

Thirteenth Annual Veterans Remembrance Ceremony
Boston College Veterans Alumni Network
Chestnut Hill Campus of Boston College
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Veterans Day Remembrance Remarks
by Robert L. Keane, S.J.

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning! And, thank you for your kind invitation to celebrate this Veterans Day with you! I confess that I am somewhat surprised and humbled to find myself as a guest speaker at my Alma Mater. I am also awed by being in the shadow of this venerable library where, as an undergraduate, I spent so many hours sleeping in the over-heated book stacks! Nonetheless, it is both a privilege and a pleasure for me to join you today to acknowledge the generations of women and men who have served in the Armed Forces of our nation, many of them graduates of Boston College. Their dedication, courage and selflessness deserve our profound respect and our lasting gratitude.

I have been asked to speak to you this morning about Catholic military chaplains and, in particular, about the suitability of Jesuit priests for this very unique ministry. I do so from the perspective of Navy chaplains who minister primarily to Sailors and Marines. However, I trust that my Jesuit brothers currently serving as Army and the Air Force chaplains would concur with my observations. For the record, let me say that I address you today not as an official representative of the Department of the Navy, or of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA. I am but a retired Navy Chaplain who is honored to have been a member of both organizations for more than two decades. Hence, I, alone, am responsible for these remarks.

Military chaplaincy is nothing new to the Society of Jesus. Our founder, Saint Ignatius Loyola, himself a soldier, was undoubtedly on the receiving end of the priestly ministry of dedicated chaplains. His successor as Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Diego Laynez, once served as a chaplain to Spanish naval forces in a raid on Tripoli in 1550. Closer to home in both time and space, Father John McElroy, the revered founder of Boston College, served for ten

months as a chaplain to American Army personnel in 1846-1847 during the Mexican American War. He did so, I might add, at the age of 64!

I am indebted to Fr. Joseph Duffy of the Boston College Jesuit Community for his research into the number and identity of Jesuit military chaplains of the past century. Fr. Duffy reminds us that at the close of World War II 246 American Jesuit priests were serving as military chaplains. Fifty-four were members of the New England Province, and 18 of them came from the ranks of the Boston College faculty. One chaplain, Fr. Daniel J. Lynch, holds the distinction of being the only Jesuit to have served in both World Wars! Another former faculty member, Fr. Joseph Timothy O'Callahan, is the first Navy Chaplain to be awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions aboard USS FRANKLIN in the Western Pacific. Over all, from 1918 to the present, 67 New England Province Jesuits have served our nation as military chaplains. Today only one New England Province Jesuit remains on active duty: Father John Monahan, who is at the Coast Guard Air Station at Kodiak, Alaska.

I began my own active duty service in the Navy at an age by which many others had already retired – though I was not as old as Fr. McElroy! In the late 1980's you would have found me as a college chaplain and an instructor in the modern language department at that other educational institution in Worcester whose name we do not mention on the Heights. Shortly after the school year began my supervisor asked me to reach out to the Midshipmen of the Navy ROTC Unit on campus. Many months later an unexpected conversation with the Commanding Officer set in motion a sequence of events that I had never foreseen. Acquiescing to his request that I at least think about becoming a Navy chaplain, I researched the issue thoroughly, as any good Jesuit would do. And I consulted with several priest-chaplains with whom I was acquainted. They spoke very enthusiastically about their ministry and stressed the desperate shortage of Catholic priests in the military. At that time, my Jesuit Community had fifty-one priests. I reasoned that they would likely not miss one. So, I decided to volunteer for the naval service.

My first challenge was to convince my Jesuit superior that this plan was a really good idea. Church authorities are notoriously reluctant to allow priests to go off to serve in the

military. They fear we won't ever return to our dioceses or religious communities. Suspecting that I would be fighting an up-hill battle, I mounted a deliberate, phased campaign aimed at persuading Father Bob Manning, my Jesuit Provincial, to grant me permission to become a Navy chaplain. In our initial meeting in his office we had a cordial conversation, which he concluded in a very non-committal fashion. He simply suggested that we both pray more about the matter. While driving home, I reflected on our visit and, specifically, his response to my request. Though not lacking an appreciation for the importance of prayer, I quickly came to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit might benefit from a little assistance from yours truly.

