



the story of

Father Emil J.

KAPAUN

- FATHER EMIL J. KAPAUN -

Elizabeth Hajek Kapaun and her husband of one year, Enos, moved the bed into the warm kitchen of the remote farmhouse in preparation for the birth of their first child. At 11:00 a.m. on April 20, 1916 - Holy Thursday - their son Emil Joseph was born. Father John Sklenar, surely the most towering and influential person in the area, baptized the boy on May 9 at the newly-built St. John Nepomucene Church in Pilsen, Kansas, three miles from the Kapauns' 160 acre farm. Emil was christened for a life in the pious, hard-working enclave of Bohemian settlers just 40 miles south of the central Kansas town of Abilene, the boyhood home of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Little did Enos and Bessie know that 35 years later their son would be lauded as a hero by men returning from a prisoner of war camp in North Korea. Although Chaplain (Captain) Emil J. Kapaun was the victim of malnutrition and pneumonia after spending only seven months in the camp, his story is that of a saintly hero dedicated to living a life of Christian virtue and service to his fellow man under the most difficult and despicable conditions imaginable. Father Kapaun's heroism in the

prison camp isn't an isolated event, however: his lifelong dedication to Christ and to His Church placed him in the life of priestly service that culminated in his ultimate sacrifice in North Korea at only 35 years old.

Emil's German-Bohemian ancestry was typical for the residents of Pilsen in 1916 and even to this day. His father, Enos, who had been born of German and Bohemian background in Czechoslovakia in 1880, emigrated with his family to Pilsen in 1887. Emil's mother, Elizabeth Hajek, was born in 1895 in Trego County, Kansas of Bohemian parents. Enos and Elizabeth were married on May 18, 1915. Father Sklenar officiated at the nuptial Mass in Pilsen.

Emil had only one sibling: a brother Eugene, born when Emil was almost eight years old. Emil always had a close relationship with his family. He was a willing worker who was assigned chores such as gardening and weeding on the family farm. Emil enjoyed hiking, hunting, swimming and fishing. Even as a youth, Emil was skilled at repairing and building implements, a talent that served him well all his life, especially in the prisoner of war camp.

The young Emil was quiet and retiring, with a keen sense of humor. Like his parents, the Kapaun boy was hard-working and neighborly, and, as was typical of the German-Bohemian immigrants of the area, he was also tenacious and determined. He grew up with these talents and traits into a handsome man: slender with wide-set eyes, a cleft chin and a strong nose.

Emil started school at age six in the fall of 1922. He attended school in Pilsen, where three Adorer of the Precious Blood of Christ Sisters (whose mother house was in Wichita) taught first through eighth grade. Emil completed the eight grades in six years with almost perfect report cards and attendance. His instruction was in both English and Bohemian, and Emil studied intensely to understand the difficult Bohemian language. He frequently arrived in Pilsen one hour before the start of school in order to serve Mass for Father Sklenar. Emil continued to serve Mass during vacations and on free days, riding his bike the three miles from his home into town. He received his First Holy Communion on May 29, 1924, and he was confirmed by Bishop Augustus Schwertner on April 11, 1929, seven months after starting his high school education at Pilsen High School. The sisters continued

to serve as his teachers for the two years that were offered at the school. At this time, Emil's cousin, Emil Melcher, came to Pilsen to live with the Kapauns, and the two attended high school together. The two Emils became close life-long friends as a result of their family and high school experiences during the next two years.

In September of 1930, Emil Kapaun entered Conception Seminary a boarding high school and college run by the Benedictines at Conception, Missouri. His tuition and board were covered by scholarships. The first two years were spent finishing high school, and the next four studying classics and philosophy in preparation for further studies for the priesthood. He was an exceptionally good student, active in sodality, drama and choir. He learned Latin and Greek and had duties as sacristan, head librarian and writer for the school newspaper. During his six years at Conception, Emil returned each summer to help out on the family farm. Each day of those summers in Pilsen started with Mass and Holy Communion for Emil, no matter how much work had to be done that day.

