

An archdiocese spanning the globe

Asked to name the most populous American dioceses, alert Catholics would likely name Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. I rather doubt that most of us would rank Brooklyn (the country's only completely urban diocese) as high on the league table as it in fact is, and I'm willing to wager that not 1 in 20 Catholics would put Rockville Centre and Orange (California) in the top 10. Then there is the real sleeper, which is the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA - a global jurisdiction whose congregants include Catholics serving in the armed forces and their family members; students at the service academies; all patients in Veterans Administration hospitals; and U.S. government personnel and their families serving abroad, such as members of the foreign service and those American Catholics working abroad in foreign aid programs. Add all that up, and the Archdiocese for the Military Services is the fifth-largest diocese in the United States.

It also faces unique challenges.

The first is geographic. While its administrative headquarters is in Washington, D.C., near the Catholic University of America, the AMS literally spans the globe, with responsibilities in every time-zone and on every continent (including Antarctica). That puts an enormous strain on Archbishop Timothy Broglio and his auxiliary bishops, who spend much of their on the road, visiting, celebrating the sacraments with, counseling, and otherwise encouraging their far-flung flock.

The AMS also has unique personnel challenges. It is the sole authority for recognizing Catholic chaplains in the armed forces and at VA hospitals; but its military chaplains are under the command of the chiefs-of-chaplains of their respective services. Its priests are drawn from all over the United States; but they must have the permission of the local bishop to serve, and they remain canonically a

part of their home diocese. Thus the only clergy canonically incardinated in the AMS are the archbishop and his auxiliaries. Given the current shortage of priests in many dioceses, some bishops are reluctant to release priests for work in the AMS as military chaplains; thus Catholic billets in the chaplain corps are chronically under-filled, and Catholics on overseas deployments can go weeks, sometimes months, without having access to the sacraments.

Military chaplaincy also places unique demands on the priests who volunteer for service with the armed forces. The Capodanno Room at AMS's headquarters in Washington bears poignant and powerful testimony to what the fulfillment of those demands can require. Father Vincent Robert Capodanno was a native of Staten Island and a Maryknoll missionary with years of service in China when he volunteered for the Navy chaplains corps during the Vietnam War and asked to serve with the Marines. On Sept. 4, 1967, Father Capodanno, despite having been severely wounded while tending to his troops, rushed to interpose his torn body between a wounded Marine medic and an enemy machine-gunner, and was killed instantly when dozens of bullets tore through his head, neck, and back. He was posthumously awarded the nation's highest decoration for valor, the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the cause for his beatification has been recognized, such that Lieutenant Capodanno is now the Servant of God Vincent Capodanno.

Another unique challenge facing AMS is funding. The archdiocese is not a governmental body, nor is it a part of the armed forces. Rather, it's a church body that receives no federal funding for its work with federal employees. Thus AMS must rely on donations from individuals, parish, diocesan and military communities, bequests from wills, and grants from philanthropies. One might think that a national collection in support of such vital work - which is done on behalf of all U.S. Catholics - would be a good idea, but there are objections to increasing the number of national collections.

So let's have an informal national collection: If you're looking for a unique Christmas gift, consider making a tax-deductible charitable donation to the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, directing your check to the archdiocesan headquarters at P.O. Box 4469, Washington, DC 20017-0469. Your gift will be much appreciated, around the world.

George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.