

Evangelii Gaudium for Military in light of the Centenary of World War One

Pope Francis has issued a call to *get out and do*, rather than sit on the sidelines or in a chapel or command office. This is both a challenge against complacency and an antidote to inherited national guilt and fear. Although we may live with a national history shackled with guilt, the forgiveness of Christ gives us a true chance for a future filled with hope. Even when soldiers share experiences from battles, Christ's love allows brotherhood to develop rather than hatred to fester. The pope further encourages lay faithful, including soldiers, to get so involved and engaged in building a good future that their very struggles to do that will help develop Catholic Social teaching.

Both the words of Pope Francis and his personal example of subsidiarity (letting local bishops and bishops' conferences make many decisions) as well as his personal involvement (hearing confessions, visiting the poor of Rome, etc.) have shown us how to be so involved. He has asked bishops (and the same principles can be applied to chaplains and to any lay military leaders) to be in the front to give vision and guidance, to be in the midst of their fellows to enable and encourage, and to be in support by allowing new outreach options guided by seasoned wisdom.

In the front, Chaplains would improve their preaching particularly by giving explanations at a level easily understood by all. For example, explaining using military force to remove terrorists as being parallel to how a doctor treats an infection: first by containing, then by medicine, and if necessary by surgery that cuts through good muscle to remove the infection—so also military are sometimes the scalpel that cuts through even good society to remove a terroristic infection to the body politic. Also from the front commanders and other military leaders of every rank would give good example and show both courage under pressure and compassion even while bearing the full weight of the burden of command. Such actions overcome complacency and human laziness and debilitating fear.

In the midst of a military unit Chaplains would live in the same conditions as their soldiers, travelling with them and using breaks in action to listen to their deepest needs. For at least a century now chaplains have been expected to conduct religious services and various ceremonies such as those that help assuage grief, to answer deep religious questions as they arise on the battlefield, to be the intermediary for individuals with commanders, to offer support for family crises that the soldier is too far away to heal, to preserve human dignity for the wounded and prisoners, to push for uplifting options like education or "Morale and Welfare" activities like wholesome club rooms to relax in for even a few hours, and to support various needs during battle (such as helping in medical areas). They would also "open doors" for a military unit, such as enabling the "adopting" of an orphanage, by making connections the soldiers themselves might not find.

Lay faithful, in a parallel way, encourage and are encouraged in the midst of their units by having lay organizations that multiply the options and effectiveness of the individual. For example, a small group can sometimes more easily get permission for projects and can often do 100 times more than what just one person and his buddy can do alone.

In the rear chaplains and commanders both give moral support to new methods of involvement or outreach, and yet provide the wisdom and experience that compliments youthful enthusiasm. Knowing that such support and evaluation will be there gives courage to try new ideas and sustains morale when not every new idea succeeds.

There are, however, two particular challenges that military face today in the pursuit of active involvement for good in the midst of a very broken world. One is the temptation to imposing an unjust peace, as happened at the end of World War I and haunts us still. Such an unjust peace destroys hope in the oppressed group and plants the seeds of future insurrection and terrorism. It is exactly the opposite of the constant church teaching of offering a “preferential option for the poor” which raises up hope and provides opportunities. A particular danger in the military is being forced to be an instrument of enforcing an unjust peace, and this is more acute in political systems where the option of leaving the military to avoid such collaboration is lacking.

The other challenge is a creeping secularism that tends to marginalize religious involvement and lock it into only ritual services. That attitude is the forceful imposition of the absence of religious activity as a secularist religion itself—and can be more easily combatted by lay organizations than by individuals alone or by church groups. If one has a treasure (in this case Jesus Christ) and wants to share that treasure without cost or imposition, the ability to do so is among the most basic of human freedoms which all nations should uphold.

Finally, the responsibility to lead holy and effective lives in the military, both as chaplains and as lay members of every rank and circumstance, does not rest exclusively on the individual but on the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Prayer to him for help will be as effective in our world as the rosary was at the battle of Lepanto in 1571, and will magnify all efforts by both chaplains and all military to make this world better by our efforts, and more effectively a part of the Kingdom of God.