

RESEARCH ARTICLES

A Priest Forever: What Sets Apart the Catholic Chaplains Killed in Action in Vietnam

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The celebration of 250 years of ministry to soldiers, sailors, marines, and coast guardsmen, is a fitting time to reflect on those who sacrificed for God and Country. The Vietnam War witnessed some of the American military's most vicious combat, mixing pitched battles with counterinsurgency. American military chaplains served with great courage and distinction in all areas of the war. Little is written about those chaplains killed on the front lines ministering under enemy fire. Little consideration has been paid to the circumstances and statistics surrounding the deaths of these courageous chaplains.

Seventeen Army and Navy chaplains were awarded Silver Stars during the war, seven of whom were Roman Catholic priests.¹ Three chaplains were awarded the Medal of Honor, all of whom were Roman Catholic priests. The statistics surrounding chaplains killed in action are perhaps even more striking. Sixteen chaplains from the Army and Navy were killed in Vietnam. Thirteen of those chaplains were from the Army, and the other three were from the Navy. Of those sixteen, seven were Roman Catholic priests.² The majority of the non-Catholic chaplains who were killed lost their lives in tragic accidents, primarily aircraft accidents and booby traps; in one case a heart attack.³ Aside from one chaplain who was killed in a helicopter crash, each Catholic chaplain who was killed lost their life in direct contact action with the enemy while administering the sacrament of Last Rites.⁴ These statistics are even more noteworthy when considering the severe shortage

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¹ All the Distinguished Service Crosses awarded to chaplains were subsequently upgraded to the Medal of Honor and the only Silver Star awarded to a Navy chaplain was awarded to a Catholic Priest.

² All three of the Navy chaplains killed were Catholic priests, one actively serving with the Navy, the other two serving with the Marine Corps in ground operations.

³ Of other 9 chaplains who were killed, two were Jewish chaplains and the rest fell under the general category of Protestant chaplain. "Chaplains on the Wall," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, January 19, 2022, <https://www.vvmf.org/topics/chaplains/>.

⁴ Although the term "Last Rites" is not currently used in Catholic sacramental terminology for end-of-life sacraments, it would be permissible in this article when dealing with pre-Vatican II realities. Last Rites, as known pre-Vatican II, refers to set of sacraments and prayers administered only by a priest or a bishop to those nearing death. This sacrament includes Holy Anointing, Confession, Extreme Unction, and Viaticum (Holy Communion).

of Catholic chaplains in the theatre during the entirety of the Vietnam War and their percentage of the Chaplain Corps in Vietnam.⁵ I investigate the theological and institutional reasons behind this disproportion to argue that the unique theological formation and identity of Catholic chaplains led them to accept high levels of combat risk, ultimately explaining their disproportionate casualties

I construct a model of the average seminary formation in the US during the period these chaplains were seminarians through my use of archival evidence. My model shows that the man serving as a chaplain during Vietnam left the seminary with a particular view of what it meant to be a good priest. In examining the testimonies of those who knew these chaplains as well as personal letters, I show how the priests who were killed in the Vietnam War actively sought out ways to fulfill that ideal. I demonstrate that these priests left the seminary with immense discipline and an idea about the priesthood that was the following: the existence of the priesthood is necessary for the salvation of souls, the priesthood is an ontological change of the soul making them a priest no matter what they are doing, and that the essence of the priesthood is that of suffering and sacrifice. As representatives of this, I examine three of the seven priests who were killed, Fathers Aloysius McGonigal (U.S. Army), Vincent Capodanno (U.S. Navy/U.S. Marine Corps), and Michael Quealy (U.S. Army).

The combat chaplain who served in Vietnam, both non-Catholic and Catholic, saw their place as being in the most dangerous areas. On my view, the fundamental difference between the way non-Catholics and Catholics ministered was the theological view of souls and forgiveness. These priests believed they were there to save the souls of men who may not make it back to the field hospital, and that they were the only ones capable of keeping their immortal souls. Because of this and deeply ingrained admiration for martyrdom, Catholic priests risked death to save souls, whereas non-Catholics did not have this imperative and thus saw no need to risk their lives for this. These priests put themselves in dangerous conditions more often because they perceived their vocation as priests to necessitate a greater capacity for suffering and sacrifice.⁶

To tell this story of sacrifice it is important to understand the average seminary theological, spiritual, and pastoral formation of diocesan and religious priests (in this case, Jesuits and Maryknoll Fathers) during the period when these chaplains were in seminary. But it's also important to emphasize

5 Henry F. Ackerman, *He Was Always There: The US Army Chaplain Ministry in the Vietnam Conflict* (Washington DC: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1989), 30. At the height of the Vietnam war, in 1967 – 1968 there were 296 chaplains to cover nearly 536,000 American servicemembers. Thirty percent of that number was Catholic, leaving 93 Catholic priests in theatre to cover 160,000 servicemen that year.