Father Sklenar, with the help of the Bishop of Wichita and several of Emil's aunts, was able to put

together financial assistance for Emil so he could begin his theological studies for the priesthood at Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, in late summer of 1936. By August of 1939, Subdeacon Emil Kapaun was assisting with street preaching in the Bohemian language around the area of Caldwell, Kansas. His first sermon at Mass as a Deacon was delivered in Bohemian from the pulpit at St. John Nepomucene in Pilsen that same year at Christmas Midnight Mass. Bishop Christian Winkelmann ordained Emil on June 9, 1940 at St. John's Chapel on the campus of Sacred Heart College in Wichita, now Newman University. Father Kapaun, the first Pilsen native to be ordained, celebrated his first Mass at his home parish 11 days later in the presence of 1,200 guests. On June 30 of that year, he was assigned to stay on at Pilsen as the assistant pastor to Father Sklenar. He made good use of his Bohemian language skills there.

Bishop Winkelmann assigned Father Kapaun the additional duty of serving as the auxiliary chaplain at the Army airbase in Herington, Kansas, 16 miles north of Pilsen. This appointment lasted for 18 months in 1943-44 and allowed Father Kapaun to learn the needs of enlisted personnel and experience the satisfaction of a calling to the chaplaincy.

In November of 1943, Father Sklenar (now a Monsignor) retired, and his assistant at Pilsen, Father Kapaun, became the administrator of the parish. Father Kapaun desired to spark an interest in the Bible among the younger members of the parish, so for Christmas that year, he gave every boy and girl in Pilsen a copy of the New Testament. Although Father Kapaun loved being a priest, not everything was perfect for him. Concerned that some of the people who had known him since childhood would be reluctant to confide in him as their priest, and feeling a tug to assist the men in the military fighting in World War II, Father Kapaun humbly confided to Bishop Winkelmann that he thought a different Bohemian-speaking priest should be assigned to Pilsen. Relenting, the bishop relieved him of his duties at Pilsen and recommended him for the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps on July 12, 1944.

Father Kapaun received a great deal of personal challenge and satisfaction, both mentally and physically, from the daily Army regimen he experienced, both at the Fort Devens, Massachusetts Army Chaplaincy School in the fall of 1944 and at his first post, Camp Wheeler, Georgia from October 1944 to March of the following year. It was at Camp Wheeler that Chaplain Kapaun began his

habit of sending a copy of his monthly chaplain's report along with a long letter to his bishop in Wichita. In these reports he listed the number of Sunday and daily Masses he offered, the number of confessions he heard, the number of instructions in the faith he conducted, as well as the general attitude toward faith that he found among the Catholic and non-Catholic service personnel. Both Bishop Winkelmann, and later Bishop Carroll, sent written responses to every monthly report and letter written by Father Kapaun.

In March of 1945, Chaplain Kapaun was sent overseas to Burma and India, where he served troops at the tail end of World War II. During this period he met many missionary priests and sisters whom he considered to be true heroes due to the many spiritual and physical sacrifices they made to serve the people of a foreign land, especially with the deprivation and hardship caused by war. For his own part, Father Kapaun made many spiritual and physical sacrifices of his own to serve his men. In letters to his bishop he often reported traveling between 2,000 and 2,500 miles per month by Jeep to celebrate Mass for troops in forward areas. The Army recognized his faithful commitment to his duties and promoted him to the rank of Captain on

January 3, 1946. A few months later, on May 3, as the aftermath of the war continued to wind down, Father Kapaun left India, bound for San Francisco. There he was officially released from service and had some time off, although he spent two weeks of his vacation in July serving as a substitute at the parish in Strong City, Kansas so the pastor could take his own vacation.

Although he was not initially drawn to it, Father Kapaun was obedient to Bishop Winkelmann who requested that he make use of the G.I. Bill to attain his Master's Degree in Education. While waiting to find living accommodations in Washington, D.C. to attend the Catholic University of America, Father Kapaun served brief stints in Kansas as temporary administrator of St. John in Spearville, Kansas and as assistant pastor at St. Teresa in Hutchinson. In October 1946, Father Kapaun began his classes and quickly regained a knack for studying. He completed a dissertation entitled "A Study of the Accrediting of Religion in the High Schools of the United States," and was granted a Master's Degree in Education in early 1948.

