

# U.S. must keep up support for troops in Iraq

FRANKFORT, Ill. – Support from people in the U.S. is important to the nation's troops who are serving in Iraq and must continue, especially for soldiers "in harm's way," a military chaplain told a congregation in the Diocese of Joliet.

Father John Hannigan, a priest of the Chicago Archdiocese, has been on leave from active duty since January, but before that he had been stationed in Iraq since the early days of the war.

He would travel every day in convoys with American soldiers along desert roads, dodging bullets and roadside bombs with his comrades while evading rocket-propelled grenades.

The priest's mission was to boost the spiritual drive of the infantry Marines stationed within a 30,000-square-mile region stretching across Baghdad and Fallujah to the borders of Syria and Jordan.

The U.S. Navy commander who is a Marine Corps chaplain relied on donations from people stateside – including members of St. Anthony Parish in Frankfort – to secure rosaries, Bibles, medals and other religious items for the troops.

He paid a visit to the parish in mid-February to express his thanks.

Members of the parish's Knights of Columbus donated \$2,000 to help provide the troops in Iraq with spiritual items, said Bill Mech, a member of the council.

In an interview with the Catholic Explorer, Joliet's diocesan newspaper, Mech said the Knights learned that Mary Becker, a member of Infant Jesus of Prague Parish in nearby Flossmoor, was in close contact with Father Hannigan, helping him garner funds to pay for such items.

So the Knights approached her and offered to donate money for the effort, Mech said.

In the meantime, youngsters from St. Jude Parish in New Lenox made corded rosaries for the troops, said Becker, who also attended the Mass in Frankfort.

Students of Noonan Elementary Academy, a private Catholic school in Mokena, also wrote letters to the soldiers. Becker sent the items to Father Hannigan who distributed them to the troops, she said.

"We've gotten help from all over" to support the faith lives of the troops in Iraq, including from people across the United States and abroad, said Becker.

Another Massgoer, Nancy Weber of Holy Cross Parish in Batavia, said Father Hannigan is "a real hero for us and defender of the faith." She and her four children made corded rosaries for the troops.

"We're part of Hannigan's Helpers," she said.

Ordained in 1976, Father Hannigan served as an associate pastor at three parishes in the Chicago Archdiocese before beginning his career as a military chaplain in 1990.

The 56-year-old clergyman said that for as long as he could remember he always had the desire to be a Catholic priest and, at the same time, he wanted to be in the military. Being a military chaplain seemed like an appropriate fit, he said.

Father Hannigan explained that military chaplains are responsible for strengthening the morale of the troops and are stationed across battle lines.

Enemy forces understand the positive impact chaplains have on the lives of the soldiers, he said, so chaplains are targets along with combat commanders, communication officers and physicians.

"I've had six close calls," he said.

He noted that there are 75 percent fewer Catholic priest chaplains than Protestant chaplains serving the Marines. Those numbers are similar in the other branches of the military, he said.

"We really need priests out there," the chaplain said, noting that it was impossible

for him to adequately serve all the Catholics in his assigned perimeter in Iraq.

“The bishops have been very supportive, but they just don’t have enough priests,” he said, referring to the priest shortage in the United States. Priests serve the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services as chaplains with permission from their bishop.

With regard to the situation in the volatile Middle East, Father Hannigan believes that the plan to send 21,500 additional soldiers to Iraq is needed, as American troops are training Iraqi police officials and soldiers while fighting off insurgents.

“We are winning there. We’re making headway. Those aren’t just empty words. The American public needs to hear that. And, the Iraqi people really appreciate our presence there,” he said.

When he reports back to active duty sometime in March, Father Hannigan has been assigned to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif.