

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

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Christ is Alive in Conflict

Sharing insights from a Military Chaplain's Perspective

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Mark started by telling us that, while he prefers to be called “Mark” in the military he was always “Carl” because the military always goes by first names, no matter what. A young 85 years old, he now enjoys golfing and Serving at All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA as a “priest associate”. Whilst he tries to avoid the humdrum aspects of parish life, except in emergency, he really enjoys his Anglican-Lutheran Society conferences.

Mark served as a U.S. Navy Chaplain from 1958 to 1988. His experience is therefore a little dated by the principles remain the same. But so that we could understand where he comes from he sketched in some personal background. He comes from a ‘pure’ Swedish background, his father, two brothers, uncle, cousin, and grandfather, were all Swedish Lutheran clergy. His father was Pastor of the second oldest Swedish Lutheran Church in the USA but there was no ecumenical flavour to his ministry!

His journey into ministry began with Liturgy. He went to the Episcopal Cathedral in Davenport, Iowa and loved all that pomp and ceremony, that they called themselves ‘Catholic’, and that the sermons were shorter than he was used to. Indeed, there was sort of a military bearing to the pomp, and the people knew what to do and where to be. In the Swedish churches they did some things liturgically. They chanted everything and wore vestments, but this was somehow different.

When World War II started one of his brother’s went off to ‘war’. Mark was only about 12 years old then, but when he was sent Hershey bars, a German helmet and a bayonet he was in teenage heaven! The war ended but his interest in the military, especially the Navy, was peeking.

However, at university he joined the pre-medical programme because if you were a doctor you made lots of money. But a casual remark of an atheistic Professor of English, “You have to have some values in life...” struck him, and he abandoned medicine and headed towards the ministry.

However, the military was still in his mind and he enrolled in Navy Chaplaincy Programme and after Ordination began ministry in the Navy. He went through extensive Navy training and the Chaplain Corps’ specific training.

‘Chaplains are officers in the Navy,’ he explained. ‘They are officers first and clergy second. They are under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and they function at the will of their endorsing agency (in his case the Lutheran Church) and the Navy. They are governed militarily by the Chaplain Corps and assigned to the Navy, the Marines or the Coast Guard. Mark was always with the Navy.

Mark explained the Chaplain Corps structure – Chief of Chaplains (an Admiral), then chaplains allocated to Navy, Marines, Coastguard. The Navy religion can be summed up as “Cooperation without Compromise”. Chaplains are identified by their insignia, Roman Catholics and Protestants wear a Cross symbol, Jewish chaplains wear the Tablets, Muslims, Bhuddists and so on have other insignia.

Chaplaincy is by its very nature ecumenical and pluralist. Whilst a chaplain of someone’s own denomination will be found if practicable, but often on small ships for example there is only one chaplain for everyone. ‘On board smaller ships, you’re everyone’s padre,’ he told us, ‘you preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments, and in combat situations, or when proceeding towards a combat area, you face life and death situations, help young people to prepare themselves for what might come, offer comfort and support. There is a lot of spiritual counseling to be done, and you are dealing with frightened young people whose life directions may suddenly change dramatically.’

Religion in the Navy can be defined in two words, we were told: Morale and Morals. These were at the forefront of each relationship every day. Mark compared a parish and chaplaincy. ‘A parish offers a unified type of ministry,’ he said. ‘You are preaching to people you know, you have a long-term commitment and vision for the congregation, everything is denominational so you know where you are. But military chaplaincy is not like that. Everything is short-term, people

coming and going, on watch and off watch, so that preaching is Gospel oriented, but has to take more of a universal approach. It is NOT easy, but it is rewarding!

Chaplaincy can be rewarding. There are times when military people see and feel the Good News; as LIFE flashes before them, and they respond! It's often about rifles, bombs, and the Eucharist...

But there are those who don't respond, and it's no use being downhearted. 'That's the way of the Gospel, isn't it?' Mark observed. 'The Gospel always works, it is just that sometimes WE DON'T!'

Our theme was 'Christ is Alive! Really? Where do we find him? We find him everywhere, in all circumstances, there beside us sharing our joy and our suffering. We find him in people. People like a fellow-chaplain, Roman Catholic Fr Capodanno. And Mark ended his presentation with this moving citation:

On the morning of September 4, 1967 [during the Vietnam War] Fr Capodanno volunteered to go out with Marine units that were being flown in to relieve a battalion in the hotly contested Que Son Valley. Knowing that an attack was imminent, he had spent most of the night praying for those who would lose their lives.

Soon after landing, Capodanno's unit was hit hard by a force of nearly two thousand North Vietnamese. As the Marines came over the crest of a hill, they were bombarded with mortar shells and automatic weapons fire. "We're being wiped out!" one platoon radioed back. "There are wounded and dying all around."

Hearing the message, the chaplain ran to their aid. He went back and forth, bringing in wounded men and giving Last Rites to the dying. Even though hit twice - once in the face and also in the right hand - he continued to look for wounded, telling them, "Jesus said, 'Have faith. Jesus is the truth and the life.'"

One of the men he helped was Ray Harton, who was bleeding heavily and feared that he was going to die. Then he looked up and saw Capodanno. "I can't explain it, but when he touched me and I heard his voice, I had a calming feeling that I have never had before or since." Capodanno reassured Harton that "God is with us all this day", and blessed him with his still intact left hand.

Then a wounded corpsman screamed in pain, and Capodanno ran to help. As he knelt there, a burst of machine-gun fire killed both men instantly. One of the soldiers who brought in Capodanno's body hours later said, "He had a smile on his face, and his eyelids were closed as if asleep or in prayer."

Fr Vince Capodanno was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery that day.