During Father Kapaun's course of studies at the university, Bishop Winkelmann died and was replaced by Bishop Mark K. Carroll. Although he

was not able to return for the installation, Father Kapaun wrote a letter of congratulations to Bishop Carroll, which started a life-long correspondence between the two. At the end of his studies, Father Kapaun requested the bishop's permission to go back into active military duty as a chaplain. Instead, Bishop Carroll wanted Father Kapaun back in the diocese and assigned him to be pastor of the largely Bohemian parish in Timken. After six months as pastor in the central Kansas town, Father Kapaun again wrote to Bishop Carroll requesting permission to re-enlist in the Army. Father Kapaun told the bishop that he loved his pastoral work in Timken, but that his conscience told him that his priestly duty was with the men of the Armed Services. The bishop granted his request and Chaplain Kapaun reported to the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Corps at Fort Bliss, Texas in late 1948. The routine of sharing his monthly chaplain's reports with the bishop was renewed, as was the bishop's written response to each report.

From December 12 to December 16, 1949, Chaplain Kapaun had what was to be his final visit to Pilsen. He was shipped out to Yokohama, Japan in January of 1950 to join the post-World War II peacekeeping forces of the 1st Cavalry Division

stationed there. Father Kapaun performed regular religious duties for the troops and even joined them for military maneuvers. Surprising everyone, communist North Korea invaded democratic South Korea on June 25, 1950. Two weeks later, on July 11, Father Kapaun's unit, the 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, was part of the first American troops sent to assist the South. Before leaving he wrote a short letter to Bishop Carroll back home: "Tomorrow we are going into combat. I have everything in order, all Mass stipends, my will, etc. The way the Catholic soldiers are rallying around the priest is edifying."

During the next four months, Chaplain Kapaun tended to his chaplaincy duties with fierce devotion. All the while he experienced first-hand the horrors of the Korean War: hundreds of dead and wounded soldiers, men utterly exhausted and shell-shocked from battle, South Korean refugees fleeing their homes, extreme heat and mosquitoes in summer and wet, rainy days during the fall, frequent lack of sleep and food, and the constant nerve-racking noise and confusion of battle. He quickly earned a reputation for being a fearless soldier who risked his life to minister to the men fighting on the front lines. Along with praying with men in foxholes and

saying Mass on the battlefield (often times using the hood of his Jeep as the altar), Chaplain Kapaun would risk his life to administer the sacraments to the dying, to retrieve wounded soldiers and to bury the dead- ally and enemy alike. Numerous times he barely escaped with his life. On one occasion his smoking pipe was shot out of his mouth by a sniper's bullet. On another he lost all of his possessions, including his Mass kit and Jeep. After this, he always carried the Blessed Sacrament and the vessels for Mass on his body, along with his confession stole and holy oils.

Father Kapaun's heroics were noticed by the men around him. He received the Bronze Star Medal for bravery in action on August 2, 1950 near Kumchon, South Korea, where he rescued a wounded soldier despite intense enemy machinegun fire. The humble Chaplain was less than thrilled when he found out that news of this award was shared with the newspapers back home; to him, he was only doing what needed to be done. Father Kapaun was happy, however, that his work had an impact on the soldiers. His dedication and example kept up the morale of the GIs, and his calm demeanor - no matter how intense the fighting - gave them a sense of peace even in the midst of war. His con-

cern for his men also extended to their families, as he often took time to write personal letters to the next of kin of the servicemen who had died in battle to reassure them that the fallen soldier had died in the presence of a priest and with the consolation of the last rites. He also wrote many letters to his own family and friends back home, saving the most detailed letters and reports for Bishop Carroll.

