
Military Chaplaincy

A military chaplain, when meeting with other priests, many times is in an awkward position. Some priests feel we do not belong because we have been away from parish service and as such not one of them. Some priests feel that we are part of the war machinery and as such complicit in the horrors of war. Most priests do not understand our ministry. How can the person in the

congregation understand a ministry when their priest does not.

When in the service of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, some priests went to teach or minister in Ukraine. That was considered to be “our American Church helping our broth-

ers and sisters in Christ”. When I spent time in Ukraine working in catechetics, my return was greeted with appreciation. Missionaries no matter how long they are away were always considered “one of us.” A military chaplain is a

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missionary. My job is to bring God to soldiers and soldiers to God. Chaplains provide a spiritual support and sacraments to men and women who cannot get to a church or a community that welcomes them. It is the same job no matter what country we support. Fr. Andrij Zelinskyj, SJ is a chaplain for over 10 years for the Ukrainian Army. Many of the priests serving Ukrainian soldiers are volunteers. They come out to the battle fields and celebrate the Divine Liturgy, hear confessions, pray, offer a consoling ear and administer the holy mysteries as bombs burst around them.

Whether they are serving troops in Ukraine for the Ukrainian Army or supporting troops in South West Asia for the American army, our purpose is religious. We are taking care of the faithful that belong to the parishes at home who have gone off to war. Ideally, their parish priest should come and visit them on a regular basis to provide spiritual sustenance. Since their priest is in their parish and probably unable to make a trip to Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan or other hot spots, I and my fellow-priests provide this service to their parishioners and will return them to their pastors when they go home,

Once I met a priest who demanded to know why I could associate with those ‘Baby Killers,’ a Viet Nam reference. I assured him that my job was to help these young men and women not be those monsters. If we priests abandon the formation of consciences of these young people, how will they know right from wrong? Confession is an opportunity to form the conscience.

Once, I spent 19 hours straight hearing confessions of 18- to 20- year-olds going off to meet death face to face. My job was to help them face not just death but judgment. On the average here is the Middle East, I hear 25 confessions a week. While most of the confessions are the same kinds of sins I would hear back in the States, some go much deeper. They are deeper because of war.

First, I must clearly and categorically

state that I do not meet the definition of a soldier. Yes, I wear a uniform, but I do not carry a weapon. I am only part of the machinery of war in that like the doctor and nurse, I am there for the soldier who is injured. The medical people take care of the physical ailments, and I take care of the moral injuries.

We in the East can use the Just War Theory, but the legalistic approach does not always speak to the heart and soul.



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There is really no such thing as a “good war” or a “holy war”. We can see good coming out of a war as in the destruction of Nazism and its slaughter of Jews in World War II.

Abraham Lincoln was asked if God was on the side of the Union and Lincoln’s response was what was important is that we were on God’s side. Like Police Officers, who are commissioned by the state to protect citizens, our service men and women raise their hands and promise “that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same.” When people complain about the wars we are fighting, I remind them that we were sent into that war by our elected officials. If you put them into office, especially by not voting, you are sending

my brothers and sisters into battle.

Peace can only come from God. Christ, our God, had numerous opportunities to condemn military service. He did not even mention Roman wars, when speaking with the centurion. When He stated when a person is pressed into service for one mile, to give two. If you look at pictures of the Roman army marching, did you ever wonder who was carrying their gear?

Behind them were civilians pressed into service to carry their gear for one mile. Our Lord’s hearers caught the reference. War comes out of sin. When we recapitulate the whole world, restoring things to the way they were in Paradise, sin and war will end.

This work done in the name of peace keeping is why we used to pray for “all those in the military”. We were politically correct and changed it to “those in the service of our country”. Warfare endangers the spiritual life of those who fight and especially, those who kill. I have spent hours in counseling that turned into a confession with young soldiers who have taken a life of an enemy. Everything in the core of our being says to respect life. We rip into the spiritual life of a young person in war. This is the ultimate separation between a person and their neighbor, whom Christ has called us to love. This is what in our tradition, we would call an involuntary sin. The soul of the soldier is damaged. The soldier’s goal like all of our goals is deification. It becomes more difficult to grow in holiness when you have taken the life of another.

No matter the cause, no matter how “right” society says it is, and no matter how you can configure it as self-defense, the person falls short in having that day “perfect, holy, peaceful and sinless.” It takes time to recover. This is why the Canon of Saint Basil, separated them from communion for a period of three years. This was not a punishment, but a spiritual pilgrimage back to God. God has never left them, but they feel they are separated from God. The Chaplain helps them on their pilgrimage. The Church re-

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minds them that they risked their own spiritual brokenness so that others can be saved. They risked all for the sake of others. Others are saved because they are broken. The Church does not condemn those who kill in war as murderers but acknowledges their need for pastoral guidance towards healing and salvation.

While we acknowledge that war is filled with a myriad of evils, we pray in the Anaphora of Saint Basil for all civil author-

ities and of our armed forces, grant them a secure and lasting peace That we in their tranquility may lead a calm and peaceful life in all reverence and godliness. This shows that government and the military have a legitimate role. Military chaplains support that role, work for the spiritual healing of those who are injured and guide all entrusted to their spiritual care in the journey of Theosis.

Fr Jonathan Morse