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Spiritual leaders in the battle zones

Judy Gross | Aug. 30, 2010

In Iraq, Fr. Kenneth Beale, center, poses with American troops in front of one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces, where Beale set up a space for Christian worship.

Fr. Kenneth R. Beale, an active-duty Air Force major and chaplain, was preparing for his ninth deployment since 1996. This time around, he was scheduled to go to Afghanistan in March. Beale, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Community on Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., the largest base in the free world, was scrambling to find his replacement. At times Reservist priests or civilian parish priests step in, other times he must ask retired clergy to cover his absence. There are some 1,500 Catholics at Eglin.

When Beale returns, he will go back to Eglin and try to pick up where he left off. ?My leaving is getting harder each time, and for my parishioners.? Still, he says, ?I love being a priest in the military because of the people I have been called to serve. They are devout in so many ways, young and energetic about serving both God and country.?

In every modern war fought by this country, soldiers were accompanied by spiritual leaders to whom they could turn in times of distress. As far back as the Civil War, priests accompanied Union troops to battle zones. Today, chaplains are found in military installations, veterans? hospitals and wherever U.S. military personnel are working. Military chaplains are responsible not only to God and their consciences -- they are also responsible to uphold their oaths as military officers. While they spoke freely of their experiences to *NCR*, if any of the chaplains interviewed hold an opinion of the rightness or wrongness of the U.S. presence in Iraq or Afghanistan, they kept their views to themselves as they vowed to do.

Judy Gross also wrote a story about military families for our Nov. 16 issue:Keeping the home fires burning[1]

Whether or not they believe the United States is engaged in a just war, they keep their opinions to themselves. Still, Catholic chaplains serve, knowing the words of Pope John Paul II at the beginning of the Iraq war: ?To all of you who are listening, I say: Do not believe in violence; do not support violence. It is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Catholic church. Believe in peace and forgiveness and love, for they are of Christ.?

While John Paul II may have objected to the war in Iraq, he was also responsible for creating the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services in 1985, to serve more than 220 military installations in 29 countries. The archdiocese also serves federal employees overseas in 134 countries and is responsible for more than 1.5 million Catholic active-duty military and their families with only 285 chaplains. A scant 242 priest chaplains serve veterans and families in 153 veteran medical centers. Priest chaplains remain members of their home dioceses and may be recalled by their bishop or religious superiors at any time. With the growing priest shortage, dioceses trying to staff parishes do not always welcome active recruitment efforts by the military.

Along with sacramental service, a chaplain is often the first link to soldiers experiencing emotional distress, loneliness and alienation. Armed personnel in combat zones may not approach a mental health counselor, if available, because of the perceived stigma and the possibility of such counseling affecting future promotions, but as Beale noted, ?they will talk to a chaplain with whom they feel safe.?

Prolonged U.S. presence in the Middle East has strained the ability of chaplains to do as much for their charges as they might wish. How are they coping with the demands on them? Timothy P. Broglio, archbishop for the Military Services, told Catholic chaplains at a January training he held at the Vatican, ?We are terribly undermanned.? The daylong training dealt solely with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Virtually all soldiers from combat zones return with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, sometimes a lifelong condition veterans deal with on a daily basis. Chaplains admit they are not invulnerable to the disorder, even with their strong spiritual grounding. They may suppress emotional wounds when they return to civilian life in order to maintain an appearance of strength.

Even chaplains serving in domestic facilities have to deal with extraordinary stress. Their parishes are constantly changing as enlisted personnel, officers and veterans move in and out, leaving little sense of permanence for the spiritual leader. Additionally, with every year of armed combat, chaplains? workload expands.

At times, priests who are military Reservists are pulled from their parishes to be deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan or a dozen other countries where the American military is present. They see the horrific cost of war when men and women, barely out of high school, lose their lives. After a year of deployment in combat, who ministers to the ministers when they return?

NCR spoke with spiritual leaders from a variety of faith traditions in veterans? facilities, on military bases, civilian and enlisted, to ask why and how they serve. In extended conversations, military chaplains who had been deployed in war zones dealt with a range of questions: How have they changed from the time they left to be active-duty chaplains? Can they slip back into their former parish priest role? Does the specter of what they have witnessed hang over them as they go about their daily lives? How do these spiritual leaders cope with the demands placed upon them and maintain their own spiritual and emotional health? What programs are available to help them return to ministry, either as a civilian or military chaplain? What of chaplains who return with post-traumatic stress disorder? While some spoke openly, for others the experience was still too raw.

Before becoming permanent military in 1988, Beale was assigned to parishes, but even then he was deployed overseas. Switching back and forth from parish priest to combat-zone priest took a toll on him. For one thing, there was no fanfare like there was for returning Air Force pilots in his unit. Almost wistfully, he says, ?When I came back there was no sense of homecoming.?

Chaplains are unarmed, even on front lines. Beale remembers his brother priest and friend Fr. Tim Vakoc, who was killed by a roadside bomb. (Vakoc, a Minnesota Army chaplain was seriously injured in Iraq in 2004 and died June 20, 2009.) Clerical garb offers no protection when mortars are flying. Beale recalls a mortar shell

lobbed next to a Green Zone trailer where he was sleeping; another blew up while he was celebrating Easter Mass. ?Every day, you?re being shot at. Chaplains and doctors are prime targets in the al-Qaida manual.?

