



DISAPPEARED BUT DEVOTED

“As you all know, Father Kapaul disappeared on the Korean War Front on November 2, 1950. No word has reached us about his safety except that we know that he was captured alive . . . Almost worse than certain death is the unspeakable sorrow and the every-lengthening anxiety and worry of his beloved parents. Such waiting, such sorrowing is untouchable – for no human ministrations can assuage that sorrow; no mere words, however elegant, can comfort; no rewards, even those as noble and precious as received this morning, can compensate parents even for the temporary loss of their son.”¹

When the Most Reverend Mark K. Carroll, Bishop of the Diocese of Wichita Kansas, preached his sermon on Oct. 18, 1952, he was talking about his friend and mentee, Chaplain (Captain) Emil Kapaun, of the Army’s 1st Cavalry Division, whose parents were sitting in the congregation. Mr. and Mrs. Kapaun were receiving two (2) awards on behalf of their missing son.

They had raised him to live a simple life—working on their small, Kansas farm. Plant the fields; take the livestock out to the pasture; repair the fences; clean and sharpen the tools. Hard work and quiet service were the norm.² It was no surprise when Kapaun enrolled in seminary and later was ordained as a priest at the age of twenty-four. It was also no surprise that he volunteered for the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps. in 1944 and spent the last year of World War II trudging through the jungles and mountains of Burma and India bringing spiritual aid and Mass to thousands of soldiers on the front lines.³

It was also no surprise that Father Kapaun could not stay away from his true congregation. Although he had been honorably discharged at the end of WWII, and although he earned his Master’s Degree from Catholic University and had been assigned to a quiet parish in central Kansas, Father Kapaun’s heart wasn’t in it. By then, Bishop Carroll had assumed leadership of the Diocese, and Father Kapaun repeatedly wrote to him, requesting to be released from his duties so that he could re-enlist in the Army. Eventually, Bishop Carroll relented, and in 1948, Father Kapaun resumed the role of Chaplain Kapaun with the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Corps at Fort Bliss, Texas.⁴

In January 1950, he was reassigned to the 1st Cavalry Division, and they were deployed to Yokohama, Japan to assist with post-World War II activities.⁵ Six months later, North Korea invaded South Korea, and Chaplain Kapaun’s unit was deployed. Within four months, Chaplain Kapaun and what remained of his unit were taken prisoner and “disappeared” into the horrific unknown of the missing in action and prisoners of war.⁶ Then, the reports started coming.

Summer 1950 ~ “A G.I. could come almost any day and find a simplified, home-made altar on the hood of a jeep . . . He also climbed many a hill and mountain just so he could make some lonely G.I. feel a little better after talking to him.”⁷

August 1950 ~ “Chaplain Kapaun received information that there was a wounded man in an exposed position on the left flank of the first battalion who could not be removed as there were no litter bearers available. Chaplain Kapaun . . . immediately proceeded to the front lines where he contacted the Battalion Commander in order to obtain the approximate location of the wounded man. . . . Chaplain Kapaun went after the wounded man, under intense, enemy machinegun and small arms fire. However, Chaplain Kapaun successfully evacuated the soldier, thereby saving his life.”⁸

November 1950 ~ For “36 hours, the regiment was subject to a relentless, fanatical attack by hostile troops. . . . In the early morning

hours, the enemy succeeded in breaking through the defense, and hand-to-hand combat ensued in the immediate vicinity of the command post where the aid station had been set up.”⁹ “By 11:00 p.m. that night we were surrounded three times, and had broken through each time About a mile or two down the road, Father and I were helping out the Medics with the wounded. All of a sudden machine-guns, burp guns, and what not, opened up on us . . . That night, there were 995 dead, missing and wounded in our 8th Cavalry Regiment alone. . . . Lt. Curry, a medical officer, and a good friend of Father Kapaun was last seen giving first aid to some wounded men. By his side was Father. One G.I. told them to run, practically screaming at them, but they wouldn’t leave the wounded for anything in the world.”¹⁰

“Deep in the day on November 2, the group was captured by the Communists. Seeing a wounded soldier about to be shot by a North Korean, Father Kapaun rushed over, pushed the gun aside, and picked up the wounded G.I., Sergeant Herbert Miller. In disbelief at the Chaplain’s bravery, the North Korean let the two live.”¹¹

March 25, 1951 ~ Father Kapaun celebrated his last Easter Sunday. He had a “black patch on one eye due to infection after a chip of wood had damaged it, and used a homemade cane when he walked because of the blood clot in his leg, which no one knew about.”¹² He made a small crucifix from scraps of wood; they said the Lord’s Prayer; and he spoke of suffering and faith. He wept because he could not serve them Communion.¹³

After seven months in captivity, Chaplain Kapaun died of malnutrition and pneumonia as a prisoner of war on May 23, 1951. It would be many months before his family would learn of his fate. If you were to ask him, he probably would say he did not do anything extraordinary. He likely would say he was simply a priest, serving his congregation wherever they found themselves. On this Memorial Day, may we take some time to remember Chaplain Kapaun and the many other service men and women who may have disappeared, but remained devoted.

¹ Sermon by the Most Reverend Mark K. Carroll, Bishop of the Diocese of Wichita Kansas, Oct. 18, 1952, in Arthur Tonne, *The Story of Chaplain Kapaun*, Ch. 15 (Didde Publishers Emporia, KS 1954), available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Emil_Kapaun/TONKAP/16*.html.

² Father Kapaun, Catholic Diocese of Wichita, <https://frkapaun.org/about>, last visited Apr. 9, 2023.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ U.S. Army, Biography for Chaplain (Cpt.) Emil Kapaun, available at https://www.army.mil/article/98061/biography_for_chaplain_capt_emil_kapaun, last visited Apr. 9, 2023.

⁷ Ltr. from Pfc. Ernest J. Ritter (Feb. 28, 1951), available at https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Emil_Kapaun/TONKAP/11*.html#Ritter_letter.

⁸ Citation, Bronze Star Medal, by command of Major General Gay (Sept. 2, 1950), available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Emil_Kapaun/TONKAP/16*.html.

⁹ Citation, Distinguished Service Cross, by command General Van Fleet (Aug. 18, 1951), available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Emil_Kapaun/TONKAP/16*.html.

¹⁰ Pfc. Ernest J. Ritter, *supra* n. 7.

¹¹ Father Kapaun, *supra* n. 2.

¹² Therese Park, Korean War POW Fr/ Emil Kapaun’s last East Mass Speaks to this Good Friday, NPR (Apr. 2, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/opinion/guest-voices/korean-war-pow-fr-emil-kapauns-last-easter-mass-speaks-good-friday>.

¹³ *Id.*