Bishop Carroll received Chaplain Kapaun's last report and letter along with a package of Korean War mementos in October of 1950. There was little hint of what was to come: after weeks of making great progress, many of the U.S. soldiers thought the war would be over by Christmas. However, just as they had the North Korean Army on the run and almost defeated, the Chinese decided to enter the war. Father Kapaun and the men of the 8th Cavalry Regiment were the first to encounter the Chinese. On the night of November 1, 1950, while protecting the town of Unsan, Chaplain Kapaun's outfit was attacked from all sides by the combined Communist forces. A fierce battle ensued, and Father Kapaun went about anointing the dying and dragging the wounded to safety. Captured once, Father Kapaun escaped when his captors were shot by U.S. soldiers. Offered a last chance to retreat to

safety, Father Kapaun and an Army Medic, Doctor Clarence Anderson, decided to remain and look after the wounded. Deep in the day on November 2, the group was captured by the Communists. Seeing a wounded soldier about to be shot by a North Korean, Father Kapaun rushed over, pushed the gun aside, and picked up the wounded GI, Sergeant Herbert Miller. In disbelief at the chaplain's bravery, the North Korean let the two live. After a few days, Father Kapaun and the other prisoners of war were marched between 60-100 miles to a prison camp at Pyoktong. Many had difficulty walking because of frostbitten feet and battle wounds. Those who tarried were often left for dead or shot, but Father Kapaun went along the line encouraging the soldiers to help carry those who couldn't walk on their own, all the while doing his own part to carry the wounded. Because of his example, many soldiers lived who would have otherwise died.

Once at the prison site, the officers were separated from the enlisted men and were kept in huts located on a hill above the rest of the camp. During the next seven months this modest priest from Pilsen became the saintly hero of Prison Camp No. 5. Even though he himself was forced to undergo the same daily sufferings as the other prisoners - and often was treated far worse - Father Ka-

paun selflessly dedicated himself to serving both the spiritual and physical needs of the other men in the camp. Long before the normal day began, Father Kapaun was up at 5:30 a.m., even in the -20 °F temperatures of winter, gathering sticks for fires. These he would use to melt snow into clean water for the men to drink. Using a talent he had perfected on the farm, he fashioned vessels out of old iron sheeting so he could have containers to launder the clothing of the sick and wounded and have a place to store purified water. Father Kapaun would slip out of the camp to scrounge for corn, salt, millet, and soybeans for the starving POWs, praying to St. Dismas, the Good Thief, before every one of these missions. He would travel around to the huts of the other prisoners to give aid to the sick and wounded, pick lice off of men, wash the clothes of the weak, incontinent POWs, and even bathe those too ill to do so themselves. When men died, he often volunteered for the burial duty so he could say a few quick prayers over their grave.

During the mandated indoctrination sessions held twice a day, the Communist captors would try to convince the POWs of the “evils” of capitalism and religion. Even when the guards yelled at the prisoners, Father Kapaun calmly stood and refuted their claims. One officer, Lt. Walter Mayo, told a

story of the Communists taunting Father Kapaun. They argued that God must not exist since He was doing nothing to save them. The other POWs were buoyed by Father Kapaun's response: "God is as real as the air you breathe but cannot see; as the sounds you hear but cannot see; as the thoughts and ideas you have but cannot see or feel." At other times he made jokes to lighten the mood in the camp. Father Kapaun was determined to keep the men trusting that they would make it out alive.

Father Kapaun was also keenly aware of the prisoners' spiritual needs. Although public prayers were strictly forbidden, after dark, Father Kapaun would sneak around to the different huts in the camp to say prayers with the men. He led the prisoners in prayer for their daily material and spiritual needs and for their deliverance and liberation. He even led the men in prayers for their captors, that they be delivered from the evils of Communism. Although his favorite prayers were the prayers from the Mass, the Stations of the Cross and the Rosary, he would minister to everyone, adapting his prayers for men of other faiths. Above all he would lead the men in the Lord's Prayer and give them his priestly blessing. Men who were struggling would approach Father Kapaun for his counsel, and all

walked away feeling lightened of at least part of their burden and able to fight another day.