6 Rectors conference, Father Gladstone Stephens, February 5, 2024.

the theological differences with non-Catholic chaplains. The stories of the three aforementioned chaplains, and how their seminary formation and theology were reflected in their ministry are both deeply human and deeply sacrificial.

The Seminary Formation of Chaplains

The seminary formation of Catholic chaplains killed in action gave them their ministerial imperative during war. According to their theological education and conviction, their status as priests was indispensable for the Catholic men most in danger of losing their lives, the front-line combatants. Those men were, therefore, most in need of immediate sacramental care for the sake of their immortal souls and at risk of entering eternity “spiritually unarmed.” In the minds of the priests who were killed, this necessitated them being in combat, too. A sacrificial/martyr priestly identity inculcated in them provided a predisposition to put their bodies in harm’s way.

What led men like Quealy, Capodanno, or McGonigal to enter a priestly vocation and persevere to ordination? In 1963, Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen cited a survey among seminarians that sixty percent were inspired to join the seminary because of their contact with a mortified and saintly priest.⁷ Men entering the seminary also did so out of a desire to endure hardships to bring the sacraments to the faithful. Archbishop Sheen mentions another survey among three hundred young men that sought to determine what kind of priest inspired them the most; the top two answers were missionaries and those who ministered among the poor.⁸ Sheen argues that this is indicative of a man who pursues entrance to the seminary and ordination to the priesthood because he desires to make a heroic sacrifice; to become a victim as Christ was the victim on the cross.⁹ Archbishop Sheen hinted at something already being utilized by the Maryknoll Fathers in their recruiting efforts to great success with recruiting pamphlets reading, “Deny yourself! It can and will win souls for Christ!” and “We *have* to give man bread and the sacred host / We *have* to teach the alphabet and the doctrine of Christ / We *must* offer them social justice and the providence of God / We *have* to learn the value of work and the value of prayer / We *have* to save not only souls but men.”¹⁰

The seminary which the Catholic chaplains of Vietnam experienced was intense and quasi-monastic; seminarians were under a strict program of intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and human formation. Once a man entered priestly formation, he was formed all seven days of the week. Seminarians

⁷ Mortification here refers to the subduing of the bodily desires.

⁸ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Priest is Not His Own* (New York: McGraw – Hill, 1963), 26.

⁹ Sheen, *Not His Own*, 26.

¹⁰ Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers Fundraising And Promotional Material, 1948, W-Y, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

were rarely allowed to leave the seminary except for his Sunday parish assignment or short holiday breaks. They were constantly under the watchful eye of their priest-formators, priests assigned to educate and form them in theology and the priestly ministry. “Rules of Life,” rules and regulations for the lives of seminarians, from the Maryknoll Fathers seminary and Sulpician-run diocesan seminaries, offer outlines of strict schedules with rising before dawn for mass and prayer with every hour of the day planned out until the seminarian bedded himself.¹¹ Also included were strict guidance of when the seminarian could leave the seminary, where he could go, and how he should dress himself. Mandated times for prayer, formation sessions, mass, and pastoral assignments were also included. Furthermore, each seminarian was assigned a personal spiritual director to meet with on a weekly basis for confession and spiritual guidance. Under these conditions, seminarians were formed in a crucible under the every-watching eye of their formators, that demanded they conform themselves to a strict and sacrificial way of life.

Seminary formators in the first half of the twentieth century conveyed the ideal of sacrifice through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, which the priest would share in, not just when he celebrated Mass, but every moment of his life. A formator writes to seminarians at Sulpician-run St. Mary’s in Baltimore, “We must be a victim united with our beloved Victim. One with Him. *Sacerdos alter Christus* [the priest is another Christ]... the more thoroughly we become victims, the more truly we are priests.”¹² For Maryknollers, this was exemplified through the sacrifice known in martyrdom, with one brother seminarian of Fr. Capodanno proclaiming, “We were to aspire to martyrdom; and to pray for martyrdom as a grace.”¹³ In *The Making of a Jesuit Priest*, produced by the alma mater of Fr. McGonigal, Woodstock Seminary, the Jesuit formators laid out their expectations of the Jesuit priest after ordination due to his training.

