

VA Chaplain comforts veterans, leads chaplaincy

By Andrew Junker
The Catholic Sun

Fr. Ken Kleiber is a busy man. Early morning often finds him celebrating the 6:15 a.m. Mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glendale. And some nights, he offers the daily evening Mass on the other side of the Valley at St. Patrick Parish in Scottsdale.

But his main duty is serving as a Catholic chaplain at the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center in central Phoenix.

Ordained and incardinated in the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1968, Fr. Kleiber sought permission to move to Phoenix in 1977 to be near his ailing uncle, also a priest. He assisted in various parishes and filled in at the VA hospital when the need arose.

"One thing led to another," Fr. Kleiber explained. "So, you could say I've been on loan from the Archdiocese of Chicago since '77."

That's a good thing for the patients at the medical center, who all seem to like and appreciate their chaplain.

"He's well-known here," said Franciscan Father Matthias Crehan, the other Catholic chaplain who serves at the medical center.

On Sept. 20, Fr. Kleiber held a printout of patients' names highlighted in different colors.

"When I came in this morning, I drew up the Catholic list. That's my main responsibility. I've got these men in yellow; they're the new patients," he explained.

"Then I drop in and see some of these other guys. The pinks are the ones who have already received the anointing of the sick," he said. "I go around not only to see the new patients, but also just to drop in on the regulars."

Some of those "regulars" live in the medical center's nursing home.

"We've got one guy in our nursing home who was one of the original Navajo code talkers," Fr. Kleiber said on his way to visit some of the residents. "Oh, he has stories he can tell you."

Many of the vets sat outside their rooms, waiting for Fr. Kleiber to come. He asked about their health and chatted with each one before giving them a blessing.

"Sometimes, visiting these guys, I think, 'Who's helping whom?'" Fr. Kleiber said as he made his way back to his office. "Well, we're helping each other."

Family spirit

In 2002, Fr. Kleiber was named chief of chaplains at the medical center. The title carries with it greater administrative duties — which Fr. Kleiber described as a "headache" — and also made him



Andrew Junker/CATHOLIC SUN

VA chaplain Fr. Ken Kleiber visits with John Weller, a resident of the VA medical center's retirement home Sept. 20.

the leader of the other chaplains.

In addition to Fr. Crehan, the medical center has two full-time Protestant and one Jewish chaplain.

"We get along just great," said Fr. Kleiber. "From what I hear, that's unusual."

Fr. Crehan said the inter-faith harmony in the chaplaincy can be attributed to a goal shared by all the chaplains, regardless of religion.

"We work together," he said. "We're all focused on the same ministry: whatever we can do for our veterans."

For the Catholic chaplains, that means administering the sacra-

ments to the Catholic patients, most frequently the Eucharist and the anointing of the sick.

But, as Fr. Kleiber noted, "It's not only administering the sacraments. It's also to let them know their chaplains are down here praying for them and concerned about them. That's what we try to communicate to the patients."

"It's inspiring to know these men, to know how they've served their country," Fr. Crehan said. "Just knowing what they did, particularly in World War II — you know Tom Brokaw's idea of the 'Greatest Generation?' I understand what he's saying."

Serving these veterans presents unique challenges, Fr. Kleiber said.

"It's a different ballgame here. You've got to realize that these men — whether they're from World War II, Vietnam or the Persian Gulf — you've got to realize what they've been through," he said.

Many of the veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Some are also very poor. Fr. Crehan estimated that as many as a third of the patients at the hospital are homeless.

As a Franciscan, working with the poor has been very appealing to Fr. Crehan. The chaplaincy hands out food coupons to the vets and allows them to rest in the air-conditioned chapel.

In addition to working with the vets, the chaplains often provide spiritual counsel to the employees at the medical center.

"You could call us the stabilizing influence," Fr. Kleiber said. "We've got our hands full."

Many of the employees attend daily Mass at the medical center chapel, or seek out one of the priests when they're having a particularly rough day.

The chapel also draws Catholics from the surrounding areas for the Saturday night vigil Mass, which Fr. Kleiber celebrates. The Mass is often standing room only. That's nice, because it gives the vets a chance to see people from the outside world, Fr. Kleiber said.

"The family spirit is unique here," Fr. Crehan said of all the different people the chaplains minister to.

It keeps the days long and busy. But Fr. Kleiber wouldn't have it any other way. *

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Local Pax Christi members pray for peace

By Andrew Junker
The Catholic Sun

A group of about 15 people gathered at twilight Sept. 17 in the courtyard separating the Diocesan Pastoral Center and St. Mary's Basilica.

In the shadow of the downtown Phoenix church, they lit candles and prayed for an end to the war in Iraq.