Father Kapaun was a shining light in the midst of the darkness of the Pyoktong prison camp. With his selfless acts and indomitable spirit, he gave the other prisoners hope despite the tortures they experienced. His Chinese captors considered him to be an agitator and a propagandist, but their attempts to scare, threaten and humiliate him failed. They were afraid to eliminate him or stop him for fear the other prisoners would start a rebellion. Although it was forbidden, Father Kapaun led an Easter Service for the men in 1951, reminding them of the sufferings that Christ endured for their sake and the new life brought about by His Resurrection. A few weeks after this service Father Kapaun fell ill, and the Chinese saw their chance to rid themselves of the troublesome priest. Father Kapaun, suffering from pneumonia and a blood clot in his leg, had been immobilized by the American doctors on the floor of his hut so that he could heal. The POWs who visited him knew he had to be suffering great pain, but Father Kapaun rarely let on that he was hurting. For a week or two Father Kapaun was in and out of consciousness, and the soldiers were afraid that he might die. In mid-May, just as he

was starting to recover, the Chinese caught on to his plight. They stormed into the hut and declared that Father Kapaun was to be moved to the camp “Hospital”, which all the prisoners knew was merely a place where the Communists let men die. The POWs put up a fight, but Father Kapaun stopped them. “Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I’m going where I always wanted to go, and when I get there, I’ll say a prayer for all of you.”

The soldiers, with tears in their eyes, demanded to carry their chaplain to the Death House themselves. On the way, they marveled at the fact that Kapaun made them stop so he could ask forgiveness of the guards if he had done anything to harm them, and then watched as he lifted his arm to give them his blessing. A few days later on May 23, 1951, alone in the Death House and only 35 years old, Father Kapaun breathed his last, his body utterly spent from his service to his men.

The story of Father Kapaun is the most mentioned memory of the surviving POWs of Prison Camp No. 5. They admired and loved him for the witness he gave by his kindness, humility, cheerfulness, piety and hard work. Even after his death, the mere memory of his words and sacrificial deeds was enough to keep the men going through their

awful torture. One POW, Major Gerry Fink, a captured Marine Pilot, was transferred to Father Kapaun's old camp because he was making trouble in another one. When he arrived, he immediately noticed that the atmosphere in the camp was different than his old one, where the men often fought in order to look out only for themselves. The men here, inspired by the memory of their chaplain, were determined to look after one another. Fink was so struck by the stories he heard of Father Kapaun that he offered his services in creating a tribute and lasting memory to Father Kapaun. Although a Jewish man himself, Fink, a gifted artist, carved a four-foot tall crucifix out of cherry wood and scrub oak he found in the camp. The crucifix, now on display at Kapaun Mt. Carmel High School in Wichita, Kansas, became a daily reminder for the prisoners of Father Kapaun's sacrifice, and on the day of their release, nearly two and a half years after Father Kapaun died, they carried the cross with them to freedom.

- FATHER KAPAUN TODAY -

It is due to the dedication and determination of Father Kapaun's fellow prisoners of war that we know of his story today. Already awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in battle, Chaplain Kapaun was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions during and after the Battle of Unsan. After years of clamoring that this medal be upgraded, the President of the United States posthumously awarded Chaplain Kapaun the Medal of Honor on April 11, 2013. This Medal is the highest award given to a member of the military, and Kapaun is just one of five Chaplains to have received the award.

The Catholic Church is also in the process of examining Father Kapaun's life to potentially declare him a saint. This process, called canonization, is performed very meticulously to ensure that the candidate who is held up as an example of authentic Christian living is in fact with God in heaven. The process is lengthy, with four steps. The Archdiocese of the Military opened the cause in 1993, when Father Kapaun was given the title "Servant of God", recognizing that he is a candidate for canonization - this is the first step. The Diocese of Wichita, Father Kapaun's home diocese, picked up the cause in 2008. After many years of research, the diocese collected over 8,000 pages of documenta-

tion on Father Kapaun's life. In November of 2015, Bishop Carl A. Kemme presented the summary of this documentation - itself over 1,000 pages - to the Congregation for Causes of Saints in Rome. As of 2016, the Congregation has begun to review the Positio Super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis (Statement on the Life, Virtue and Holy Reputation) of Father Kapaun. If approved by the Congregation and the Pope, Father Kapaun would be given the title "Venerable" in recognition that he lived a holy life. This is the second step towards canonization and requires the most research on our part.

