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TO INFORM AND INSPIRE TODAY'S CATHOLIC



Courtesy of Richard Quinn, C.Ss.R.

The Catholic Military Chaplaincy: Looking For a Few (More) Good Men (condensed)

By Christine Ballew-Gonzales

Richard Quinn, C.Ss.R., talks with Captain Steve McGuire during training maneuvers at Fort Irwin, California.

America's priests in uniform have been bringing the reality of God's love and presence in the sacraments to those who serve in the United States Armed Forces for nearly eighty-five years. Yet the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA (or Military Ordinariate), the largest geographical archdiocese in the world, could arguably be the least well known. Many American civilian Catholics and even fellow priests aren't aware that the Military Ordinariate provides sacramental and pastoral care to more than 1.2 million American Catholic military personnel, federal employees serving overseas, and their families.

According to Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, the theology underlying the military chaplaincy is simple: "All Catholics have a right to pastoral care and the sacraments, and unique problems arise when Catholics leave their home parish to serve in the military." Living that theology is not easy. The Catholic military chaplaincy blends the priesthood and the life of a military officer--two very demanding ways of life--into an existence of nonstop duty.

Catholic priests who serve in our military perform a complex mix of priestly and military duties. In addition to administering the sacraments to Catholics at military installations or on deployment, priests in uniform must also carry out the duties of a military officer, Archbishop O'Brien says. The essential sacramental nature of the Catholic priesthood makes a Catholic military chaplain's job even more time-intensive than that of chaplains of other denominations; although Catholic chaplains can and must minister to non-Catholic soldiers, chaplains of other denominations cannot administer the sacraments to Catholics.

Compounding this is the shortage of vocations, which is felt acutely in the Catholic military chaplaincy. While 25 to 30 percent of U.S. military personnel are Catholic, only 12 to 13 percent of military chaplains are priests.

With 390 priests already on active duty and reserve priests being called up to serve in Operation Enduring Freedom, Archbishop O'Brien sees the pressures on priests in uniform mounting. He is very concerned about the current military buildup and says that "it is certainly going to put more stress on our operations." Bishop John J. Glynn, Vicar of Chaplains for the Military Ordinariate, shares Archbishop O'Brien's worries. His biggest concern is "that our priests in uniform don't become exhausted by it all."

When national security is threatened, stealth bombers fly, and Tomahawk cruise missiles light up the sky, priests in uniform must stare down their own fear of death while they minister to their fellow service members. Historically, Catholic military chaplains have served with distinction, and many have given their lives--ninety-six priests were killed in the wars of the twentieth century. A monument dedicated to the memory of the priests killed in the service of our nation and Church stands in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

The Military Ordinariate is currently compiling a book of touching stories, incidents, and profiles of Catholic military chaplains and their incredible faith journeys alongside the people they serve. In one excerpt, Father Leonard Stegman's unit was surrounded by the enemy and suffering heavy casualties in Majonni, Korea. Father Stegman was walking through the tiny village when a villager spotted his priestly stole and eagerly explained that the entire village was Catholic but that no one had received the sacraments for two years.

Father Stegman gladly offered Mass atop a makeshift altar of ammunition crates and heard the confessions of the villagers. Just two days later the village was overtaken and every inhabitant killed.

Catholic military chaplains also minister to patients at VA hospitals all over the country. Father John Minkler responded to a patient's request to see a priest at a VA hospital in New York. The young man had AIDS. He told his story to Father Minkler, who soon learned that the dying man had been rejected by his family. After administering the sacrament of reconciliation and giving him Communion, Father Minkler called the young man's parents and pleaded with them to come to the bedside of their son, who was quickly slipping away. The young man's mother was at his side when he died. Just before his death the young veteran expressed his profound gratitude to Father Minkler: "Thank you, Father, for making it possible for me to see Jesus." That statement goes to the very heart of what the Catholic military chaplaincy is all about: helping those who serve our country and their families see Jesus.

The future of the Catholic military chaplaincy depends in large part on young men's answering the call to add a white collar to their battle dress and combat boots. "There's no doubt that we'll have to find priests to serve the military," Archbishop O'Brien says. "It's about time we look within the military and not just outside for vocations."

One positive result of Operation Enduring Freedom and the current focus on the military is the increased visibility of the Catholic military chaplaincy. "I'm hoping it will prompt more men to consider the priesthood," Archbishop O'Brien says.

Bishop Glynn is also optimistic about the future of the Catholic military chaplaincy. "We're seeing some positive signs, and I have great faith that the situation with vocations to the military priesthood will turn around," he says. "By the grace of God, we're always going to be around."

Christine Ballew-Gonzales is a full-time mother, editor, and freelance writer.

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