

# Minnesota priest injured in Iraq while serving as Army chaplain dies

ST. PAUL, Minn. – Father H. Timothy Vakoc, a Minnesota priest who was reportedly the first Army chaplain to be gravely injured in the Iraq War, died June 20. He was 49.

He died at a nursing home in the suburb of New Hope. No cause of death was released.

According to journal updates by his family on the CaringBridge Web site at [www.caringbridge.org/mn/timvakoc](http://www.caringbridge.org/mn/timvakoc), Father Vakoc “was surrounded by family and friends who prayed him into heaven.”

His funeral Mass was to be celebrated June 26 at St. Paul Cathedral in St. Paul.

Father Vakoc, ordained in 1992 as a priest of the St. Paul and Minneapolis Archdiocese, served in two parishes before joining the Army full time in 1996. The priest held the rank of major.

In May 2004, Father Vakoc’s Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb while he was returning to his barracks after saying Mass for soldiers on the 12th anniversary of his ordination. He suffered severe head injuries, including the loss of his left eye and brain damage.

He was transported from Iraq to Germany and then to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, where he remained hospitalized for four months. He was transferred in a near-coma to the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Minneapolis in October 2004.

He underwent several surgeries and was in a minimally responsive state for several months, but finally regained consciousness. He had speech, physical and occupational therapy, and in the last couple of years had become increasingly more able to speak, recognize people and answer questions.

In April 2007, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul awarded Father Vakoc with the 2007 Distinguished Alumnus Award. The seminary has presented the award annually since 1994 as a way to recognize alumni “who have lived their vocation in an extraordinary way.”

He received a Purple Heart, the Bronze Star Medal and the Combat Action Award.

Before he was injured, Father Vakoc had told the National Catholic Register in an e-mail interview: “I live with (the soldiers), work with them, eat with them, care for them, listen to them, counsel them. The soldiers know if you are real and genuinely care for them or not. The bottom line in helping these soldiers through the grieving process is to be present to them and walk with them.

“I prayed with the soldiers, I prayed for the soldiers who died. I brought the sacraments of the church and the light and love of Christ into the darkness of the situations,” he said.