

Fargo's vicar general hopes to return to service as chaplain

WASHINGTON – Monsignor Brian Donahue, vicar general of the Diocese of Fargo, N.D., and pastor of two parishes in the diocese, wants to do a second tour of duty as a military chaplain in Iraq.

To do so, however, he is going to have to “unretire,” transferring out of the retired reserves to the individual ready reserves. In 2007 he retired from the Army National Guard after 20 years of service, which included active duty during the Persian Gulf War and a previous stint in Iraq.

Monsignor Donahue, 52, has put in the paperwork and is waiting to undergo fitness tests with the military. He'll probably know the Army's answer by Easter.

But given the severe shortage of Catholic chaplains in Iraq, it's likely the priest will be able to serve once more. The Army has only 92 Catholic chaplains.

Monsignor Donahue, who was ordained in 1983, is one of 86 active priests in the Fargo Diocese, which covers the eastern half of North Dakota and has a Catholic population of about 86,000.

During his previous Iraqi tour of duty, Monsignor Donahue told Catholic News Service in a Feb. 8 telephone interview from Wild Rice, N.D., he visited 10 different bases in one two-week period. In 2005 he was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his service as battalion chaplain in Iraq.

Asked if he ever felt his life was in danger, Monsignor Donahue laughed and replied, “Oh, yes. many times. There's a lot of different situations. But I was always at peace. ... A deeper trust in the providence of God came out of that at least for me.”

But why return?

“The unit I was with before in Iraq contacted me in the fall and told me they're returning to Iraq and asked me if I would come pray with them,” Monsignor

Donahue said. It is a field artillery unit of the Texas Army National Guard.

"In November they sent another message. This battalion was without a chaplain and they really wanted a Catholic chaplain," the priest said, adding that one reason is "the high percentage of Catholics" in the battalion.

"I talked with Bishop (Samuel J.) Aquila (of Fargo) and we prayed about it for a while, and we felt this was where the Lord was leading me. And, if the Army approves it, to remain on active duty," he added. Even after this Iraqi stint, he does not plan to return to the diocese.

In a statement to Catholics in the diocese, he said he will "serve soldiers and their families as long as my health allows me to do this."

"Our soldiers need priests with them, to minister to them and to offer them the sacraments," Bishop Aquila said in a statement about his decision to release Monsignor Donahue from his diocesan duties to return to military service.

The priest's departure will be difficult for everyone in the diocese, he noted, but said that as his bishop "it would be even more difficult to deny his return to the military."

Monsignor Donahue's return to the Army's chaplain corps would make three Fargo diocesan priests in military chaplaincy.

For him, "the affinity with the military goes back to childhood," he told CNS. "As a teenager I had three brothers in Vietnam. So I had an affinity back then. ... When I was ordained, the town that I was assigned to had an engineers battalion in the North Dakota National Guard," he added. "That's how I got into the military. I call it a call within a call."

Monsignor Donahue said he told members of the two parishes he pastors about his plans at Ash Wednesday Masses. "They're very supportive, very sad. They don't want to see me go. As far as the diocese goes, I feel I have the best assignment in the diocese," he said.

"It was tough. It was tough," he continued. "There were a lot of tears. But they sensed it was coming at some point."