

[Readings: Mass for Various Needs, #30 for Peace and Justice]

Memorial Day, as Decoration Day gradually came to be known, originally honored only those lost while fighting in the Civil War. But during World War I the United States found itself embroiled in another major conflict, and the holiday evolved to commemorate American military personnel who died in all wars.

For decades, Memorial Day continued to be observed on May 30, the date selected for the first Decoration Day. But in 1968 Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May in order to create a three-day weekend for federal employees; the change went into effect in 1971. The same law also declared Memorial Day a federal holiday.

The 20th Century, and even into this century, brought with it wars, seemingly involving every generation, that would give new meaning to the words Supreme Sacrifice. Starting with the Spanish-American War in 1898, American blood was shed on foreign soil in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and then Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention other far-off places around the world.

Although history has been less than kind in judging the wisdom of our policy-makers in involving us in many of these conflicts, what is beyond dispute is that in every war to which we have sent our young men and women, they have performed with courage and patriotism in the belief that they were serving the best interests of our nation.

For those of us who have been spared the horrors of war, it is difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate the sacrifices that have been made on our behalf by those who served -- and died, or returned scarred -- while wearing the uniform.

On this year's Memorial Day, it's appropriate we take a few minutes to remember our priest-veterans.

There are two such priests designated as Servants of God, the first step to being named "Venerable," then "Blessed," and finally, "Saint."

The first is Father Emil Kapaun who served in the Korean conflict. While attending men on the battlefield, he was taken prisoner and endured a 60-mile march to a prison camp. While at the camp, Father Kapaun ignored his own wounds while tending to others. He died of complications from his injuries in 1951. He is one of four priests awarded the Medal of Honor.

The second priest named Servant of God is Father Vincent Capodanno who was known as “the grunt padre” for always being with his troops, especially on the battlefield. In September 1967 he was with a Marine force of 500 in a battle against 2,500 North Vietnamese. Too many times to count, he crisscrossed the battlefield to give first aid and to offer last rites. After having his left arm shredded by a mortar and refusing to leave the battlefield, he gave last rites to a wounded Marine and then covered his body with his own. Father Capodanno was killed. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Also awarded the Medal of Honor, Father Joseph O’Callaghan was a Navy Chaplain aboard the USS Franklin operating near Japan in March 1945. A Japanese pilot struck the ship with two bombs, instantly killing over one thousand men. For the next three days Father O’Callaghan helped rescue injured and trapped sailors, worked as a firefighter, and performed last rites. Father continued his naval career, retiring in 1953 as a Captain.

The fourth priest to receive the Medal of Honor is Father Charles Watters. He was on his second Vietnam tour when his unit attacked Hill 875 in Vietnam. It was a fierce battle, and Father Watters went onto the battlefield retrieving the wounded and offering last rites. He was killed on Nov. 19, 1967, when a bomb struck the battlefield.

Father Tim Vakoc was an Army chaplain serving in Iraq in on May 29, 2004. Returning to his home base after saying Mass at a field station, his vehicle struck a roadside bomb. Father Vakoc was severely injured; he was paralyzed and sustained brain damage as well. He was in a coma for six months but began to show signs of improvement in 2005. Using a computer for limited

communication, he began to speak in 2007. Father Vakoc died as the result of his wounds in 2009.

Perhaps the most inspiring demonstration of the chaplaincy at its best is the story of the “Four Chaplains” -- also called the “Immortal Chaplains.” They were new chaplains, recent graduates in the same class at the Army Chaplain’s School, on board the USS Dorchester headed for Greenland. On Feb. 3, 1943, the ship was struck by a torpedo.

The chaplains -- Methodist minister George Fox, Reform Rabbi Alexander Goode, Father John Washington and Reformed Church in America minister Clark Poling -- organized the orderly evacuation of the ship as well as helped calm the men. They guided the wounded men to safety and helped load the lifeboats.

When there were no more life vests to hand out, the chaplains gave up their own. Once they had helped as many men as possible into the lifeboats, they linked arms, sang and prayed. Survivors said they could hear the mixed languages of the chaplains, including Jewish prayers in Hebrew and Catholic prayers in Latin. Out of the 904 men on the ship, only 230 survived.

It is these, and all, brave Americans, who gave “the last full measure,” whom we honor on Memorial Day. Without their heroic efforts, we would not be gathering here to remember and to pray for them. “No greater love is there than this, to give up one’s life for another.” Eternal Rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen. May their souls and all the souls of war, violence and terrorism, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. AMEN!

Universal Prayer of the Faithful

Priest: Let us pray for our brothers and sisters as they go forth with courage and determination to face the forces of violence, weapons of destruction and hearts filled with hate.

RESPONSE: THROUGH THE DARKNESS BRING US TO THE LIGHT.

Deacon or Reader:

For our President, Congress, Supreme Court and our political and military leaders that they may tirelessly seek peaceful settlements to international disputes; we pray to the Lord:

That the Lord may preserve the members of our Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard and Air Force from all harm; we pray to the Lord:

That even in war, we may keep clearly before us the defense of all human rights, especially the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; we pray to the Lord:

That the families, relatives and friends of our military members may be strengthened in this time of concern and anxiety; we pray to the Lord:

That the Lord may help families with men and women in the armed forces to cope with daily challenges in the absence of their loved ones; we pray to the Lord:

That our homeland will be preserved from violence and terrorism and that the nations of the world will seek to work together in harmony and peace; we pray to the Lord:

That the hearts of all men and women will be moved to pursue true peace and justice; we pray to the Lord:

That violence may be overcome by peace; that weapons of destruction may be transformed into tools of justice, and that hate may give way to true charity; we pray to the Lord:

That grateful for and inspired by those veterans who have given their lives for our country we may bravely face the challenges ahead, and for all who have died, including those we are remembering at this liturgy; we pray to the Lord:

For the special needs we mention in the silence of our hearts (pause), we pray to the Lord.

Priest: Lord God, Almighty Father,
creator of mankind and author of peace,
as we are ever mindful of the cost paid for the liberty we possess.
We ask you to bless the members of our armed forces.
Give them courage, hope and strength.
May they ever experience your firm support, gentle love and compassionate healing.
Be their power and protector, leading them from darkness to light.
To you be all glory, honor and praise, now and forever.

Amen.