

Veterans Need our Support, Prayers

In 1970, a newly-minted Army chaplain, with airborne wings fresh out of “jump school,” I looked forward to my first leave on the Fourth of July weekend. I was to join a friend at the Boston Commons for the chance to hear the Boston Pops, under the direction of famed conductor Arthur Fiedler, play the standard patriotic musical fare and made plans to fly north.

A delayed flight got me to the Commons just as the concert was getting underway. As I trudged forward in my chaplain’s uniform I was surprised to be received by scattered boos from a number in the crowd.

Today, gratefully, the sight of a man or woman in a military uniform no longer elicits such a response from our American people, whether in times of war or peace. They are largely supportive of the generous men and women who serve in our Armed Forces, but in a very remote way. In other words, many Americans are willing to accept that our soldiers are involved in wars and peace-keeping missions far from home, but offer little emotional investment. Instead, they go about their lives, often with little thought to the price being paid by others so they can enjoy freedoms here at home.

Often, it is holidays such as Memorial Day and Independence Day that conjure up reminders of the heroic sacrifices being made daily, hourly on our behalf.

Such was the case this past Memorial Day weekend when The Sun celebrated the lives of Travis Manion and Brendan Looney. The two became great friends, nearly inseparable at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, the paper reported. They would separate upon leaving the Academy, one bound for Iraq, the other for Afghanistan as a member of the elite Navy SEALs. Three years ago, Travis was killed while trying to drag wounded comrades to safety during an ambush. He was buried in a Pennsylvania cemetery until the Friday before Memorial Day, when he was reunited with his good friend, Brendan, in Arlington National Cemetery. Brendan was killed in a helicopter crash last September in Afghanistan, his grieving wife able to only find comfort in knowing her husband would be joined in death by his best friend.

Stories such as Travis' and Brendan's are necessary for us to remember the human sacrifice that is required for us to live the lives we too often take for granted. It is the reason why we ask our parishes to include in the general intercessions at Mass each week our prayers for the likes of Travis and Brendan. But beyond recognizing their sacrifices, we must also do what we can to support them and their efforts, including at the local level.

During my parish visits, I have been impressed by the proudly-displayed tributes to parish sons and daughters serving in active duty. These often include photos of relatives and friends who are serving abroad. Though we don't like to think of war, we owe it to these individuals to put a face on the suffering that wars cause and the freedoms they earn.

This responsibility extends to our state and federal governments, too. Unemployment for returning veterans is a major concern. Not only do we owe them the jobs they left behind, but perhaps even more generous opportunities to provide for themselves and their families. And beyond employment, returning combat veterans often face many emotional and psychological barriers to their re-entry into civilian life. The rates of suicide, divorce, mental health issues and even homelessness are alarmingly high. I applaud the new programs being developed by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to reach vets in need, and encourage more be done to show our gratitude and appreciation for their heroic deeds.

Similar efforts to welcome and support these men and women are taking place at the community level and I would hope and pray that we may see more such efforts, especially here in our own Archdiocese. They were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice one can make for another. Shouldn't we set aside time in our own lives to remember, pray for, and actively support them in gratitude for their generosity?