In addition to a review of his life and teachings, the Church also seeks further proof that a candidate is in heaven with God. This comes in the form of miracles: scientifically inexplicable events - usually medical healings - that are attributed to the candidate's intercession before God in heaven. Just as God worked through the life of the saint on earth, so too He continues to work in marvelous ways through the saint's intercession in heaven. After strenuous medical and theological examination, the Congregation and Pope can affirm a miracle attributed to the candidate's intercession. After one miracle, the candidate can be given the title "Blessed", which is the third step on the way to

canonization, and is the first where public veneration - such as the liturgical prayers used in Mass or statues and images inside of churches - is allowed, especially in the Blessed's home diocese and country. A second miracle, which must take place after the candidate is beatified, is required to be officially declared a Saint, whereby the candidate becomes a sure example for the entire Church. The Diocese of Wichita is currently providing information on two alleged miracles to the Congregation for Saints to investigate once the Positio is approved.

- YOUR ROLE -

We hope that Father Kapaun's example is as inspiring to you as it is to many people around the world today. The Father Kapaun Guild exists to continue to spread his story and work towards his Canonization, but we need your help! First and foremost, it is our duty, as told to us by Cardinal Angelo Amato, the head of the Congregation for Saints, to continue to pray for Father Kapaun's canonization and to spread his story. We have only gotten to where we are today because of the many people who have shared his story with their family and friends, beginning with Father Kapaun's fellow prisoners of war back in 1953. If his story has inspired you, please share it with a friend. We are

also happy to send prayer cards and these booklets to help you spread the word. Simply contact us at FatherKapaun@CatholicDioceseofWichita.org. Finally, it is thanks to donations from people like you that we are able to inspire more people with Father Kapaun's story and work towards his canonization. If you are able and feel called, we appreciate any and all donations. You may mail them to the address on the back of this booklet or go to www.FatherKapaun.org and click on the donate tab. For more information or questions, please check out our website or send us an email. We are happy to help!

May God bless you and your loved ones, and may the whole world come to be as inspired by Father Kapaun's life of virtue and service as those who knew him as a priest on the prairies of Kansas and as a chaplain on the battlefields of Korea.

Servant of God, Father Emil Kapaun, pray for us!

- BIBLIOGRAPHY -

Maher, William L. A Shepherd in Combat Boots, Chaplain Emil Kapaun of the 1st Cavalry Division. Shippensburg, PA, 1997.

Tonne, Rev. Arthur. The Story of Chaplain Kapaun, Patriot Priest of the Korean Conflict. Emporia, KS, 1954.

PRAYER FOR THE CANONIZATION OF FATHER EMIL KAPAUN

Lord Jesus, in the midst of the folly of war,
your servant, Chaplain Emil Kapaun,
spent himself in total service to you
on the battlefields and in the prison camps of Korea,
until his death at the hands of his captors.

We now ask you, Lord Jesus, if it be your will,
to make known to all the world the holiness of
Chaplain Kapaun and the glory of his complete
sacrifice for you by signs of miracles and peace.

In your name, Lord, we ask, for you are the source
of peace, the strength of our service to others,
and our final hope. Amen.

Servant of God, Father Emil Kapaun, pray for us!

*For more information, to report favors granted due to Fa-
ther Kapaun's intercession or to offer financial support for
Father Kapaun's Cause for Sainthood please contact:*

Father Kapaun Guild
424 N. Broadway
Wichita, Kansas 67202
(316) 269-3900
www.FatherKapaun.org



CATHOLIC
DIOCESE
OF WICHITA