

Southtown Article # 7 Spirituality of Soldiers

Some of the most powerful moments in my life as a priest have come while celebrating the Sacraments with soldiers as they prepare to enter a combat zone. Something happens to a person when he faces, maybe for the first time, his own mortality. The thought, "I'm going but I may not be coming back", weighs heavily on the minds on many.

This has been a time of tremendous transition for the troops in Iraq. The majority of troops are either in the process of coming into the theatre or going back home. As I said mass at Camp New York recently, the Third Infantry Division was in the process of moving to the Baghdad region of the country.

Soldiers, during a time of war, have very little. All the comforts of home, save for a few small objects or pictures, are stripped away. You have your weapon & clothing, your training, and your buddies. All of the other objects you might normally have which gives you a sense of identity or solace are absent. Families, cars, homes, creature comforts are all several thousand miles away at the same time you encounter the very real possibility of being wounded or killed.

From a spiritual point of view, this "nakedness" brings into focus our absolute dependence on God. Frankly, it's easier to experience our need for God when we can't hide or distract ourselves by the busyness of our regular life. Young men and women who otherwise haven't gone to Church in years frequently find themselves seeking meaning, hope, and more than a few answers, as they sheepishly enter the tent which houses the religious services.

I make it point to greet and welcome each of them. During the course of mass I try to assure them that no matter what God loves them and that the peace that all of us seek can only be found with Him.

The readings from the Bible also take on new depth. I never realized how frequently the subjects of war or the desert appear in Scripture. During mass you can see soldiers inch toward the edge of their seats when they hear these themes being proclaimed. The thought that God speaks to us in the midst of the reality of war is both humbling and gratifying.

Confessions are also intense experiences. Back at St. Cajetan in Chicago, I probably have never described the act of receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation as "getting right with God" for fear of making it sound too simplistic or mechanical. But here it is just that simple. These young men and women are going into a combat zone and they don't know what the future holds.

We know well that we have sinned and at this time, maybe more so than any other time in our lives, we are aware of our need for God's forgiveness. The lines for confessions are long. The encounters with soldiers are powerful. Watery eyes, sometimes tears are

not uncommon. But most of all the palpable sense of peace they leave with confirms to me that I am in the right place at the right time.

I am in awe of these people, these soldiers. Their spiritual search is genuine and profound. Ministering to them makes me want to become a better priest.

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