

THE HISTORY OF CATHOLIC CHAPLAINS IN THE MILITARY

by Bill Miller, Senior Reporter

The U.S. military has a long tradition of chaplains, including those of the Roman Catholic faith, addressing the spiritual needs of soldiers, sailors, Marines, and Coast Guard personnel. But it wasn't until World War I that the Vatican

approved a diocese specifically for American warfighters and their families. Nearly 70 years later, it has evolved into the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA. The following timeline provides an overview of how priests, including those from the Diocese of Brooklyn, have served in conflicts over the years.



November 1917-1918 (World War I)

Pope Benedict XV approves the establishment of a military diocese for the American armed forces, based in New York City, which serves as a primary port of embarkation for U.S. troops destined for the battlefields of World War I. Of the 1,000 priests serving as chaplains, 23 are killed in action or from disease. Among the most famous was Father Francis Duffy of the "Fighting 69th" Infantry Regiment from New York City. Answering the call from the Diocese of Brooklyn for the U.S. Army were the future sainthood candidates, Msgr. Bernard Quinn, Father Ward Meehan, and Father Edward Wallace.

1941-1945 (World War II)

Catholic priests again sign up for overseas duty. Those with ties to Brooklyn and Queens included: Father Wallace again (this time for the U.S. Navy); Father Joseph Hammond (Navy); Father Anthony de Laura (Army); brothers Father James McInenly (Army) and Father Joseph McInenly (Navy); and Father Dominic Ternan (Army, KIA), to name a few. Of the 172 chaplains to die during the war, 66 were Catholic priests. Among them was Father John Washington of Newark, one of the "Four Chaplains" who die in the sinking of the troopship Dorchester. These clergy perish after giving up their life jackets to save other passengers.



The coat of arms of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, is divided into three sections. At the top, an American Bald Eagle holds in each claw the universal symbol of



peace, a green olive branch. In the middle, there is a silver cross on the outline of the meridians of the earth. And in the lowest, is the gold and silver crossed keys of St. Peter. The composition of the

arms conveys the message and mission of the Archdiocese for the Military Services — bearing peace, proclaiming Christ throughout the world, and carrying out the Church's mission to offer healing through the forgiveness of sins.

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF FAITH ON THE FRONTLINES

Former Brooklyn Priest on Global Mission as Naval Academy's Lone Catholic Chaplain

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archdiocese in 1985.

"The military archdiocese is unique because it covers the world. It's global. Wherever we have a U.S.-based installation, that's part of it," explained Father Thevenin, who was commissioned an ensign in the U.S. Navy in 2001 — four years before he was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn — and has risen to the rank of lieutenant commander.

Before Pope John Paul II's move, Catholic chap-



1950-1953 (Korean War)

Five Catholic priests die while serving as chaplains in Korea. Father Emil Kapaun (Army) of Pilsen, Kansas, dies while continuing to minister to fellow prisoners of war. He later became a candidate for sainthood in 1993 and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in 2013.

lains in the armed forces were guided by the archbishop or cardinal of the Archdiocese of New York. But in 1985, the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, was born. It is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has been headed by Archbishop Timothy Broglio since 2008. According to its website, the archdiocese covers 220 military installations in 29 countries, 153 Veterans Administration medical centers, as well as federal employees working in 134 countries, serving approximately 1.8 million men, women, and children.

However, the number of Catholic chaplains has decreased over the past 24 years, according to figures from the archdiocese. At the time of 9/11, there were more than 400 Catholic chaplains on active duty. Today, there are just over 200.

Father Thevenin was released from his duties in the Diocese of Brooklyn by Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio in 2012 and became a priest in the Archdiocese for the Military Services.

In his military career, Father Thevenin has served aboard the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima. He has also worked at Arlington National Cemetery, among

other assignments.

In his current assignment, he oversees the spiritual needs of hundreds of Catholic midshipmen at the Naval Academy. And for the most part, he does it singlehandedly as the only Catholic chaplain there. There is a priest who assists him from time to time, but he is the lone Catholic chaplain assigned to the Naval Academy full time.

"When Pope John Paul II decided to create the military archdiocese, he didn't have in mind to create a seminary. There was an understanding that priests serving in the military will have to come from dioceses," Father Thevenin explained. "As a result, there's always a shortage of priests in the military because there's a shortage of priests in dioceses."

Father Thevenin estimated that 30%-40% of the 4,400 midshipmen are Catholic.

"Our daily Masses are well attended. The midshipmen take their faith seriously," he said. "And the midshipmen make use of the sacrament of reconciliation that is offered to them. We have scheduled confessions, but they could make appointments to come to confession in my office."

Father Thevenin said he tries to get across to the midshipmen that he is there for them.

"As chaplains, we help them navigate through their problems, so that they know they're going to get to the finish line," he said.

1967-1968 (Vietnam War)

Sixteen U.S. military chaplains die during this conflict, including three Catholic priests. The fallen include a former Maryknoll missionary from Staten Island, Father Vincent Capodanno, who was a Navy chaplain ministering to Marines when he died trying to rescue severely wounded men during a firefight. He posthumously received the Medal of Honor in 1969 and is a candidate for sainthood.



2025

On July 21, its 40th birthday, the AMS receives more than \$95,000 from 337 donors to support Team Saint Paul (TSP), a ministry of Catholic laypeople sent by the AMS to accompany young adult servicemen and women on their journey of Christian discipleship and faith at the installations where they serve.

2004 (Iraq War/Global War on Terror)

Father Henry Timothy Vakoc of Robbinsdale, Minnesota, perishes in the explosion of an improvised explosive device in Iraq, the only Catholic priest to die in the conflict.



1985

Pope John Paul II removes responsibility for the military services from the archbishop of New York and creates the new Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA (AMS).

2024

Douglas Oldmixon, a retired member of the U.S. Air Force Reserve, and his wife Jo-Dee Benson, donate \$75,000 as seed money for the Saint John XXIII Foundation to establish the Father Vincent R. Capodanno Co-Sponsored Seminarian Endowed Scholarship for the Archdiocese for the Military Services to help men training for the priesthood and seeking to become military chaplains pay their seminary costs.