So, several weeks later I took a five by seven index card and wrote: "Dear Bob, Reason Number One why you ought to let me join the Navy." I stated my case very simply, mailed it, and waited for his response. The Provincial replied exactly as I expected – on the back of the very same index card. The next month I followed up with Reason Number Two, and a month later, Reason Number Three. I seem to recall that we reached Reason Number Eight or Nine before he finally capitulated – slain by the Spirit, if not my persistence. Although Fr. Manning has long since gone home to God, I can well imagine that he is still enjoying a good laugh over my unusual, if not persuasive, tactics.

I now look back on my twenty-three years, two months and sixteen days of naval service and wonder where the time went. Those years were filled with marvelous opportunities for priestly ministry, and with countless situations in which peoples' lives were enriched by the practice of their Catholic faith. I sailed all around the world, landed on six continents, and visited many of the holiest shrines and religious sites so important to our Faith.

Many times I have been asked: "What was your favorite duty station?" Truthfully, I never know precisely how to respond to that question. In God's good providence every one of my tours of duty was richly rewarding and exceedingly enjoyable - but not for the reasons I have just listed. The primary source of my satisfaction was always the people: the service men and women, and their families, with whom I served and to whom I was sent to minister as a priest and a chaplain.

I cannot find the words to describe adequately how extraordinary are these young men and women who volunteer to serve our nation. They repeatedly endure cramped quarters, long deployments, physical rigors, long separations from their families, uncertainty, fatigue, constant change, economic hardship and real danger in order to honor their enlistment or commissioning oaths. I stand in awe of their courage and dedication. Their ingenuity, creativity, and initiative humble me. Their selfless commitment to each other and to their mission is nothing less than inspiring. It is patriots such as these whom our nation honors today. We owe them our profound gratitude and unrelenting admiration and respect.

The exercise of priestly ministry in the Armed Services is intensely personal. As chaplains, we witness marriages, baptize babies, hear confessions, anoint the sick and dying, and share grief and suffering in moments of disappointment, confusion, sickness and death. Names and faces are forever embedded in our memories. For example, my very first military funeral was that of CPL Robert J. Murphy, USMC who died in a training accident at Fort Ord in California. Mid-career, I was called to the Pentagon war zone on the evening of 9-11. Two days later I was ordered to the White House where I joined a team of psychologists and clergy providing counseling to the household staff and to workers in the Executive Office Building. In the weeks that followed 9-11, I conducted seven funerals or memorial services for Naval Academy graduates, including one for my former shipmate, CDR Pat Dunn, with whom I served in the Sixth Fleet. Shortly after arriving at my final duty station at Quantico, Virginia I laid my own nephew to rest in Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery.

Unlike civilian pastors who are accustomed to greeting their flock at the doors of the church, we chaplains go out and forward with our units: we train with them, deploy with them, get cold, wet, tired and dirty with them. The camaraderie that arises from those experiences builds a bond and a trust which eventually open all sorts of doors for pastoral ministry. To paraphrase Pope Francis, when chaplains return to garrison after a field exercise, we definitely smell like the sheep of our flock!

Many people have seemed surprised to see or hear of a Jesuit in uniform. I usually explain to them that a Jesuit in the military chaplaincy is actually perfectly consistent with our

history and our spirituality. As you know, our founder, Ignatius of Loyola, was himself a soldier. In founding the Society of Jesus he borrowed from his own life's experiences in order to better orchestrate the ministries of his early companions. Hence, military service and religious life within the Society of Jesus have much in common, and not by coincidence.

So, with this in mind, please allow me now to share with you six reasons why I believe Jesuits are especially well-suited to serve as military chaplains.

(1) First, Ignatius states that it is according to our Jesuit vocation to travel to the farthest corners of the earth where there is hope of greater service to God and of help to souls. Consequently, from the very earliest days of our novitiate training, we Jesuits are expected to be available to serve wherever we are needed and sent. Though many of us labor in venerable institutions such as Boston College, Ignatius did not want us to be tied down by these commitments, but rather to be highly mobile and ready to go at a moment's notice wherever the need was determined to be greater. Thus, the entire world is our mission field. So, crisscrossing the globe as I have done for twenty-three years would probably not surprise Ignatius in the least. In fact, I hope it would please him immensely.