She [the seminary] has watched over him with a mothers care during all these years; she has provided for his every need; she has trained him to deny himself of the love of Christ and at the end of the long period of probation she puts upon him her final seal, offering him to Christs Vicar as an apostle ready to do and suffer for the welfare of God’s Church on Earth. This is what society expects due to the making of a Jesuit priest.¹⁴

11 Priests Formators of the Society of St. Sulpice, St. Mary’s Seminary, “Rule of Life”, (internal document to St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, MD, Baltimore, 1943), 58. “Rule of Life”, Glenn Ellyn Seminary, 1948, W-Y, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

12 Joseph Bruneau, S.S., *Our Priesthood* (Baltimore: 1944, St. Mary’s Seminary), 151. Associated Sulpicians of the United States Archive.

13 Journal entry from an unnamed confrère of Fr. Capodanno in *Positio*, 72.

14 *The Making of a Jesuit Priest*, Imprimi potest: Edward Phillips, 28 January 1932, Woodstock College Archives, Woodstock Rare Book & Manuscript Collections, 1869-2022, Georgetown University Libraries.

Personal cultivation of the heart of a priest was paramount in formation. Bishop Wilhelm Stockums, an oft-used writer by the Sulpician Fathers, wrote to seminarians that a priestly heart is a heart that has been “anointed with ardent and self-sacrificing love for Christ and mankind.” A priest may be called upon to lay down his life for those he serves if necessary.¹⁵ He further couched his language so that seminarians saw themselves as soldiers in the battle for souls: “The priest, more than anyone else, must be a good soldier, a loyal warrior. . . . Who shrinks from hardship and battle should never consider becoming a priest; he is not made of the stuff required for service on the firing line where the priest has his place.”¹⁶ This is echoed in a seminarian’s daily meditation manual: “He joins the ranks to be a soldier of Christ, to fight his battles and to bear bravely the hardships of campaign.” Similarly, Capodanno and Quealy would have heard over and over Maryknoll’s self-proclaimed moniker, of “God’s shock troops to be sent to the front lines.” Language such as this, heard year after year in the seminary, undoubtedly influenced the chaplains who ran to the sound of the guns.¹⁷

Formators instructed seminarians in the fundamental theology of the priesthood as part of their academic curriculum.¹⁸ It is likely that the relatively recently published (1935) encyclical from Pius XI, *Ad Catolici Sacerdotii*, was taught in this course. Pius XI reminds the faithful of the necessity of the priesthood, that the Church needs priests, or else there would be no way to minister sacraments. Moreover, without the priests, the ordinary means of the salvation of souls, the sacraments, cannot be accomplished on this earth. Formators made clear to the aspirants that they were entering into a ministry that was not replaceable; there could be no question that the Church, inwardly and outwardly, depended on the priesthood.¹⁹ The essential role of the priest is the protection and direction of immortal souls, and it was conveyed as the most sublime labor of the priestly ministry.²⁰ The Catholic religion and the Catholic priesthood alone offer such a spectacle.

The Making of Jesuit Priest, a booklet published by Fr. McGonigal’s alma mater, Woodstock Seminary, tells seminarians and aspirants that ordination to the priesthood brings a ministry above even that of the angels, “they will be enabled to do what the Angels about God’s throne in heaven dare not attempt, to consecrate the sacred host in our saviors name and with

15 Wilhelm Stockums, *The Priesthood* (TAN, 1974 [1938]), 34, 37.

16 Stockums, *The Priesthood*, 79.

17 Interview with CH Stephen Moretti at the U.S. Army Chaplain School, 1985. US Army Chaplain Museum Archives.

18 St. Mary’s Seminary School of Theology Catalog (St. Mary’s Seminary official daily schedule and class schedule, course descriptions, admissions, etc.), 1955 – 1956, Associated Sulpicians of the United States Archive.

19 Bruneau, *Our Priesthood*, 153.

20 Bruneau, *Our Priesthood*, 35.

his authority, to absolve men from their sins.”²¹ Pius XI, too, admonished seminarians that the Church teaches them to become “priests forever” and eternally share in Christ’s sacrificial priesthood. Without understanding their status as a “priest forever,” there could be no development of the priestly identity. The Catholic chaplains who died giving Last Rites maintained this theological understanding; their priesthood did not end when the bullets stopped or started flying, whether they were traveling or in garrison. Every moment of their lives was spent as a priest.

