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# Chaplaincy in Action

By Lt. Richard E. Malmstrom (FMF), CHC, USN

Life in the parish presents itself with many interesting theological challenges. After years of study for personal growth and the pursuit of academia, the parish pastor now studies for the sake of his flock and its eternal salvation. He pours over Pieper with a newfound interest and fervor. As new topics arise, he studies with enthusiasm that which seemed unimportant and mundane in the classroom. Every church has its own unique challenges and opportunities to proclaim the Gospel that demand further study.

The military chaplaincy is indeed unique. It is like no other. The military chaplain does not see his flock on Sunday for a few hours. He lives among his flock, carries the same pack, eats the same food, and faces the same dangers as his flock. He gets to know his people in a way that no other ministry affords. He knows everything about his flock, and they know everything about him. There are no secrets.



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**Without a doubt, military chaplaincy is incredibly physically, spiritually, and emotionally demanding. Physically, I am reminded constantly of how young my Marines are as we carry our gear through the mountains or go for a five-mile fun run. Spiritually, it is demanding to be the voice of reason and hope in the midst of chaos.**

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Soon after our arrival, we saw our first casualties. Two Iraqi soldiers died from a roadside bomb, and I quickly had to decide what to do. How would I treat these dead? Should I treat them any differently? What would be the effect on my Marines? I knelt by their bodies and prayed. "Are they going to heaven, Chaps?" asked one of my corpsmen. "That's not my call. I'll leave that one for God to decide," I answered. I said the same prayer for all of the men who died. "Lord, into Your hands I commend this, Your child. Be merciful to him according to Your loving-kindness. Judge him not according to his works but according to his faith. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

There were many issues that arose. I had to deal head-on with death and killing in the line of duty. I had to deal with combat stress and homesickness, dear John letters and infidelity, and the weeks of uncertainty following Hurricane Katrina when many of my Marines worried about loved ones back home or whether there even be a home for them when they returned.

As I spoke with other chaplains, I found that our orthodox Lutheran faith offered the greatest hope and comfort to our men and women in combat. In particular, Luther's discussion of the two kingdoms helped beyond measure. While other chaplains struggled to help their Marines who had to fire their weapons in the line of duty, the doctrine of vocation gave great comfort and peace.

God calls each and every one of us to be sons and daughters, wives, husbands, pastors, teachers, and the like, and each have specific duties and responsibilities. He also calls men and women into service in the Navy, Marines, Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard. We serve God in our vocation in the armed forces. We serve God as chaplains, nuclear operators, builders, electricians, storekeepers, administrative professionals, artillery, and infantry. At times, those duties are rather mundane. At other times, they are downright dangerous and exciting.

The two kingdoms help the members of our armed forces to see their service to our country as simultaneous service to God. In the kingdom of grace, God cares for His children through Word and Sacrament. He forgives our sins and showers us with His loving-kindness. In this kingdom, our sins are not held against us, and we are declared to be righteous and holy. In the kingdom of power, God cares for His children through public service. God feeds us through farmers, grocers, and cooks. God heals us through doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals, and medicines. God protects our homes through firemen and civil engineers. He protects the innocent through police on a local level and the military on a national or world level. The list is endless. We serve God by serving our neighbor in faith.

In Iraq, this theology helped many Marines and sailors. In the mind of a Marine, there is no greater honor than to serve in combat. They look down on those who never leave the wire, that is, they look down on those who stay in the safety of camp. Knowledge of the two kingdoms helped those who felt guilty about working in supply or administrative jobs and those who felt guilty for taking a life in combat. Those stuck in garrison realized that every job helps the overall mission of the Marine Corps and at the same time offers service to God. Those in battle were comforted to know that they were serving



God in the kingdom of power by protecting the innocent and eliminating the bad. I even went so far as to pray with my snipers before a mission, giving them God's blessing upon their missions.

The many memorial services also presented a unique challenge. There has been a lot of talk about the alleged restrictions put on Christian chaplains. However, by understanding the objections to Christian prayers, many chaplains freely pray in the name of Jesus. The objection is that a prayer in Jesus' name does not account for the faith of others. By simply introducing himself as a Christian and asking non-Christians to find comfort according to their own faith, the chaplain is given permission to pray. Never apologize for the faith, but pray boldly allowing others to opt out if they desire. I approached every memorial assuming that one or more of the Marines was a Christian. Therefore, I had many opportunities to proclaim justification by grace through faith in Christ.

Without a doubt, military chaplaincy is incredibly physically, spiritually, and emotionally demanding. After returning home, I had to spend a lot of time at the VA hospital dealing with my own Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is something with which I am learning to deal. Physically, I am reminded constantly of how young my Marines are as we carry our gear through the mountains or go for a five-mile fun run. Spiritually, it is demanding to be the voice of reason and hope in the midst of chaos.

At the same time, military chaplaincy affords rewards beyond measure. As God carried me and my Marines through the worst we could imagine, I saw faith grow. As I was called upon to go into combat without a weapon, I again saw faith grow, both mine and others. My Marines told me daily of how God saved them from certain death.

Throughout my travels, I have seen a number of churches that proclaim a theology of glory. It comes as no surprise that many chaplains also preach a theology of glory. When times are good, people flock to hear how their affluence and success are evidence that God has blessed them. But in the midst of war, that theology collapses under its own weight. Many believers will lose faith as they are led to believe that if they have enough faith, nothing bad will happen to them or their loved ones. On the contrary, our orthodox Lutheran doctrine provides comfort and peace in all situations.

The military chaplain has the opportunity to live out this life of faith every day. We take the Gospel where it is needed most. Now after returning home, God has called me to a new task. As the headmaster of Zion Lutheran Academy in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I was presented with a new set of challenges. But no matter what the future might hold, I will cling to the orthodox faith I learned in the catechism and the Lutheran Confessions. For it is this faith that provides comfort, peace, strength, and joy in good times and bad. 🇺🇸

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