man who hit 583 home runs and became a national hero in 1998 when he set a record with 70 home runs in one season. This year was the first he was eligible for the Hall of Fame, the crowning achievement for a baseball player's career.

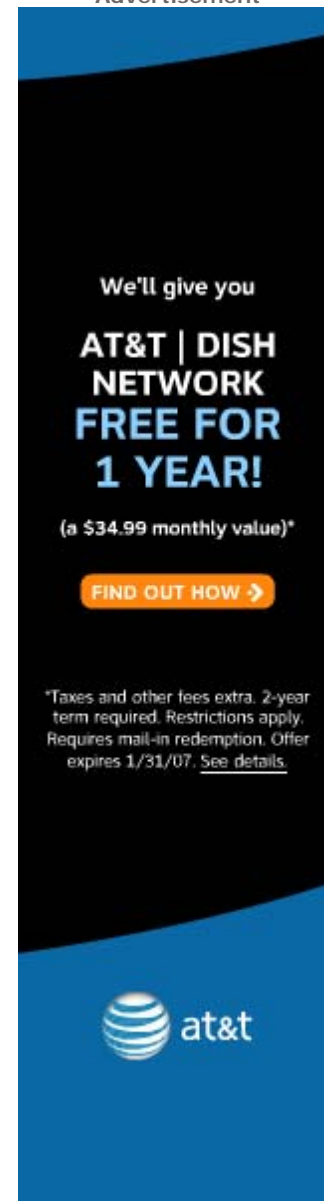
Instead, McGwire garnered a paltry 128 votes, 281 short of acceptance, done in by rumors of steroid use during his prime playing years and helped not at all by an evasive performance at a 2005 congressional hearing.

The rattling bones of closeted skeletons have certainly shaken us all at one time. The truth is, we can live quite comfortably with the ticking time bombs of past transgressions, as long as they don't go off. For it's not so much the old sins that make us sweat; it's the wondering if we're going to be found out.

"People in general are more concerned with what other people think of them than what we know about ourselves," said Mark Leary, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University whose research focuses on self-identity issues.

"We live with a lot of hypocrisies and misbehaviors," Leary said. "But they don't bother us too much unless other people find out about them."

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Sin can seem so insignificant at the moment it's committed.

Wielgus apparently wasn't alone in collaborating with the communist government. Several other priests face similar accusations.

Similarly, McGwire, if guilty, was simply keeping up with his competitors. By some accounts, steroid use in baseball was not uncommon during McGwire's most productive years.

But mistakes often are measured by the standards of the day they're exposed, not the day they were made. Had he not been seen as a cheater, McGwire would doubtless be readying his speech for Cooperstown.

"Mark McGwire could have done one of 60 other things, but right now steroid use is, symbolically, extremely important," said Cristina Traina, an associate professor of religion who teaches Christian ethics at Northwestern University.

"Sometimes," she added, "it's important not to reward behavior that we would not condone even if when it was performed it was not considered that important."

So timing is all. U.S. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) confessed youthful cocaine and marijuana use in his autobiography. By coming clean early about behavior familiar to many people, Obama likely has marginalized the issue from his anticipated presidential campaign.

For bad timing, see Jack Ryan, who during his 2004 run for the U.S. Senate did his best to cover up the salacious details of his divorce from actress Jeri Ryan. Claims that Ryan had coerced his then-wife into sex clubs became public less than five months before the November election, and that was that.

People typically react to their misdeeds with a combination of shame and guilt, but one emotion inevitably overwhelms the other, said Ronda Dearing, a psychologist with the University of Buffalo Research Institute on Addictions and co-author of the 2002 book "Shame and Guilt."

Guilt leads a person to acknowledge what he has done and try to repair the damage. "With shame, you get so focused on 'I'm a bad person,' the event tends to get lost," Dearing said. "You hide from the world, but fixing it never gets done."

Wielgus went to Pope Benedict XVI and acknowledged some of the allegations against him even as he stood before a packed cathedral.

McGwire had the opportunity to clear his name--or at least gain points for acknowledging guilt--when he was called to testify before Congress. Instead, his voice choking and near tears, he simply said, "I'm not going to discuss the past."

In McGwire's defense, few people are asked to confess their worst moments under klieg lights. Bishop Timothy Lyne of the Archdiocese of Chicago suggests the demand for public disclosure sometimes goes too far.

"It'd be interesting if every time we committed a sin we'd have to stand on a corner and say, 'Hey, did you know what I did last night?'" Lyne said.

Everyone, after all, has something to hide.

"When visitors come over to the house, there are things we put away," said Leary, the Duke psychology professor. "We put out the National Geographic and hide the True Confessions."

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