Even prior to seminary, seminarians would have been familiar with the teaching that belief in Christ alone is not sufficient for salvation. Even after being sacramentally initiated into the Church through baptism and confirmation, a person can sin mortally (a violation of one of the 10 Commandments) and “lose his baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion.”²² If a person dies with the stain of mortal sin on their soul, it is lost to eternal damnation. While the Church teaches that only God can forgive sins, it also teaches that He entrusted the power of absolution to His apostles during His life on earth which manifests itself in the sacraments of Last Rites and Confession.²³ As indicated in *The Making of a Jesuit Priest* the only creatures capable of forgiving sins by the authority given to them by Jesus are the successors to the apostles Catholic bishops and priests; not even the Angels of heaven can do such a thing. It is with this teaching that man can forfeit God’s grace that the sacraments of confession and Last Rites are efficacious. The Council of Trent definitively taught that the performance of these sacraments, especially Last Rites:

[on Extreme Unction] And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him. For the thing here signified is the grace of the Holy Ghost; whose anointing cleanses away sins, if there be any still to be expiated, as also the remains of sins; and raises up and strengthens the soul of the sick person, by exciting in him a great confidence in the divine mercy; whereby the sick being supported, bears more easily the inconveniences and pains of his sickness; and more readily resists the temptations of the devil who lies in wait for his heel; and at times obtains bodily health, when expedient for the welfare of the soul.²⁴

²¹ *The Making of a Jesuit Priest*, Imprimi Potest: Edward C. Phillips, Jan. 28 1932, Woodstock College Archives, Woodstock Rare Book & Manuscript Collections, 1869-2022, Georgetown University Libraries.

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 363.

²³ Confession is included as a part of Last Rites.

²⁴ Council of Trent 106.

The priestly ministry of hearing confessions and absolving those on their deathbed through Last Rites was heavily emphasized in formation. In a book given to seminarians in their last year preparing for priestly ordination at St. Mary's seminary in Baltimore, Rev. Joseph Bruneau instructed, aside from saying mass and hearing confessions, the priest is must console and visit the sick and heal the wounds of their soul and especially without even waiting for the call, likening ignoring the call to absolve the dying to criminal neglect.²⁵ What this entailed was offering to the dying the sacrament of Last Rites, which would absolve them of their sins and save them from potential damnation to Hell for eternity. An essential formation point for would-be priest-chaplains was the urgency conveyed. Any delay might endanger the eternal salvation of a soul.

Cases of Non-Catholic Chaplains

The opposite side of this question considers the motivations of non-Catholic chaplains. Why weren't they killed in direct engagements like Catholics were? The answer lies not in a lack of valor (non-Catholic chaplains were undeniably courageous), but in a fundamental difference in soteriology, ministerial theology, and model of seminary formation. Here I provide some brief examples from non-Catholic chaplains who served in Vietnam.

Chaplain James Johnson, a Baptist chaplain assigned to an army riverine assault unit from 1967 – 1968, like many others who were assigned to combat units, understood that his ministry would be best felt while on the front lines. In his diary, Johnson expressed that his impact would be minimal if his ministry were relegated to the aid boats. Chaplain Johnson served bravely in many firefights; however, his frontline ministry, aside from religious services during quiet moments, saw him largely there as a ministry of presence and doing his best to get out of the way of the soldiers during attacks. Ultimately, he does not define what it means to be there to minister under fire. Johnson further admits that as a Protestant and Baptist, he cannot provide Last Rites, thus limiting any sacramental impact during combat.²⁶

Chaplain Claude Newby, one of the few Latter Day Saints (LDS) chaplains who served during Vietnam, saw combat attached to the 1st Cavalry Division. Newby's memoirs of his tour in Vietnam express his desire at the time to serve with an infantry line unit and to see combat with them. Like Johnson, he felt his most significant impact would be with those enduring combat; however, like several other chaplains against regulations, he carried a sidearm for self-defense. Much like Catholic chaplains, Newby knew where other LDS soldiers were in his area and did his best to give sacramental care to

²⁵ B.F. Marcetteau, S.S., *The Priest's Companion* (Baltimore: St. Mary's Seminary, 1932), 333.

²⁶ James Johnson, *Combat Chaplain: A Thirty Year Vietnam Battle* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001), 183.

them according to his tradition.²⁷ Newby's ministry in combat was exemplary, earning three bronze stars and three purple hearts. He recounts one instance in which he crawled to a wounded soldier under heavy fire to drag him to safety.²⁸ By his account, he was determined to be there with the men he was assigned to minister to under the harshest circumstances. Newby clearly expressed concern for the eternal salvation of souls, yet found himself ultimately in a position helpless to save them as his theology does not permit him to remit sins sacramentally.²⁹ Ultimately, his idea of ministry was to be an assuring and calming presence to the soldiers in combat, and immediate sacramental care does not appear to have been a concern.

Chaplain Bob Bedingfield, a Presbyterian Navy chaplain serving with an ANGLICO unit in the Marine Corps in 1966, quickly endeared himself to troops by replacing a chaplain unwilling to be on patrols and enter combat with the Marines.³⁰ His willingness to be with the Marines on the front line led to two bronze stars and purple hearts; purportedly, a silver star was withheld as the citation included him throwing grenades.³¹ He recalls the crux of his combat ministry as quick field services with the offering of communion and a ministry of presence. However, when contact was received, Bedingfield characterized his ministry by putting himself in the way of enemy fire to drag or carry wounded troops and give them "comfort," as evidenced by his two Bronze Stars with V device.³² Chaplain Bedingfield cared for the mortal lives and morale of the men in his unit, but his motivations to save souls under fire are not expressed. However, Bedingfield possessed uncommon bravery under fire that was uncommon for all chaplains.