(2) Second, Jesuits are missionaries. We go to unfamiliar places to share the message of Jesus Christ both in word and in deed. Throughout history we have adapted our forms of ministry in order to better meet the needs of people, sometimes with great success, and at other times to the chagrin of those watching our innovations. In my first letter to Fr. Manning I described to him how I had come to identify strongly with the sixteenth-century Italian, Jesuit missionaries who were admitted to the imperial court of China. I, like they, had to learn to speak a new language (called acronyms), to wear different clothing (called uniforms), to adapt to unfamiliar social customs (called military protocol), and to live among people whose priorities and experiences were often very different from my own.

When I first joined the Navy the culture shock which I experienced was disorienting, to say the least. The only knowledge I had of military life came from old John Wayne movies and from a few history books I had read along the way. Like many World War II veterans, my own

father, who was injured in the Battle of the Bulge, never ever spoke of his wartime experiences. Hence, it came as no surprise to me that I had much to learn at my first duty station from my teachers: the United States Marines. One of their favorite expressions is “Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome!” - an expression that I found very practical, and “motivating”, as Marines like to say.

I recall early in this tour of duty going once again to consult with the Battalion Executive Officer about some matter of importance. As usual, the X.O. was harried and busy. Despite the fact that his desk faced the doorway, he never looked up from the thick stack of papers before him. Recognizing my voice, he simply barked: “Yes, chaplain, what is it?” I thought to myself in a moment of frustration: “What do I have to do to get this man’s attention?” To this day I don’t know what possessed me, but spontaneously I knelt down in front of his desk and kept talking. The X.O. soon recognized that my voice was no longer coming from high above him but rather was at his eye level. Completely startled, he looked up in almost total disbelief, speechless. At that very moment, I thought: “Ah, ha, I’ve got him!”

From then on, every time I went to see the X.O. he instantly gave me every bit of his undivided attention. You see, the real issue was not that I was so important or the matter at hand so urgent. Rather, it was that he knew that every person who passed by his open door would want to know why the X.O. had the battalion chaplain down on his knees!

Learning new tricks and adapting to unfamiliar surroundings are behaviors not unknown to Jesuit missionaries.

(3) Third, Jesuits are called to labor for the good of souls in an ecumenical environment. The Navy introduced me to a world far apart from the Boston, Irish Catholic cocoon in which I grew up. There I occasionally encountered harsh stereotypes or ill-informed misconceptions about the Catholic Church. Once I was caught completely off guard while speaking with a younger chaplain who had never in his life ever met or spoken with a Catholic priest. I was an entirely new challenge for him, and he for me. Over the years I have learned to appreciate more and more the world-wide, historical and theological perspectives which we Jesuits develop due to our extensive education and training. This provides a tremendously useful resource in demystifying

the Church in the eyes of others. The Navy Chaplain Corps' motto, "Cooperation Without Compromise", speaks well to the manner in which military chaplains work closely together on a daily basis while never sacrificing their own religious identities.

(4) Fourth, Ignatius expected his followers to go wherever the need was determined to be the greatest. Currently, the Department of Defense has a total of 234 active duty priests serving approximately 1.8 million Catholics, that is, military personnel, family members, and American diplomatic and federal employees laboring overseas in 134 countries. Military priests deploy with their units, as well as serve personnel at 220 military installations in 29 countries. Today approximately 25% of all military members identify themselves as Catholic, and yet only 8% of all military chaplains are Catholic. So, given these statistics, I think it is safe to say that the need for priestly ministry among our military services is very great indeed. A soldier himself, Ignatius would certainly be sympathetic to Jesuits stepping forward to assist with this need.

I want to mention in passing that the Archdiocese for the Military Services is also responsible for providing pastoral ministry to the Catholic patients of 153 Veterans Affairs Medical Centers throughout the country. A number of "civilian" Jesuits have served faithfully at these centers as chaplains to our veterans. God bless them for their dedication and service!

