

‘Commando crawl’ and all, priests train to be chaplains

FORT JACKSON, S.C. – As the soldier leaned out over a length of rope stretched 20 feet in the air over a net, he began the “commando crawl,” a careful, hand-over-hand movement across the rope to a wooden platform on the other side. The other men and women in his platoon waited on the ground below and cheered him as he slowly made progress.

The casual observer would never guess the man on the rope, a first lieutenant, was also a Catholic priest, Father Mario Rosario, studying to become a chaplain in the U.S. Army.

He and eight other Catholic priests were among approximately 130 students in late March at the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School at Fort Jackson, near Columbia.

Father Rosario, a native of the Philippines, and three other priests were enrolled in the Chaplain Basic Officer Leadership Course, the initial three-month course to become a chaplain. They graduated April 5. Five other priests, already chaplains, are taking the Chaplain Captain Career Course, or C-4.

Catholic priests are a minority in the ranks of Army chaplains, even though it is estimated that one in four soldiers in the Army is Catholic, said Oblate Father David A. Kenehan, an Army colonel who serves as deputy commandant at the chaplain school.

Priests who become military chaplains are also soldiers. Their lives include daily and weekly Mass, prayer and other elements of a civilian priest’s life.

But they dress in regulation camouflage battle-dress uniforms. They study military regulations and procedures, wake up early to go on five-mile marches, learn how to put on a gas mask in less than nine seconds, and rappel off a 60-foot wooden structure known as Victory Tower.

This training is essential because many of these priests and their fellow chaplains will be deployed to combat areas during their careers. It also bonds them with those

they serve.

"It's important for the soldiers to see the chaplains doing the same things they do," Father Kenehan said.

The shortage of Catholic priests in the Army resembles in many ways the shortage of priests in the civilian world. With an increasing shortage of priests in the United States, more dioceses are relying on missionary priests from overseas.

Of the nine priests in training at the chaplain school, all but one were foreign-born. They came from the Philippines, India, Poland, Kenya and Nigeria.

"The pressing need for priests in the Army prompted me to do this," said Father John Baptist Gabriel, a priest of the Diocese of Neyyattinkara, India. "The kids who are facing combat really need support from priests at this time in their lives."

Once they complete chaplain training, Catholic priests are usually assigned to serve as chaplains for a division. As chaplains, they minister to soldiers from all denominations, not just Catholics.

Often, the priests say, they are called on to do much more than their regular chaplain duties. They might log hundreds of miles in the air flying from base to base in Iraq, for instance, to offer Mass for Catholic soldiers.

"You're used a lot over there - at one point when I was over, there were only two Catholic priests who covered the whole of Baghdad," said Father Christopher Opara, a Nigerian-born chaplain in the C-4 program who completed a deployment to Iraq in November. "I got used to flying a lot."

Priests who want to serve as chaplains must first receive approval from their bishops, and can be recalled at almost any time if a serious need arises in their home diocese. This rarely happens when they are deployed on active duty in a combat zone, like Iraq, Father Kenehan said, but it is a possibility they face when serving in other areas.

Newly ordained Catholic priests, unlike most other new clergy who become chaplains, also must serve in a parish for three years before they can become full-

time chaplains.

This requirement is not a problem for most of the chaplain candidates at Fort Jackson. Father Fausto Kaverenge, born in Kenya, has been a priest for 16 years. Father Maciej Napieralski, a native of Poland and first lieutenant in the U.S. Army, was ordained in 1983 and spent the past seven years serving the Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska.

After graduation, the four priests received their assignments: Father Rosario, Hunter Army Airfield, Savannah, Ga.; Father Kaverenge, Germany; Father Gabriel, Fort Hood, Texas; and Father Napieralski, Fort Wainwright, Alaska.

"We need more chaplains in the U.S. Army and we need more priests," Father Napieralski said. "I wish those who think about the priesthood would also think about this as a possibility."

Priests who have already completed one or two tours in combat areas in the Middle East say the issues soldiers face these days are daunting, especially strained marriages and family ties because of long, multiple deployments. Add this to the daily stress of combat, homesickness and the pain of losing friends and fellow soldiers, and the work of the Catholic priest as chaplain becomes even more vital, they say.

"Being in combat helps you to know more the value of life," said Father Isaac Opara, another Nigerian in the C-4 class who was deployed to Kandahar in Afghanistan.

"What gave me joy over there was knowing I was living the mission of bringing the Gospel to everyone," he added. "The work I did showed me how important the priest is in the combat context. Catholic soldiers especially need their priests because it takes a priest to make sure they get the spiritual attention they need."