Memoirs from front-line non-Catholic chaplains convey many of the same sentiments. The themes of these memoirs suggest that chaplains on the front lines, without liturgical imperatives to minister to the dying and wounded in a particular sacramental way, had to formulate their own way to minister under fire. Chaplain Newby wrote that the army had no official combat ministry doctrine and that most chaplains understood they were institutional rather than ecclesiastical figures while on duty.³³ With their ecclesiastical roles in combat ambiguous and in the absence of official doctrine, they

27 Claude Newby, *It Took Heroes: A Cavalry Chaplains' Memoir of Vietnam* (NYC: Ballantine, 1998), 280.

28 Newby, *It Took Heroes*, 276.

29 "The bishop *cannot and does not* forgive sin, but he may judge the matter and waive the penalty that the Church might otherwise impose against the person. The repentant sinner must still make confession and obtain forgiveness of the Lord." See "Bible Dictionary: Confession," *Homepage - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/confession?lang=eng>.

30 ANGLICO: Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company.

31 Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor The Marines at War in Vietnam: An Oral History* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 295.

32 Lee Salter, "Bronze Star," *Camp Lejeune Globe* (Camp Lejeune, NC) June 27, 1969.

33 Philip Kramer, in his 2015 analysis of the development of army chaplain doctrine, notes that the 1952, 1964, and 1967 chaplain manuals provided virtually no guidance on chaplain combat ministry should a chaplain find themselves under direct contact. However, the 1964 manual briefly mentions that chaplains assigned to combat units should center themselves at aid stations.

looked to their conscience to act according to how they thought would best serve the troops' morale in critical moments. Moreover, across non-Catholic denominations, primarily evangelical and reformed Christian traditions, there is little indication that seminary education provided the immersive and often monastic formational experience that Catholic seminary did in the first half of the twentieth century.

While this research is limited to Catholic seminary formation, a brief analysis of seminaries of denominations like Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and LDS during this period shows a primary focus on theological proficiency rather than pastoral identity, which was learned through personal pastoral apprenticeships rather than a unified emphasis on pastoral identity.³⁴ The onus of pastoral and spiritual formation in places like Asbury Theological Seminary, a primarily Methodist institution, were on the individual and were not mandated. While prayer and chapel were offered, they were not mandatory and pastoral proficiency was evaluated through apprenticeships and Methodist Conference instruction checklists.³⁵ This evidence suggests that while there was theological uniformity among chaplains in their respective traditions, there was not a corresponding pastoral and spiritual uniformity that was instilled through their seminary systems to the extent that it was in Catholic seminaries. It was up to the man to determine what the heart of a shepherd ought to be.

Non-Catholic chaplains independently decided that being there during the firing was enough, and at times, braving fire to help move the wounded to cover. However, according to their theology they could do nothing more than provide reassurance and medical aid. While theological beliefs regarding the forgiveness of sin varied from denomination to denomination, non-Catholic chaplains had no imperative to place their lives at greater risk during combat due to lack of the concept of sacramental forgiveness. Non-Catholic and Non-Orthodox Christian denominations understand sin forgiveness to be personal confessions without the necessity of priest-mediators. Accordingly, the chaplain's motivations were the preservation of their comrades' lives and their own. The immortal souls of these soldiers, even if those soldiers were members of the chaplain's faith tradition, were essentially out of their hands. Because of this, it may be inferred that these are significant factors why non-Catholic American military combat chaplains were not killed in the manner and number Catholics were. Yet, it does not account for why certain Catholics bore the brunt of the combat casualties in the manner that they did.

³⁴ Gregory A. Smith, "Baptist Ministerial Education in the United States, 1850-1950," *Faculty Publications and Submissions*, 43 (1997). and Casey Paul Griffiths, "A Century of Seminary" *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (2012) <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/si/history/a-century-of-seminary?lang=eng>.

³⁵ Father Seth Seaman interview, St. Bridget Catholic Parish Richmond, VA, May 24, 2025.

