

What Does a Priest Do During War?

By his call to the priesthood, the priest at his ordination is called to serve people. In the time of war, the people may be on the battlefield, and he may volunteer or be called to follow these people into battle. Therefore, as Jesus came incarnate to be with humanity, a priest also brings the presence of Christ to human beings in the most dangerous of situations.

Speaking as a former military chaplain, I acknowledge that not every priest is called to the battlefield, just as every priest is not called to the classroom. Father Andriy Zelinsky, S.J., a former student at St Basil College Seminary in Stamford, Connecticut, now serves as the chief military chaplain of our Church in Ukraine. In an interview with *Vatican News*, he describes the mission of chaplains during this war. He notes that it is different with each unit. Some units consist of professional soldiers, while other units are made up of volunteers who one day are teachers and electricians and soldiers the next day. Ministry in each unit is individual, just as each pastor's ministry depends upon the parish or school he serves. Father Zelinsky states that his ministry goes along three lines. The first is the creation of spiritual and psychological resilience for the units that run the risk of exhaustion from the relentless fighting. In the American army, soldiers are regularly trained in resilience; this involves meditation and other relaxation training. In our Church there are meditative elements. The Jesus Prayer is one.

The second line is team-building and accepting responsibility for one another. When Jesus sent out His disciples, He sent them two-by-two. In the military, we call those "battle buddies". In my case, since I was not armed, my battle buddy was my Chaplain Assistant. His job was to keep me alive as I carried on my ministry on the battlefields. Since the Chaplain placed the Chaplain Assistant's life in danger, the Chaplain had an obligation to provide emotional and spiritual support to the assistant. Father Andriy noted, "your neighbor is the most important means of your safety and security," especially on the battlefield. In the American military, a chaplain works to provide unity and overcome cultural and racial differences. The Chaplain is a force multiplier. This means that by bringing soldiers together as they support one another, they become a more effective fighting force. The Chaplain in Ukraine brings together people of very different backgrounds who will need each other to survive, and this is what chaplains do.

The third line is hope. There are two hopes: the hope that the war will come to an end; and the hope that evil will never prevail. Father Zelinsky notes that the ministry to soldiers is supported by spiritual means: prayers, being present for those who seek the sacrament of reconciliation, having a listening ear for those who wish to talk, and a general ministry of presence. As a Ukrainian Greek Catholic chaplain, he also has another duty: to minister to all Catholics regardless of *sui iuris* Church. One of the tools that the Chaplain has is absolution.

Most are familiar with confession and absolution in our parishes. A person confesses their individual sins to a priest who gives absolution. In wartime, this may not always be possible. As the *Code of Canon Law for Eastern Churches* states in Canon 720.2: "absolution of many penitents at the same time without prior individual confession cannot be imparted unless: 1. the danger of death is imminent and there is not

time for the priest to administer the Sacrament of Penance to the individual penitents; 2. There is a grave necessity; that is when, in light of the number of penitents, a supply of priests is not available to administer the Sacrament of Penance to individual penitents within a suitable time, so that through no fault of their own, they are forced to be deprived of Sacramental grace or reception of the divine Eucharist for a long time." This simply means that, especially in the case of war, the Catholic Chaplain, who otherwise can't absolve from sin without hearing individual confessions, has the ability to dispense with the requirement before the soldiers go into battle. As well, in this author's opinion, it also would seem that people in towns being bombed would also qualify for general absolution because their numbers are great, and their danger of death is even greater.

The Code of Canon Law adds: the eparchial bishop is competent to decide when such a grave necessity exists and determine a case of necessity. With general prescriptions, having taken counsel with the patriarch and an eparchial bishop of other churches, a bishop may exercise this power in the same territory. When I served with the combat unit in Syria before the soldiers and marines went off to battle, I would give general absolution. This is granted to all American chaplains of the Archdiocese for Military Services USA. My presumption is that His Beatitude would have given this nationwide to all his priests because of the war. Through local Ukrainian Catholic bishops or his Beatitude, the Latin bishops can give our priests in Ukraine the same faculties for dealing with Latin Catholics on the battlefield. In the United States, this permission has been provided for Latin priests to minister to Ukrainian Greek Catholics and Ukrainian Greek Catholic chaplains to minister to Latins. This permission has come from the Vatican.

The Code of Canon Law continues in Canon 721.1. "For a member of the Catholic faithful to enjoy the Sacramental absolution given to many at the same time, it is required not only that the person be properly disposed, but also the same time intend and in due time, confess individually the grave sins which at the present time cannot be confessed. 2. As much as can be done, the Catholic faithful are to be instructed concerning these requirements. An exhortation that each person take care to make an act of contrition to precede general absolution even in danger of death if time is available is to be made." Thus, when a priest encounters a squad on the battlefield, and there are people who need confession, the priest can make a general statement concerning their proper disposition. Are they sorry for their sins? They don't have to verbally answer, but the answer has to be "yes" in their hearts and minds. Do they have a firm purpose of amendment, a *metanoia*, a change of heart? Again, not vocal but internal answer. They are reminded that if they have any serious sins when the battle is over, and they can confess to a priest, they should do so. And they are to make an act of contrition, and the priest then gives them absolution; the act of contrition serves as their penance.

Soldiers going into battle worry that if they die in the battle would they be able to go to heaven. The general absolution gives them a clean slate of their sins if they die. If they survive, they will then go to an



individual confession when possible.

This opportunity for forgiveness of sins brings serenity to a soldier's conscience before the battle. So, when asked "what did you do in the war?", I can say: "I forgave sins individually and generally to Amer-

ican Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, as well as French Special Forces and Chaldean and Syrian Catholics".