

## Fr. Emil Kapaun, Servant of God<sup>1</sup>

Emil Kapaun – priest, soldier and Korean War hero – is a rare man. He was awarded the Bronze Star in Korea for heroism in August 1950—the chaplain ran through enemy fire, dragging soldiers to safety—months before his detention. He has been awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award, and is also being considered by the Vatican for canonization as a saint.

In the midst of war, he constantly ministered to the dead and dying while performing baptisms, hearing first confessions, offering Holy Communion and celebrating Mass from an improvised altar set up on the front end of a jeep. He constantly would lose his Mass kit, jeep and trailer to enemy fire. He told how he was thoroughly convinced that the prayers of many others were what had saved him so many times.

Fr. Emil Kapaun was born in Pilsen, Kansas, and was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Wichita in 1940. He entered the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps in 1944 and, gaining a reputation for just appearing wherever the fighting was, he served until the end of World War II.

He re-entered the Army in 1948 and served in the Korean War where he resumed his constant presence under duress.

One account describes how, when enemy fire rendered his jeep inoperable, he took to riding a bicycle along the front lines. One of his fellow prisoners described this in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1954:

*Helmet jammed down over his ears, pockets stuffed with apples and peaches he had scrounged from Korean orchards, he'd ride this bone-shaker over the rocky roads and the paths through the paddy fields until he came to the forward outposts. There he'd drop in a shallow hole beside a nervous rifleman, crack a joke or two, hand him a peach, say a little prayer with him and move on to the next hold.*

During the battle of Unsan, Kapaun moved through the U.S. ranks under heavy enemy fire to aid and comfort his fellow soldiers. Eventually, Kapaun and his men were surrounded by enemy forces. All able-bodied U.S. troops were ordered to retreat, but Kapaun volunteered to remain with the wounded and fallen, knowing full well it would mean his capture.

As the Chinese continued to close in, Kapaun noticed an injured Chinese officer and convinced him to negotiate the U.S. soldier's surrender. Just after their surrender, Kapaun saw an enemy combatant standing over and preparing to kill one of the U.S. soldiers. Kapaun bravely shoved the man away,

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<sup>1</sup> This biography is a compilation taken from the following sources:

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Miracle-Father-Kapaun-Soldier/dp/1586177796>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emil\\_Kapaun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emil_Kapaun); [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-04-10/lifestyle/38436013\\_1\\_father-emil-kapaun-prisoners-pyoktong/2](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-04-10/lifestyle/38436013_1_father-emil-kapaun-prisoners-pyoktong/2); <http://www.kansas.com/2009/12/09/1089887/father-emil-kapaun-as-hundreds.html>; <http://www.army.mil/article/99317>; <http://freebeacon.com/army-chaplain-emil-kapaun-to-receive-medal-of-honor/>; <http://www.tfpstudentaction.org/politically-incorrect/hall-of-heroes/father-emil-kapaun-military-chaplain.html>; <http://catholic-church.org/kofc11987/kapaun.htm>

saving the American's life. Kapaun's actions stood as a beacon of hope and strength to the men with him that day and spurred many on to survival.

Hundreds of U.S. prisoners were marched northward over snow-covered crests. Whenever the column paused, Fr. Kapaun hurried up and down the line, encouraging the men to pray, exhorting them not to give up. When a man had to be carried or be left to die, Fr. Kapaun, although suffering from frostbite himself, set the example by helping to carry a makeshift stretcher. Finally, they reached their destination, a frigid, mountainous area near the Chinese border. The poorly dressed prisoners were given so little to eat that they were starving to death.

For the men to survive they would have to steal food from their captors. So, praying to St. Dismas, the "Good Thief," Fr. Kapaun would sneak out of his hut in the middle of the night, often coming back with a sack of grain, potatoes or corn. He volunteered for details to gather wood because the route passed the compound where the enlisted men were kept, and he could encourage them with a prayer, and sometimes slip out of line to visit the sick and wounded. He also undertook tasks that repulsed others, such as cleaning latrines and washing the soiled clothing of men with dysentery.

Lice multiplied overnight, congregating in armpits, inside seams, in underwear. Men who failed to kill them died covered with gray swarms; men too starved to care let them die.

But Kapaun would open the shirts of the sick and pick lice from armpits. He made it a game. "Hey, Mac," he'd say. "I got 75." "Yeah?" McClain would answer. "I got 90."

He scouted out the wounded and sick, and either helped them himself or brought the American doctors to them.

Al Brooks, on a wood detail one day, walked past and saw him grin. "God bless you," Kapaun said. Brooks never forgot him saying it, or how those three words lifted him. After 59 years, Brooks still chokes up describing that moment.

Kapaun gave away pieces of his own clothing, in a camp where men committed suicide by rolling away from their friends' body heat. Bob Wood more than once heard a fellow officer say, "I've had enough, don't bother to wake me in the morning." The next morning, that man was dead.

He gave away nearly everything he had, even his own food; when he had no food to give, he gave words.

By February 1951 the Allied prisoners at Pyoktong, North Korea, were dying so fast on ground frozen so solid that unburied bodies lay in stacks three to four feet high, 30 to 40 yards long. Men hoarded food or stole it from the weak, and left sick men to die in their own defecation.

Many soldiers were in their teens and early 20s, not mature enough to deal with that level of suffering. Father Emil Kapaun never yelled at them; he let his actions speak.

When men fought over who should dig out latrines, Kapaun dug out latrines. When men argued, Kapaun mediated. When men despaired, Kapaun cracked jokes, said little prayers.

On the farm in Kansas, his father, Enos, had taught him to make or fix nearly anything with his hands. He put those hands to use.

Kapaun watched feeble men carrying water for the camp in two leather bags hanging from a stick draped across their backs. The leaky bags lost half their contents before the POWs could bring them

home. One day the bags stopped leaking; Mike Dowe, curious, asked what had happened. Other POWs said they'd watched Kapaun melt down an old rubber boot and make hot patches for the buckets.

One soldier said that the miracle of Father Kapaun was not just that he patched leaky buckets or stole food. It was that he rallied men to embrace life when life looked hopeless. When starvation inspired betrayals, Kapaun inspired brotherhood.

Fr. Kapaun's faith never wavered. While he was willing to forgive the failings of prisoners toward their captors, he allowed no leeway in regard to the doctrines of the Church. He continually reminded prisoners to pray, assuring them that in spite of their difficulties, Our Lord would take care of them. As a result of his example, some 15 of his fellow prisoners converted to the Catholic Faith

In 1993 Kapaun received the title, "Servant of God," from the Roman Catholic Church, which is the first of four steps before being named a saint. The Vatican continues investigations into his possible canonization.

**Small group discussion questions:**

- 1) What most inspires you about Fr. Kapaun?
- 2) Have you ever met anyone who has shown great courage and strength of spirit amidst suffering? What was the source of their strength?
- 3) Is there someone in your life who may be struggling with discouragement? How can you bring them hope?
- 4) God used Fr. Kapaun's natural gifts (humor, his ability to fix things, etc.) as part of his ministry. What natural gifts has God given you? How can you use them to minister to others?
- 5) What else strikes you about Fr. Kapaun? How does his story inspire you to change / grow?