Fr. Aloysius McGonigal

To his superiors and contemporaries, Fr. Aloysius McGonigal S.J. was reckless. Even the Chief of Chaplains at the time, his brother priest and World War II Distinguished Service Cross recipient, Chaplain (Major General) Francis L. Sampson, believed he had a death wish.³⁶ But as a boy in Philadelphia, McGonigal was inspired by the adventurous missionary spirit of the Jesuits and their many martyrs to enter the priestly formation for the Society of Jesus. After eleven years of intense Jesuit priestly formation, McGonigal was ordained for the Jesuits in 1953 at the age of thirty-two. Influenced by his lengthy formation, during a teaching apostolate at Gonzaga High School in Washington, D.C., students remembered McGonigal as championing the stories of the Jesuit martyrs and promoting a “distinctly muscular brand of Christianity.”³⁷

When McGonigal’s death was reported in late February 1968, articles consistently reprinted the phrase, “The dead chaplain was killed while serving with a unit that was not his own in a battle he could have avoided.”³⁸ This was because after participating in the southern portion of the Battle of Hue with the Army in early February 1968, McGonigal had been reluctantly assigned a desk job at Da Nang due to his ‘reckless’ behavior. Yet, after seeing the brutality of the southern portion of the fighting, he could not stand to be where men were not suffering, and he could not actively assist as a priest sacramentally and live out his missionary zeal. Unable to find an army unit that would accept his ministry, McGonigal returned to Hue with a Vietnamese airborne unit and found his way to an entirely different service: 1/5 Marines. McGonigal learned that 1/5 Marine’s chaplain had just been fired for cowardice and volunteered his services. The commander, Major Bruce Thompson, agreed, but urged McGonigal to stay in the small MACV compound, where wounded and dead were being congregated. But McGonigal saw a more urgent need and retorted, “There are too many men who are not making it back to the compound. I need to be on the streets [to administer last rites].”³⁹ McGonigal relentlessly visited soldiers in the most dangerous places in the citadel hearing confessions and administering Last Rites multiple times. One evening, when McGonigal did not report to Maj Thompson, a search party was sent to find him. McGonigal was eventually found dead from an enemy bullet to the head in a blown-out building.⁴⁰

³⁶ Sampson interview.

³⁷ Mark Bowden, “No Ordinary Chaplain: Fr. Aloysius McGonigal and the Battle of Hue,” *VVA Veteran*, May/June 2019.

³⁸ Newspaper Clippings, 1968, Chaplain Museum Archives.

³⁹ Bowden, “No Ordinary Chaplain.”

⁴⁰ Contact was made with the family of Fr. McGonigal and the Jesuit Woodstock Archives at Georgetown University regarding personal letters of Fr. McGonigal. His family and The Society both report that none have survived.

McGonigal's story perhaps indicates trends with the other Catholic chaplains in terms of relationships with soldiers and their ministry. These combat priests felt it was their most sacred priestly duty during combat to save souls and would put their lives at risk to do so. However, Marines and soldiers, despite loving and respecting their selfless and courageous ministry, were put off by the prospect of receiving Last Rites, as it was an omen of impending death.⁴¹ McGonigal and other priests were trained to understand what it took for a soul to be saved through frequent reception of the sacraments, but it is likely that the Catholics they ministered to neither knew nor cared. Yet, such sentiments did not stop priests like Fr. McGonigal, who had been trained as priests, from doing the contrary.

Fr. Vincent Capodanno

Born to Italian immigrants on Staten Island in 1929, Vincent Capodanno grew up in a devoutly Catholic household. Fr. Capodanno entered the priestly formation program for Maryknoll in 1949 and was ordained a priest 9 years later. It is clear Capodanno took formation quite seriously and always had the ideal of the priest as represented by his formators in his mind, especially after ordination. As he wrote to his former rector, "The ideal of the priesthood in a Maryknoller you set before us in your own life and your conferences will always be an example to encourage me. ... The book you gave us, *Radiating Christ*, will greatly help direct God's light to the shadows throughout the world."⁴² Many who knew him spoke of his discipline, cleanliness, and maturity, reflecting the seminary rule of life even post-ordination.

After release from his society, in January 1966, Fr. Capodanno reported to Newport, RI, for Naval Chaplain School and set foot in Vietnam less than three months later with the 7th Marines.⁴³ Immediately, Fr. Capodanno felt at home, "I am busy as the only Catholic chaplain in the 7th Reg., I enjoy every minute of it."⁴⁴ He quickly became a favorite among the men for going out of his way to minister sacramentally and interpersonally to them under any circumstances. A marine he ministered to remembered Capodanno in this way, "It seemed easy for Fr. Capodanno to carry out his priestly duties. It was natural. . . . Father Capodanno's reputation among the Marines was impeccable. Everyone had the highest regard for him."⁴⁵ It was also clear that Capodanno was deeply influenced by his seminary education, writing, "It is most necessary for us to remember the influences that have gone into our

⁴¹ Bowden, "No Ordinary Chaplain."

