
Several books have been written about the “Forgotten War,” the American-led United Nations action in Korea, but few include any references to the chaplain service in that conflict. William L. Maher’s profile of Fr. Emil Kapaun brilliantly fills this void. In eleven short chapters this former newspaper reporter and member of the Counter Intelligence Corps in Tokyo during the 1950s weaves the history of the opening days of the Korean War with the biography of a heroic Roman Catholic chaplain into a fascinating account of the making of a twentieth-century saint. In 1993 Fr. Kapaun was recognized as a “Servant of God.”

This book traces the footsteps of Emil Kapaun from his birth, April 20, 1916, on a windy prairie farmstead that was two and a half miles from Pilsen, Kansas (in the Diocese of Wichita) to his torture and death (May 23, 1951) in Unsan, a North Korean prison camp. Born into a close knit Bohemian family and community, Fr. Kapaun’s life was cultivated by a strong Catholic faith-filled family immersed in daily prayer and Catholic traditions. His early years, which balanced the love of faith, family, and community with the rigorous struggles in a farming district located outside an isolated “rural crossroads with a couple of general stores, two gas stations, a post office and about 20 weather beaten wooden houses” (22), provided the manual skills, ingenuity, good-natured sense of humor, and deep faith that would sustain him through many hardships. Chores on the farm, obstacles to his initial desire to become a missionary, the “enormous financial burden” of the Depression on his family and community, a difficult pastor, “boss,” (who, among other eccentricities, fined brides and grooms one dollar for each minute they were late for the nuptial ceremony), and obstacles to his enlistment as an Army chaplain in World War II, were life experiences that gave him the patience, good humor, and courage to withstand greater hardships in the last year of his short life. These experiences toughened him and prepared him to choose the only path in Korea: to stay with his men, tend to their physical and spiritual needs, and ultimately endure with grace the torture culminating in death at the hands of the Chinese Communists. As a young boy, he wrote in his daily journal: “Pray hard, receive the sacrament frequently, above all give good example. ‘God will do the rest in time.’” This remained his motto throughout his short life but is best exemplified in his last months of captivity and torture.
The last four chapters depict in detail the numerous acts of heroism of this young Army chaplain in the 3rd Battalion, 8th Regiment, 1st Calvary Division. Given the opportunity to escape, he chose to remain with the 250 captured Americans. Father Kapaun's bravery under fire and lack of "fear of the enemy" "proved to be a dress rehearsal for what followed" (92). Rather than nag the sick, the wounded, and the dying to remain strong and "not believe the lies that the Communists tell us about God and the United States," he led by example (122). He continuously lived out the Beatitudes as he put his own life in danger to shelter those under attack, carry the wounded and dying on the long death march to the prison camps, wash and tend the sick, scrounge and steal food for the hungry, share his possessions (from clothing to his last indulgence: tobacco or cabbage leaves for his pipe), and bury the dead. Kapaun's many heroic and often humorous attempts to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow prisoners (without regard to race, color, or creed) earned him the nickname "The Good Thief" (119-120). The men recognized that this was a man that lived what he had preached to them. While his contemporaries felt his generous deeds were more significant than his words, the reader is inspired by his grace-filled last words as Father Kapaun reminded his men to pattern their lives after the Maccabees and remain true to the faith and loyal to America. Although denied medication, in the last words of Christ, he asked God to forgive his torturers (150-153). In 1953 the repatriated survivors echoed Kapaun's influence over their hellish lives in the prison at Samakol by always speaking of it as "Father Kapaun's Valley."

This book should be read for several reasons. It provides the story of a wonderful role model for both young and old, and obviously appeals to those interested in the beatification of Fr. Kapaun. As a historian, I was particularly impressed with the meticulous research based on Kapaun's own journal and the in depth interviews with family, friends, former teachers, army officers, fellow chaplains, and numerous former POWs which provided a vivid and intimate portrait of this American hero. Maps and photographs lend important visuals to this beautifully crafted description of Kapaun's life. More importantly, the author allows Kapaun to speak for himself. Father Kapaun best summarizes the life of a military chaplain when he says, "It has its rough days when a person is face to face with death, and it has its days of tenderness and love." In these simple words he also summarizes his life as a Christian martyr.

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