

# Bishop Spencer honors veterans on Veterans Day

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ELLICOTT CITY - In a Veterans Day homily at St. Paul in Ellicott City, Auxiliary Bishop F. Richard Spencer of the Archdiocese for U.S. Military Services challenged Catholics to never forget the needs of the nation's veterans.

"We must not ignore the silent suffering of over 23 million American veterans who are suffering from substance abuse, family breakdowns, domestic violence, homelessness (and) suicide rates that continue to rise," said Bishop Spencer, a former priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore who served as pastor of Western Maryland's St. Peter the Apostle in Oakland.

"Although only 7 percent of Americans have ever served in the military, over 21 percent of today's suicides come from the veteran community," Bishop Spencer said. "The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that veterans make up about one-fifth of the homeless population here in America. We must provide better care for them."

Before the Mass began, a bagpiper played and church bells tolled at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month - commemorating the official end of World War I in 1918. Churches throughout the city rang their bells at that precise time, as did schools throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Many veterans and some current military men and women participated in the St. Paul liturgy, watching two wreaths of flowers presented in front of the sanctuary in honor of all who served their country.

As patriotic hymns such as “America the Beautiful” and “God Bless America” were sung, several people in the congregation dabbed tears.

Bishop Spencer, who said he has been on the battlefields of Iraq five times and who was to leave for Afghanistan in 10 days, recalled that both his parents were veterans - his father serving in the Navy and his mother serving as a sergeant in the U.S. Marines.

“So, yes, my mom wore combat boots,” he joked.

They and others who served throughout the decades understood that if they did not go overseas, Bishop Spencer said, “many would lose their freedom or even their lives under the rule of ruthless dictators and terrorists.”

“We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women who fought in all of our past wars and conflicts,” said Bishop Spencer, who blessed bodies as a military chaplain at the Pentagon Sept. 11 after the nation was attacked in 2001.

Repeating a theme throughout his homily, Bishop Spencer said that while not everyone is a military veteran, everyone can be a “veteran for God and for country.” That can be achieved by following four points outlined by St. Paul: being prepared for death, fighting the good fight, finishing the race and keeping the faith, Bishop Spencer said.

Since the Revolutionary War, the bishop noted, more than 39 million Americans have served in the armed forces and more than 1 million have sacrificed their lives.

Martin Eichelman, a 90-year-old parishioner of St. Agnes in Catonsville who flew 35 missions over Japan while serving in the Air Force during World War II, was moved by the liturgy.

“The fact is that it brings back the memory of all the people that you were associated with that are gone,” said Eichelman, a member of the Catholic War Veterans and Veterans of Foreign Wars. “It makes you feel good that you are able to get together and have a good Catholic, Christian service.”

Eichelman lamented that more people do not show respect for the military services. Those returning from war need the support of the larger society, he said.

“It’s a very difficult thing to come back like these fellas are coming back - maimed and damaged with the brain - and have a difficult time finding the treatment that they need or the help that they need,” he said. “Thank God there’s enough people out there that make them feel welcome and are willing to participate in anything that takes care of the fellas.”

Seven priests assisted in the Mass, which attracted a capacity crowd.

Veterans Day holds a special place in the hearts of St. Paul parishioners because of the church’s long association with the military, according to Father Matthew Buening, pastor.

“It’s certainly in the foundations of our church,” he said. “Literally, the basement was used to help soldiers in the Civil War and ever since then, there’s just something that oozes from St. Paul’s that says we love our veterans and we thank them for their service and we want to do anything we can to help them.”

Visit [tinyurl.com/cr-paulvetday2](http://tinyurl.com/cr-paulvetday2) to listen to Bishop Spencer’s complete homily.

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