⁴² Daniel Mode, *The Grunt Padre*, (Oak Lawn: CMJ Marian Publishers, 2000), 36. *Radiating Christ* emphasized the priestly sacrifice.

⁴³ Mode, *The Grunt Padre*, 98.

⁴⁴ Mode, *The Grunt Padre*, 98.

⁴⁵ Personal testimony by James Albert Hamfeldt, November 11, 2014, in *Positio*, 270.

formation.”⁴⁶ Eyewitnesses report that at every battalion staff meeting before any operation, Capodanno would ask the intelligence officer which company was liable to incur the heaviest casualties to determine where he would go.⁴⁷

It is also clear that Archbishop Broglio’s claim about Fr. Capodanno’s priestly identity is correct. His fellow marines saw and spoke of it. They referred to him not as a chaplain but as the “padre”, earned not just due to his bravery, but willingness to share in the suffering of the men, “He suffered when the men suffered”; the marines considered this “priest of God” a hero.⁴⁸ The Marines admired his willingness to suffer with them so much that they dubbed him “the grunt padre.” These testimonies speak to the priestly heart cultivated by the Maryknoll formators. At the end of his tour, Fr. Capodanno requested an extension, saying, “I do not desire to leave.” His request was granted, although he had to take 30 days of leave.⁴⁹

When he returned to Vietnam in August, Capodanno joined the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. About a month later, 3/5 would be tasked with Operation SWIFT. SWIFT was a search and destroy mission to attack and destroy Vietnamese PAVN 2nd Infantry Division personnel and equipment in the Que Son valley.⁵⁰ At 0500 hours on 4 September, the operation commenced with D Company of 1/5 conducting a sweeping operation. D Company soon came under ambush and was caught disorganized. After nearly being overrun, B Company came to their assistance, but D Company had lost 26 marines KIA, and upon hearing the news of the situation, Capodanno, who had been at the combat operations center, immediately returned to his unit, 3/5. No sooner than he had returned than the 1/5 battalion commander requested assistance from 3/5 in the form of M and K companies.⁵¹ Having spent the entirety of the prior week with M Co, Capodanno knew there were Catholics in that unit who would need his sacramental duties. A first lieutenant initially denied his request to join, “This was unheard of for a chaplain to go out with a line company.”⁵² However, after appealing to the battalion commander, Capodanno was granted permission. The M Company was inserted by helicopter to reinforce the beleaguered D and B companies, and upon landing, Fr. Capodanno offered communion and general absolution. As they advanced, the marines came

⁴⁶ Journal entry of Fr. Capodanno in 1966 in *Positio*, 103.

⁴⁷ Mode, *The Grunt Padre*, 99.

⁴⁸ Personal testimony of LT Basil Babka and LT Joseph LaHood (no date) in *Positio*, 106, 107.

⁴⁹ Stephen DiGiovanni, *Armed With Faith: The Life of Father Vincent Capodanno*, (Washington D.C.: Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, 2018), 136.

⁵⁰ Operation Swift AAR, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁵¹ Operation Swift AAR, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁵² Mode, *The Grunt Padre*, 126.

under intense fire, taking many casualties. Eventually making it to the CP, Capodanno recognized names on the radio of men in the second platoon who were in peril and he knew to be Catholic.⁵³

Upon hearing the news on the radio, leaving the safety of the CP, the priest rushed to the second platoon, which was about to be overrun. He ran through an open area that was being raked with intense enemy fire and had also just undergone a friendly CS gas attack. Upon arrival, Capodanno gave up his gas mask to the radio operator whom he had dragged to safety. He then proceeded, completely exposed to enemy fire, to give last rites and subsequent medical aid to wounded marines.⁵⁴ At times, he acted as a shield against the hail of bullets and was painfully wounded multiple times, losing a portion of his right hand. Eyewitnesses recall hearing him give last rites to dying men while refusing aid for his wounds.⁵⁵ At last, Fr. Capodanno saw a wounded Navy Corpsman in the direct line of fire of a machine gun. His attempt to provide last rites to the corpsman resulted in the loss of his own life from a burst of that same machine gun.⁵⁶

Fr. Michael Quealy

A confrère of Fr. Capodanno in the Maryknoll Fathers, Fr. Michael J. Queally, and the first chaplain to be KIA in Vietnam, dreamed of being a missionary priest in Asia. Those who knew him as a boy remembered his ardent desire to enter formation for the mission priesthood. Perhaps inspired by one of the many Maryknoll brochures titled “Maryknoll, the World, and You,” championing its priests who were martyred abroad and advertising themselves as God’s shock troops in foreign lands to administer sacraments to those most in need, he entered formation as a seventeen-year-old in 1946.⁵⁷

In the spirit of his missionary zeal and seminary formation, Queally viewed joining the Army and a combat deployment to Vietnam as spiritually necessary, for the good of men’s souls. A *Time* Magazine article reported his motivations, “He knew that if there is no priest to celebrate the Mass, to serve Communion, to hear Confessions, to anoint the sick, then the soldier will go into battle and perhaps into eternity, spiritually unarmed. And Father Queally did not want that to happen.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Kijaz, *Positio*, 113.

