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Montreal church places ad asking fans to pray for playoff spot

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MONTREAL -- When the power play stinks, the injuries are plentiful and the offence is anemic, there may be only one hope for a lacklustre NHL team to make the playoffs.

A little help from God.

The Catholic church placed an ad in Montreal newspapers Thursday encouraging people to pray for an eighth-place finish -- and a playoff spot -- for the Montreal Canadiens.

The ad shows the Eastern Conference standings with every team listed except the Canadiens. In eighth place, the final playoff spot, it simply says, "Let Us Pray."

It was another clever ad cooked up by the Archdiocese of Montreal and the advertising firm it has worked with for more than 20 years to get the church some mainstream notice.

Faced with declining church attendance rates, the archdiocese is known for employing slick, clever ads that appeal to the public at large when it solicits funds each year.

"You know, the Catholic church doesn't have the same means as other advertisers, so they need to make an impact," said Hugo Leger, vice-president of Bos advertising agency, which designed the ad.

Leger said when people get past the joke, they will find a simple message that encourages prayer: "We just want to remind people that the church exists," Leger said. "And when we say pray, that could mean for the Canadiens, or an invitation to pray in general."

The church has a recent history of using a popular issue to get some attention. Last April, it installed a billboard visible from the crumbling Champlain Bridge that urged motorists to, "say your prayers."

The billboard attracted public attention as the media were reporting almost daily about the need for a new bridge to replace the aging Montreal structure.

Thursday's ad was described as a one-shot deal; the spots were scheduled to appear in two French-language daily newspapers, for one day only.

A spokeswoman for the archdiocese says Jean-Claude Cardinal Turcotte saw the advertising pitch just a few days ago.

"He immediately accepted and loved the concept," said Lucie Martineau.

"It was a concept that allows us to be right there with what the people are preoccupied with right now, and send them a little message to pray for the Canadiens."

It also served to remind people that the church can be there to help in their day-to-day lives, Martineau said.

A separate advertising campaign is in the works for the 2012 annual collection, held in mid-April. Those ads will be released in the coming weeks. Martineau said the church raises \$1.5 million annually during its collection.

Combining Catholicism and the secular passion of hockey was something the ad firm had long wanted to do: "Associating the Catholic religion and the Sainte Flanelle (the Holy Flannel, another nickname for the team) was a natural," Leger said.

"There are two big religions in Quebec -- Catholicism and hockey -- and it was fun to associate the two."

Leger said they were seeking to give the flailing club a bit of encouragement too.

Among the other teams slotted in a playoff spot in the advertisement are the Toronto Maple Leafs, in seventh. The Ottawa Senators are placed ninth in the ad, and the Winnipeg Jets are in 11th.

In reality, the Habs were in 14th, just a point out of last place in the conference entering their tilt with the New York Islanders in Uniondale, N.Y., on Thursday night.

The team had high hopes entering the season.

But the year has been marred by injuries, notably to top defenceman Andrei Markov and captain Brian Gionta, and by the worst power play in the league. The coach was fired, and the choice of replacement -- non-French-speaking Randy Cunneyworth -- prompted a protest outside the Bell Centre. The Habs' would-be sniper, Michael Cammalleri, was traded to Calgary after disparaging what he described as the team's losing attitude.