Members of Pax Christi, a group that promotes peace and non-violence, listened to Scripture readings, prayed a litany and sang hymns as the sky turned dark.

"The Lord talked about mercy," said Carmelite Father Val Boyle, reflecting on the Beatitudes.

"Tonight, we ask the Lord to inspire us, to inspire thousands of other people in our country to truly become people of peace," he prayed. "The world needs the conviction that peace is the solution, not just a dream."

Pax Christi member Margaret Wolford said she has that conviction.

"What we really believe is that the work begins in personal life," she said of practicing non-violence. "And then it extends to communities of reflection and action. It extends to everything in God's creation."

She and other Pax Christi members have taken a vow of non-violence, which includes promising to accept suffering, to refuse retaliation when wronged and to work non-violently to end war.

"It really comes down to the non-violence of Jesus," Wolford said. "He took it all on His own body. He told Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Put your sword down.'"

Laurie Devine said the vow of non-violence serves as a constant challenge to Pax Christi members: "Are you really living the Beatitudes?"

"It's so easy just to say, 'I can't do anything about that war,'" she said. But by avoiding road rage, for instance, and trying to live out a life of peace, Pax Christi members believe they are sowing seeds for a better future.

Wolford thought the world was beginning to take more seriously the non-violent approach and remained positive about the future.

"It's a difference in living, and I think the world is turning towards it," she said. "It is difficult because we're Americans and we want immediate solutions, rather than the long solution, which is building a relationship."

If people think non-violence is a naive way to approach conflict, Wolford points them to non-violent movements in the past that have been successful.

"There was the civil rights movement in the 1960s; there was South Africa; there was the Philippines," she said. "Those were national movements that were non-violent. People



Andrew Junker/CATHOLIC SUN

Pax Christi members lit candles and prayed for an end to the Iraq War Sept. 17. The group hopes to have vigils outside of St. Mary's Basilica in the future.

took the beatings on themselves."

Though she wants the war in Iraq to end, Wolford said it would be difficult to justify leaving the country completely because of America's obligation to the Iraqis.

"We keep talking about political solutions instead of military, but in the language of non-violence, it would be forgiveness and reconciliation," she said.

In practice, this approach would be "more political, sitting down, talking about the issues and working out solutions," she said. "That's the remedy for conflicts, not shooting somebody."

As a Catholic, Wolford feels comfortable opposing the war, and said that if any Catholic "looks towards the Vatican or the [U.S. bishops], they'll clearly see that they have spoken out against this."

American bishops speak out

In the months leading up to war in Iraq, the American bishops released a number of documents expressing doubt over both the necessity of the war and of its justice.

In a statement released in November 2002, the conference wrote that they feared the "resort to war, under present circumstances and in light of current public information, would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force."

Statements by Pope John Paul II at the time were similar.

In a January 2003 speech to foreign diplomats, the Holy Father said, "As the Charter of the United Nations Organization and international law itself remind us, war cannot be decided upon, even

when it is a matter of ensuring the common good, except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions."

Yet Catholics won't hear binding, clear-cut answers from the U.S. bishops or the Vatican, said Fr. Chris Fraser, adjutant judicial vicar for the Diocese of Phoenix.

"You're not going to find a statement where the Holy Father is going to speak using the universal and ordinary magisterium of the Church, because it's not a matter of objective faith or morals," he said.

At the same time, Fr. Fraser said that Catholics should take into account what the Church says about these matters.

"It's certainly something that a Catholic would pay attention to," he said. "It's not, of course, infallible, but the opinion of the pope, the opinion of the U.S. bishops is something that every Catholic should be very attentive to, study and learn about more."

The most recent document from the American bishops about the Iraq war was released last month. It reiterated their support for both the men and women who "risk their lives in the service of our nation" and also for those "who seek to exercise their right to conscientious objection and selective

conscientious objection."

Praying for peace

At the prayer vigil, Fr. Boyle noted how arguments over the war have divided Catholics.

"There have been great occasions where people have lauded the president on his action and agreed with his plans for the war," he said. "There have been just as many, if not more, who have gone the other direction and have been very critical and shown great grief with how the war has been carried on."

He asked the Pax Christi members not to get distracted by those circular conversations.

"Tonight, we're going to get together not to talk to each other, but to join our voices, to join our fate and to gather as members of a family, the children of God," he said.

"We're going to address all of our intentions, our petitions, our words and our hopes not to the politicians, not to each other, but to God," he said.

As he finished reflecting on the Gospel passage, Fr. Boyle closed with some advice that perhaps is applicable to all Catholics, regardless of their stance on the war.

"It is important that we pray well," he said, "pray often, pray with sincerity and pray with trust to Jesus, the Prince of Peace." *

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