⁵⁴ Personal testimony of CPL Stephen Lovejoy, radio operator (no date) in *Positio*, 113.

⁵⁵ Personal testimony of CPL David Brooks (no date) in *Positio*, 114.

⁵⁶ No Author, “Vincent Robert Capodanno: Vietnam War: Medal of Honor Recipient (citation)” Congressional Medal of Honor Society, <https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/vincent-r-capodanno#:~:text=For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity,with operations against enemy forces.>

⁵⁷ Maryknoll Mission Archives. Brochures for men discerning the priesthood throughout the 40s and 50s such as “Maryknoll, the World, and You” contained near identical inserts about the society’s martyrs such as: “Father Otto Rausenbach – missionary in China was shot through the heart by bandits,” “Missionary victim for Christ, Father Gerry Donovan – was kidnapped and slain by bandits in Northern Manchuria.”

⁵⁸ 1st Infantry Division Public Information Office “Chaplain’s Death” *Time Magazine*, November 18, 1966.

In June 1966, Fr. Queally was assigned to deploy to Vietnam with the 1st Infantry Division. In theatre, soldiers remember his relentless desire to be in the right place at the right time to save souls, leading him to participate in Operations El Paso, Shenandoah, and Attleboro. He was often found hopping from battle to battle administering Last Rites, assisting medics, and praying with non-Catholics. Operation Attleboro, Fr. Queally's final operation, was a search-and-destroy mission conducted by the 196th Infantry Regiment. This resulted in their direct contact with the superiorly numbered forces of the 9th People's Liberation Armed Forces Division. The ensuing battle necessitated the entirety of the 1st Infantry to be committed in a brutal division-on-division engagement that became the wars largest air-mobile operation to that point.⁵⁹ On November 8, at the peak of the battle, Fr. Queally, as he usually did, arrived in a MEDEVAC helicopter and immediately asked a non-commissioned officer where the worst fighting was taking place. The consensus is that upon his arrival, Queally saved at least five soldiers' lives in the face of direct light-machine gun fire.⁶⁰ However, soldiers primarily remember Fr. Queally walking to wounded man after wounded man administering last rites, perhaps recklessly, in the face of at least three enemy machine guns. During this act, Fr. Queally found the martyrdom that inspired him to become a Maryknoller. The 1st Infantry Division Press Officer reported that when examining Fr. Queally's personal effects, it was found that the last entry in his journal was copied from Matthew 18:35, "So will my heavenly Father treat you unless each of you forgives his brother with all his heart."⁶¹ Fr. Queally expressed his desire to save souls through his sacramental ministry until his last moments.

Conclusion

The circumstances surrounding the deaths of Catholic chaplains speak to their priestly identity even more than their valor. Their training and vocation as priests compelled them to act as they did. By the conviction that their very souls had been changed for eternity from ordinary men to priests of Jesus Christ, they alone bore responsibility for saving men's souls. Their culpability in the loss of souls to eternal damnation necessitated what men perceive as valor. I venture to say that had non-Catholic chaplains who served on the front lines in intense firefights been theologically identical to the Catholic priests, the number of chaplains killed would have been greater.

The intense and lengthy seminary formation these chaplains endured remained with them to the end. The sacrificial priest and his irreplaceable sacramental care compelled priests like McGonigal, Watters, and Capodanno

59 16th Infantry Regiment Association, "Regimental Maps: Vietnam and Cold War II 1965 – 1990: Operation ATTLEBORO November 1966," <https://16thinfassn.org/history/regimental-maps/vietnam-cold-war-ii-1965-1990/operation-attleboro-november-1966/>.

60 Christopher Parker, "Remembering Father Quealy: the first Catholic chaplain killed in Vietnam," *America Magazine*, November 11, 2022.

61 1st Infantry Division Public Information Office, "Chaplain's Death," *Time Magazine*, November 18, 1966.

to run to the sound of the guns and where the men on the ground suffered most. To the outsider, their risk seems unnecessary. Why risk assets that are already in short supply? To the men who sacrificed their lives, no act was ever more necessary. They were in the business of saving souls, and one soul saved even at the cost of their own lives, which was what they were trained to do and believe in, was necessary to fulfill their theological and ministerial imperatives.

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