

Military bases are like missionary diocese for archbishop

FRIEDBERG, Germany - Like spring in many dioceses, spring in the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services is confirmation season.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien packed his bags in late March and was to spend the next two months confirming the children of military personnel - and a few soldiers and sailors - stationed in Germany, Belgium, Italy and England.

Almost all the members of the armed services with whom he would come into contact had been deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan, and many would be going back.

"I find impressive the humility of military people," the archbishop said April 11 after celebrating Mass and sharing lunch with soldiers who had returned from Iraq in late February and early March.

"They know how fragile life is," the archbishop said. "They don't boast. They don't act like heroes. They act surprised when someone thanks them."

One young soldier, his foot still in a cast from an injury in Iraq, played his guitar during the meal, then had an intense heart-to-heart with the archbishop about perhaps becoming a Catholic.

At the Friedberg Mass April 11, just as at confirmation the evening before at the garrison headquarters in Giessen, the local chaplain expressed the feelings of the small Catholic contingent in the 1st Brigade of the Army's 1st Armored Division, thanking the archbishop for coming so far to visit and administer the sacraments.

"This is like a missionary diocese," said Archbishop O'Brien. "The bishop goes out to a parish to confirm three or four young people in a rural town. Every diocese must evangelize, but the potential we have is extraordinary."

Archbishop O'Brien is responsible for overseeing the pastoral care of 1.5 million Catholics: members of the armed forces and their dependents, U.S. government

employees living abroad, and those being treated in the United States at hospitals run by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“We have 250,000 young adults in uniform,” he said. “We need to go where they are.”

Yet the Archdiocese for the Military Services is hurting for chaplains. Archbishop O’Brien said more than 25 percent of people in the military are Catholic, yet only 7 percent of the chaplains are Catholic priests.

The archdiocese has 320 Catholic priests, but needs 800, he said.

At each stop in early April, Archbishop O’Brien prayed for vocations and pointedly suggested to unmarried soldiers that they consider becoming priests.

Thirteen percent of all seminarians, he said, come either from military families or have served in the military. Many of the values fostered by the military are needed in the priesthood as well: “integrity, self-sacrifice, loyalty, fraternity – you can build on that background,” he said.

Celebrating the chrism Mass in Heidelberg, Germany, April 3, the archbishop told the congregation, “Yet another Mass of Chrism finds our priest-chaplains still fewer in number and with ever greater demands upon them.

“Iraq and Afghanistan continue to take their toll of lives, American military and innocent civilians,” he said. “And military families at home wait and pray and sacrifice for safe returns and peaceful results.”

In addition, he said, there are “the thousands of returnees seeking bodily, mental and spiritual healing from wounds inflicted by a relative handful of crazed extremists.”

Archbishop O’Brien spent Easter afternoon at the U.S. military hospital at Landstuhl, visiting the injured and the staff.

“I was deeply impressed with the personnel,” he said. They work long hours, with great dedication, under enormous pressure to stabilize the wounded so they can be

flown home for treatment, he said.

Wherever Archbishop O'Brien goes, he prays for vocations, tries to recruit priests, pressures the military to provide more priests – even if it means contracting local priests – prays for the injured and dead, and lets those serving in the military know that he sees their service as a vocation.

“When I speak to young people in the military,” he told the soldiers at Friedberg, “I often hear them wondering if there is a conflict between their military duty and their Christian faith.

“I don’t see it that way. Yours is a noble profession,” he said. “You are willing to give up your lives not just for your friends, but for strangers, and sometimes it is unappreciated.”

“Not every military action is correct,” the archbishop told the men and women in their light khaki uniforms and heavy tan boots. “But your military service is an act of charity.”

The archbishop encouraged them to imagine themselves in the parable of the good Samaritan, but not at the moment when all but the Samaritan pass by the man who had been beaten.

Rather, he said, think about what happened 20 minutes earlier, when the man was being attacked: Is it virtuous to help only if you wait until he is injured?

A Christian has an obligation “to do what is necessary and only what is necessary to stop the violence,” he said.

In an interview later, Archbishop O'Brien said, “It is our job to help them make the connection between their faith and the sacrifices they are making for very generous motives.”