



## ***Four Chaplains Memorial Service***

**The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain**

**Bishop of Sioux Falls**

**February 19, 2017**

***Sioux Falls American Legion Post #15***

It is a privilege to have this opportunity to share in this interfaith remembrance of the Four Chaplains. Sadly in our day history is not studied as it ought to be, both to learn from the successes and mistakes of the past and also to remember and honor those who went before in whose legacy we live.

As you know I am a Vietnam Veteran having served as an Air Intelligence Officer at Tan Son Nhut airbase in Saigon with duty in IV Corps on the beautiful delta of the Mekong River. Thus I have a sense of the exuberance and the anxiety of military service as well as the practical realities and spiritual wonderings that come with such service.

I must admit that before being asked to participate in this service, I knew little about the Four Chaplains: Rev. Clark Poling, Presbyterian, Rabbi Alexander Goode, Jewish, Rev. George Fox, Dutch Reformed, and Father John Washington, Catholic.

As I learned of their sacrificial heroism the image that touched my heart deeply was that of the four men of God, representing different traditions but the same Creator, arms linked together and praying aloud together as their ship went down and they with it. They were each chaplains for less than a year on their way to other assignments. Yet in this brief moment together they represented the instinctive response of people of faith to care for others and care about one another, including the whole person, the spiritual as well as the physical. This powerful image recalls the words of Jesus that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends<sup>1</sup>. The Four Chaplains did so literally and should be remembered and honored. This image of linked arms and joint prayer is an icon of what might be possible if faith guides not only in times of military crisis but in daily relations among nations and peoples.

You are all familiar with the details of the heroic witness of these men of God. Even so it is worthwhile for us to remember relevant facts that can teach and guide us today. The soldiers were on an old coastal steamer renamed the *Dorchester* once it had been pulled into military service in the early days of World War II. It was built for non-military purposes to carry some 400 passengers and crew. Some 900 or more were on board this transport vessel at the time of the attack. Filled with these hundreds of soldiers, it traveled slowly in cold and icy North Atlantic waters of February in which German U boats lurked below the surface. Many soldiers were already seasick and nauseous before the strike, thus complicating reactions. Time was of the essence when the torpedo hit knocking out electrical and other systems. The four chaplains did not hesitate to reach out to their temporary flock though likely within them was fear and wonderment.

The four new chaplains responded as was their call both in demeanor and action: urging and exemplifying calm, assisting those struggling to find the way to safety, distributing life jackets to whomever came forward, providing a rudder of stability in the chaos. When the life jackets ran out each took off his jacket and gave it to others, assuring their own deaths. Given that this entire disaster lasted only minutes from hit to sink, surely a spiritual force touched and formed these four men of diverse faith communities into one community of God's love and mercy. Their influence in their resolute ways touched lives that were on their way to death and those on their way to safety yet forever changed by the experience.

The Four Chaplains Memorial Foundation reported: "One witness, Private William B. Bednar, found himself floating in oil-smeared water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. "I could hear men crying, pleading, praying," Bednar recalls. "I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going." He talks of the "they". In this crisis the divisions within and without religion became empty as the care for souls, all souls, believers or not needed spiritual attention. None of us can know the musing of each of the chaplains; what we know is that they responded in love, in sacrifice and in faith.

Nearly 700 died, while some 230 were rescued whose first-hand reports startled and humbled in 1943 and continues to do so today.

What can we learn from this moving true story this prayer service seeks to keep alive? Among them is deep respect for the men and women who serve our country, often in difficult situations and often with inadequate support and equipment, and too often based on policy decisions about which people of good will disagree. Yet they do so for love of country, out of duty to protect her, and at great sacrifice to personal and family life. They deserve not only logistical support but also spiritual support.

When I came back from Vietnam I was advised to get out of uniform as quickly as possible before leaving the base given the hostile environment I was about to enter, my own USA. Let us never again allow our returning military to have to hide from their proud and selfless service. Let us also support their families who serve by separation. Returning military and their families need accompaniment during and following their service.

Secondly the Four Chaplains underscore the importance of having a spiritual presence among our military. Certainly faith ought not to be imposed, but those who enter harm's way on our behalf need a presence to help calm, to help direct, to offer a listening ear and to publicly pray with and for them as did the Four Chaplains.

The impact of chaplains is not quantifiable but more pervasive than is given credit. This past week Lt. General Harold Moore died at the age of 92. In 1965 as a lieutenant colonel in one of the first major battles of the Vietnam War he saved most of his outnumbered battalion. His life story and his heroic leadership became a book and the movie "We were soldiers". He credited Monsignor George Murdock, chaplain at the US Military Academy, as having influenced his life and his approach to military service. General Moore referred to himself as a 'goat', one who had more difficulty with academics than the discipline. Someone suggested that the real training General Moore received at West Point was spiritual leadership which empowered him to lead with courage and with constraint, training offered by chaplains.

General Moore was asked, “How do you find peace in war?” He responded: “In the heat of battle we don’t pray. We don’t think about heaven. We think about killing the enemy and getting through the battle alive. But before going into battle I always prayed that I would make the right decisions, that I would conduct myself properly as a leader. I prayed that I would survive the battle although I was prepared to be killed.” For the remainder of his life he prayed for those who lost theirs. He said, “I pray that my men who were killed in action under my command have eternal life in Jesus Christ. That’s the best I can do.”

I raise the importance of chaplains for in remembering the valor of the Four Chaplains we also recognize the vital role of chaplains every day. However in our day there is both a direct and subtle movement to minimize, even eliminate Chaplains in today’s military. For some it is an unnecessary expense, for others the spiritual is viewed as quaint and out of date, for some even a distraction. More significant is the imposition of political ideology that seeks for force chaplains to compromise the tenets of their faith communities while being under government employ, and if they will not compromise then to drive them out from serving our troops. It is an extension of the threat to religious liberty that is hovering over our society with the intention to marginalize faith communities and force religion into the back room.

The courage and witness of the four chaplains reminds us that in the midst of unexpected danger and loss it is the presence of those who represent the Transcendent, who sustain, encourage and empower. The old adage that there are no atheists in foxholes is an outdated image but not an outdated concept of spiritual need in times of danger at home and abroad.

War has an impact physically and psychologically but also, though less noticed, spiritually. While serving in Vietnam my spiritual life was not deep but that experience in the midst of fighting and bombing and suffering changed me personally and opened up the reality that I needed something more to make sense of it all which, over time, led me to discover Jesus Christ.

The image of the Four Chaplains with arms intertwined, praying with one another in their own traditions so others could hear as they went down with the ship is a powerful reminder that even in the midst of tragedy, fear and horror, there is Hope.

Thank you to the American Legion for reminding us of the courage and lessons taught by these four spiritual soldiers. May they rest in peace and may their witness inspire us all to be true to what we affirm in the Pledge of Allegiance that we are one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.