As far as coming back with post-traumatic stress, he freely admits to flinching when he hears loud noises, having night sweats, being extra vigilant when driving past unfamiliar objects in roadways, and replaying scenes of what he experienced in combat in his head. In a way, the chaplain said, this helps him when ministering to soldiers, as he can say, ?I know how you feel -- I?ve been there.?

Over the years, the priest has developed ways of coping with the pressures of living and serving in combat zones. In the process of writing a book, *Teach Me, Lord, to Pray*, the musically talented priest has recorded a CD of the songs he writes during each deployment. And he stays in continual touch with family and friends when things get too intense.

During a January World Religion Day observance in Tallahassee, Fla., Temple Israel congregant Al Sulkes talked about a Jewish perspective on war and the bearing of arms. ?Judaism looks upon military services as part of citizenship. Test case is the Civil War with brother against brother. We as a people descended into that kind of barbarism.?

The Rev. Teresa MacBain, a Methodist pastor, has a son in his second deployment in Iraq. She said, ?It is the responsibility of all faith leaders to call others to reach out and help our brothers and sisters,? even when it means bearing arms. Although MacBain worries about her son, she said she is proud he is serving his country. ?Duty and honor is a noble cause,? she said.

A strict set of guidelines are in place for chaplains, who are unarmed and who must minister to adherents of all and any of the 700 different denominations that are recognized by the U.S. military. Government policy prohibits any clergy from criticizing or supporting U.S. war positions. Their job is to minister to the spiritual needs of those engaged in carrying it out.

Mindful of those regulations, Beale used an entryway in one of Saddam Hussein?s palaces to set up spaces for worship. One side was used as a mosque for Muslims, the other for all Christian services.

Hindi Srinivasa Kishore said his tradition hopes that ?as one large family, may the entire world live happily together.? He says ego and greed are the fundamental problem in causing conflict between individuals and nations. As far as taking up arms, if in a military career or drafted, ?do your duty.?

Baha?i adherents are forbidden to take up arms or be involved in partisan politics. Many Baha?i serve in the military, but only as noncombatants. Benjamin David Koen said, ?The Baha?i faith encompasses the basic belief we are one unified family. When we juxtaposition this truth with what?s going on in the world we wonder how can it be the world is in the situation it is? Our common ground is serving together.?

Fr. (Major) David Czartorinski is the Catholic chaplain at James A. Haley Veterans? Hospital in Tampa, Fla. Among his other duties, he is a certified brain injury chaplain and ministers to veterans of all wars, going back to World War II. A veteran himself, the priest was in the Air Force for more than two decades, then retired and began work with veterans. Laughing, he says, ?Priests never retire.?

As a young priest he had expected to be ordained and serve in parishes, until a mentor told him he would make a good military priest. ?At that point, I didn?t even like the military, let alone want to be one,? he said. Now, after 21 years on active duty and 10 years in veteran ministry, he says he appreciates what the military has done for him. In his role at the hospital he is involved with the total care of patients, and is head of the Ethics Committee.

The priest enjoys being part of a fairly stable community of fellow chaplains. When memories of being in war

zones come flooding back, he turns to other priests who let him share what he is feeling. Freely admitting to coming home with post-traumatic stress disorder, he says there are certain triggers he is aware of. ?For instance, the Fourth of July, with the fireworks -- I stay away and from any kind of war documentary.? While listening to the life stories of severely wounded soldiers he feels are ?sacred? to them, he says it?s important to focus not on self, but to deal with the memories to prevent the residual effects of his own trauma.

For any priest contemplating entering the military, Czartorinski says, ?Even though we represent God, we are still in a governmental organization.?

Career opportunities abound for those who want to achieve high military ranking. But Czartorinski preferred directly ministering to people. ?You have to be comfortable being an officer. I?m a worker bee.?

The Rev. (Commander) Peter Muschinske, an Evangelical Lutheran Navy Chaplain stationed in Bridgeton, Mo., recruits chaplains for the Navy and Marines. He was deployed to Iraq with the Navy Seabees in 2006. Before that he was doubling as a full-time pastor and a part-time chaplain. He explains, ?In ?06 I was ?involuntarily recalled? [mobilized and deployed] and in 2007 I chose to come on active duty as a chaplain. So my situation is a bit unique in that way.

?I chose Navy in the ?Free introductory offer? that the Navy extends to seminary students.?

Being a bit of a rebel, Muschinske chose to join the Navy because the other men in his family served -- or are still serving, in the case of one brother -- as chaplains in the Air Force.

Speaking of his own experience dealing with post-combat stress he says, ?Yes, of course chaplains can experience PTSD. My training, faith, life experience -- I was 43 when I was in Iraq and experienced a degree of trauma -- education, professional experience certainly helped to mitigate the trauma of death and operational stress in a combat zone.?

[Judy Gross writes from Tallahasee, Fla.]

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