(5) Fifth, Jesuits are, by vocation, evangelizers and teachers. Within the military community there are many, appropriate venues in which we chaplains can speak the Good News. We do so in a comparatively subdued manner, but our presence as chaplains affords us the opportunity to share the Catholic faith with any who ask. This is particularly important in light of some of the alarming statistics of our times. The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life issued a study not too long ago that indicates that approximately one-third of all Americans under the age of twenty-five claim no specific religious affiliation or identity of any sort. And 88% of them say that they are not actively seeking an affiliation. They are colloquially referred to as "Nones" - spelled "n-o-n-e-s" – since they have no religious preference – none at all. 74% of these "Nones" were initially raised in some faith tradition which they subsequently abandoned. More to the point, among our young, military service members these "Nones" comprise the single, fastest-growing religious profile on record. Jesuits have a long history of

going to the “unchurched”, living among them, and sharing the faith with any spiritual pilgrims whom they meet. This, too, seems to be another good reason to have Jesuit military chaplains!

(6) Finally, the ministry of priests in the military is dedicated to sustaining the spiritual lives of all Catholics. However, our presence is especially helpful to those individuals who are discerning a call to religious life or to the priesthood. Military personnel are generous people who have a mind-set of service. Hence, transitioning from the Armed Services to a life of dedicated service within the church is not all that dramatic or even uncommon. One of my former shipmates is now a cloistered nun in Colorado. Six men with whom I once served are either currently preparing for ordination to the priesthood or are already serving in various dioceses or religious orders throughout the United States. One of them even became a Jesuit! Just last month, at that other college whose name I did not mention earlier, I ceremonially commissioned a Jesuit scholastic (or seminarian) as a Navy Chaplain Candidate. He is presently a student here at the School of Theology and Ministry and he hopes to serve on active duty once he has completed his Jesuit training. That will be about seven years from now – we Jesuits are notoriously slow students!

It is a commonly-accepted statistic that approximately ten percent of priests in the United States have previously served in the Armed Forces. So, we know that there are priestly vocations in the ranks. There definitely are individuals who are considering separating from the military in order to serve the Church in the priesthood or in religious life. Having priests in uniform to direct, counsel and advise these potential vocations is critical to their spiritual well-being. Meeting that need is certainly something that we Jesuits can do well, along with the many other, fine diocesan and religious order priests who are currently serving as chaplains.

So, in closing, let me say that I firmly believe that the military chaplaincy offers a very suitable venue in which Jesuit priests can and should be present. As a Church, we have an obligation to provide pastoral care and sacramental ministry to those in uniform. As Jesuits, we have a spirituality and a perspective on ministry which prepare us well to serve in these extraordinary circumstances. I was very pleased and proud to have served as a Navy chaplain. And, although that ministry required me to live alone for twenty-three years, I always felt very

much a part of my Jesuit community, no matter where in the world I happened to be. Thanks to my Jesuit superiors who consistently and enthusiastically reaffirmed this assignment, I was richly blessed in ways that I could never have imagined.

I am very grateful to our Jesuit Provincials who are mindful of the spiritual needs of our men and women in uniform. Despite the increasing shortages of manpower in our own institutions and apostolates, they have generously provided Jesuit priests who supply pastoral care for those in the military. Currently we have two Jesuits on active duty in the Navy, one in the Air Force, and one in the Army. There are also two Jesuits serving in the Air Force Reserve, one each in the Army Reserve or National Guard, and one in the Navy Reserve. The latter is Bishop Michael Barber, who is the new Ordinary of the Diocese of Oakland, CA. Yes, a Jesuit, Bishop, Navy Chaplain!

In appreciation of the ministry of these Jesuit priests, I leave with you with these words of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz:

“By his patient, sympathetic labors with men day in, day out, and through many a night, every Chaplain I know contributed immeasurably to the moral courage of our fighting men. None of this effort appears in the statistics. Most of it was necessarily secret between pastor and his confidant. It is for that toil in the cause both of God and country that I honor the Chaplain most.”

Ladies and gentlemen, please pray for the 234 priests who are currently on active duty in the Armed Services. They labor every day in the face of tremendous challenges and ever-increasing, urgent pastoral concerns.

Please pray also for our Wounded Warriors who struggle each day with the burdens of frail health and physical challenges and limitations. They have sacrificed much of themselves for our nation. In every way possible we need to support them, and their families and friends who provide them with assistance on a daily basis.

Today our nation pauses to remember all who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States. These veterans – you veterans - have earned our admiration and profound gratitude for your singular selflessness and devotion to duty. We can never thank you enough, but may our words and our presence here this morning stand in testimony of our appreciation for your generous and courageous service.

Thank you, and God bless you all!
