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U.S. Army chaplain Fr. Emil Joseph Kapaun, who died May 23, 1951, in a North Korean prisoner of war camp, is pictured in an undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy of The Catholic Advance)



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On July 2, 2011, the campaign to make Fr. Emil Kapaun a saint took flight when a 3-by-3-by-3 foot wooden crate weighing 300-pounds was shipped from Wichita to Rome. Inside were 8,268 pages of documents — sermons he gave from pulpits in farm towns to theatres of war, personal letters and testimonials by more than 100 people from Kansas to Korea.

On Feb. 24, Kapaun, a military chaplain who served during two wars, was [decreed](#) "Venerable" by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Causes of Saints at the direction of Pope Francis. It moved him a step closer to possible sainthood. What does that mean?

As Pew Research Center [explains](#), the Catholic Church teaches that all people in heaven are saints, but that canonized saints are recognized for living lives of such heightened virtue that they are worthy of our imitation.

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There is no doubt that Kapaun fits that description. His battlefield heroics during the Korean War and life-affirming defiance in a brutal prison in Pyoktong, North Korea, earned him the Medal of Honor and the devotion of his fellow prisoners, which included Jews, Muslims and Protestants as well as Catholics. But the canonization process is murkier and, like most things, comes down to marketing and money.

Until the end of the Middle Ages, communities declared their own saints. This is why [St. Guinefort](#) — a dog — is the patron saint of the protection of infants. He belonged to a knight who, upon returning to his castle, found his infant child missing from his crib. The knight saw blood on Guinefort's face and, thinking that he harmed the child, killed him with his sword. Then, the father heard a cry. The child was under the bed with a dead viper at his side.

In 993, St. Ulrich of Augsburg was the first saint formally canonized by Pope John XV — the first of 300 some saints canonized from 1588 to 1978. Since then, collectively, John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have canonized more than 1,450

saints.

The process is long and costly. The average march to sainthood from death to canonization is 181 years. The cost of a given cause [averages](#) \$550,000 and can reach \$1 million, the bulk of which goes to a postulator or canon lawyer who argues a candidate's case.



U.S. Army chaplain Fr. Emil Joseph Kapaun, who died May 23, 1951, in a North Korean prisoner of war camp, is pictured celebrating Mass from the hood of a jeep Oct. 7, 1950, in South Korea. He was captured about a month later. (CNS/Courtesy of U.S. Army medic Raymond Skeehan)

There are exceptions. [Pope John Paul II](#) and Mother Teresa were fast tracked, as will be the upcoming canonization of [Blessed Carlo Acutis](#) during the 2025 Jubilee in Rome. Acutis died at the age of 15 in 2006 and demonstrates that more than just holiness is at play in saint-making.

Acutis is Italian, which is a home field advantage demonstrated by the fact that over 1,000 Catholic saints are Italian. He is being called the first millennial saint. Beyond

his love for video games, Acutis taught himself how to code and created a website documenting Eucharistic miracles throughout history in the hopes to draw fallen away Catholics back to Mass.



An undated handout photo shows Fr. Emil Kapaun serving in Korea. The U.S. military chaplain died in 1951 in a Chinese-run prison camp. He was 35. (CNS/Courtesy of The Catholic Advance)

No knocking Acutis' virtue, but popes have promoted saints based on populations and demographics especially in areas the church feels challenged. Latin America, Africa and Asia have been targeted of late to make up for the lack of priests and to slow the growing evangelical movement in those regions. What's better than a role model for thoroughly modern teenagers?

The United States, of course, is a young country and we were late to the saint-making party. There are currently 11 American saints; the most recent is [St. Junípero Serra](#), the Franciscan priest who founded the mission throughout what is now California in the 1700s and was canonized in 2015.

What's next for Kapaun? For the church to elevate him to "blessed," it must accept a proven miracle that someone's life was saved because Kapaun interceded in the 74 years since he has been dead.

[Fr. John Hotze](#), of the Diocese of Wichita, Kansas, has spent most of his adult life making the case for Kapaun. He has five documented cases of people with an illness that doctors claimed was impossible to recover from. In each case, the individuals recovered after hundreds or thousands of family, friends and even social media strangers prayed to Kapaun to intercede from heaven.

If the Vatican accepts one of those cases, the clock restarts. A second new miracle (that has not happened yet) is required for full-blown sainthood. No one said it was easy to become a Catholic superhero.

"He was just an average guy," Hotze told me of Kapaun. "He was just a poor Kansas farm boy. He had nothing, and he was able to use whatever had in service of others. If he becomes a saint, then there's hope for each and every one of us to be a saint."



A photo of Fr. Emil Kapuan, a Wichita, Kansas, priest and a U.S. Army chaplain who died in the line of duty during the Korean War, is displayed on a table Sept. 21, 2021, during a chain of custody ceremony at the at the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency facility on Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. (CNS/U.S. Air Force via DVIDS/Tech. Sgt. Rusty Frank)