

Dismissing Priests?

The Catholic Review

“You should write a column about that.”

So suggested a military chaplain friend some weeks ago when the shortage of priest chaplains was being discussed. Not that our Archdiocese is in a position to do much more. By the end of the year, we will have our suggested quota of six priests on active duty serving the Faith needs of undoubtedly the most significant single reservoir of the future leaders of our country. That is far more than the suggested quota.

It is my hope that the thousands of Catholics from our Archdiocese serving our country, including their families, will return home strong and even stronger in their faith as a result of their military experience than when they entered the service. This will not be the case unless they have meaningful contact with a priest during their time of duty—a prospect increasingly less likely to happen.

Generally speaking, the Chiefs of Chaplains of our three major branches, Army, Navy and Air Force, are taking steps to recruit more priests by appealing to individual bishops and religious superiors and they should be given credit for that.

So why, “You should write a column about that?”

The advisability of a column was confirmed during last week’s visit to Rome to attend the Consistory during which our Holy Father welcomed 24 prelates into the College of Cardinals. While staying at the North American College, I enjoyed a reunion with some Navy priests just forcibly retired from active duty, and six of seven of them concluding their course at the Institute for Continuing Theological Education sponsored by the College.

These seven priests are healthy, energetic and ever so dedicated in their priestly ministry to our personnel. Most will soon pastor vibrant civilian parishes. They have been “banished” from the Navy’s chaplaincy because they have reached the

statutory age limit of sixty-two. This need not have been so, however. The Army and Air Force make exceptions on such retirements for critical needs such as those in the medical profession and the chaplains corps as well. The Navy has made similar exceptions—but the Chief of Chaplains now refuses to do so for priests, leaving countless numbers of young Catholics in the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard—many in harm's way—increasingly without the ministry of a priest. Is this simply a question of lack of sensitivity or, indeed, of discrimination? I hope it is not the latter. The situation is grave and will only get far worse unless someone intervenes to reverse the policy.

It is my understanding that my fine but frustrated successor as Archbishop for the Military Services, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, has pleaded with military leaders at very high levels to show some concern for those of our Faith, but the new mantra of the Chaplain Corps is said to be: A chaplain is a chaplain, is a chaplain, is a chaplain. In other words, it makes no difference what religious needs you have as long as there is a chaplain of any denomination nearby. For Catholics, this is unacceptable!

The result? Catholics are down to some 70 priests to serve our three sea services when the need is more than twice as many. And those "slots" no longer filled by priests are going over to chaplains of other denominations, some of whom are over eager to welcome our young, Catholic, spiritually hungry service men and women into their fold.

This is unnecessary, arbitrary and clearly unjust. The once valued spirit of ecumenism is evidently gone from the Navy and threatens to disappear from all three chaplaincies unless, in my opinion, Congress steps in.

That is why I took the suggestion, "You should write a column about that." And it is why you should consider that as you pray for more priests for our Church and our Archdiocese you might make special mention of those serving the men and women of our Armed Forces. You might also consider a call or email to your elected representative in Congress to review the Navy's troubling policy of dismissing Catholic priests.