

**Just War Doctrine and the Dilemma of Military Chaplains: The Exemplum of Father
Vincent Capodanno during the War in Southeast Asia**

Brian C. Lockey

St. John's University

Father Vincent Capodanno was killed in a battle near the city of Thang Binh, Vietnam in September 1967, while serving as a military chaplain to a U.S. Marine battalion during the Vietnam War. His death occurred precisely at the time that controversies over the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia were emerging into American public consciousness. In his biography of the Maryknoll priest, Father Daniel Mode recounts an episode in which Father Capodanno faced the controversy directly during the only extended leave that he was able to take during his service. At a “welcome-home” party thrown for the returning priest during a visit to his sister Pauline’s house in New York City, Capodanno encountered a new attitude towards the U.S. commitment in Vietnam among his friends and colleagues:

The one party which the family had at Pauline’s house [for their brother] was not the usual relaxed evening. A few of the priests who came discussed the war and expressed their support of the Vietnam War protests which at that time were picking up momentum. The conversation clearly upset Father Vincent. He took his brother in the kitchen and told him that the priests did not know what was happening in Vietnam.

The anti-war climate he discovered in the United States and the growing lack of support for the brave men he knew in Vietnam brought on a profound melancholy in Father Vincent. His desire to be with his men and care for them increased in direct proportion to what he saw as their rejection by society.¹

Of course, the year after Father Capodanno died—1968—would usher in massive and sometimes violent protests against the Vietnam War, including the riots in Chicago during the Democratic Party Convention as well as the gunning-down of protestors at Kent State University in May 1970 by the U.S. National Guard. Such events occurred in the context of a general American dissatisfaction with the war in Vietnam that began in the middle of the decade and continued to grow until the American government finally withdrew in 1975.

Two years before Capodanno's visit back to the US in March 1967, the pacifist Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan had publicly protested the war, arguing that the U.S. presence in Vietnam had been unjust based on the traditional criteria of just-war theory. In an interview with the *National Catholic Reporter*, Berrigan explained "the immorality of our current effort in Vietnam," explaining that the war effort failed to meet the Thomist requirements of a just war on three counts: "(1) The United States has not explored every other means for a settlement; (2) United States forces have exceeded justifiable employment of force; they rely upon 'torture of prisoners, execution without trial, defoliation of crops' and have practically erased the 'crucial distinction between the nonviolent noncombatants and the guilty'; (3) We have not attended to the rights of self-determination of the entire Vietnamese people."² In 1965, when Berrigan gave this interview, the most controversial events of the American war effort had not yet come to pass. Indeed, the most controversial stage of the war was just beginning in that year, for it was then that U.S. Air Force began its intensive bombing campaign called Operation Rolling Thunder, during which the U.S. Air Force would be criticized for failing to distinguish between civilians and soldiers, and in the process, destroying North Vietnamese infrastructure and killing between 2 to 3 million Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians. Indeed, subsequent years would make the

Vietnam War perhaps the most divisive foreign conflict in which the United States was involved during the twentieth century.

No one familiar with the story of Father Capodanno's service as a U.S. Marine chaplain in 1966 and 1967 could doubt either his bravery or generosity towards the American soldiers within his pastoral care. Again and again, Father Capodanno placed the spiritual and material needs of his men over his own, whether this meant choosing to accompany them in battle or on the harrowing missions in the Vietnamese jungle or choosing to provide them with whatever luxuries were provided to him by virtue of his status as an officer in the Marine Corps. But to play the devil's advocate here, how should we judge Father Capodanno's service to a war effort that was characterized by contemporary Roman Catholic priests such as Father Berrigan as unjust? The question is especially complex given that the Roman Catholic church has never characterized itself as a national church in the way that various Protestant denominations such as the Church of England or the Lutheran Church have at times characterized themselves.

The set of specific moral dilemmas of military chaplaincy during wartime were not new by the time of the Vietnam War, and they are dilemmas faced by both Roman Catholic and Protestant chaplains: what does a military chaplain do when he witnesses atrocities and criminal acts such as massacres or torture or the deliberate targeting of civilians? What is the responsibility of a chaplain when he begins to question the morality of the larger cause for which the soldiers under his pastoral care are fighting? And if the cause is judged to be morally compromised, is his pastoral care, which many commanding officers endorse as a way of improving the morale of the soldiers, also morally compromised? Finally, what is a chaplain to do when a soldier under his pastoral care is inspired by a sincere interpretation of the Gospels to adopt a stance of non-violence and become a conscientious objector? From Father Daniel

Mode's biography of Capodanno, we can extrapolate some of the answers to these ethical questions. First, it is clear from many colleagues and friends that Father Capodanno felt a great deal of love and respect for all the peoples of Asia and the Vietnamese people in particular. He had of course begun his career as a missionary in the city of Miali in Taiwan, ministering to the Christian population of that municipality. His missionary commitment in Taiwan occurred in the direct aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the purpose of which was to eradicate longstanding cultural traditions which the Communist Chinese associated with imperial Chinese decadence and corrupting Western religious influences.

In general, Capodanno's perspective on the Vietnam War should be placed in the context of twentieth-century Roman Catholic views on the Russian revolution and other communist revolutions during the twentieth century, as Mode makes this clear in his biography. The prevailing Roman Catholic perspective was that American involvement was justified in Vietnam in order to liberate the Vietnamese people from Communist oppression. It is worth recalling as well that the Communist revolutions in Russia, China, and Cuba went hand-in-hand with the persecution of Christians and the execution of priests as well as the destruction of the physical Church. Indeed, the aim of the Bolsheviks in Russia was effectively to erase the Orthodox Church from the country, and between 1917 and 1941, it is estimated that the official ideology of "scientific atheism" implemented by the Soviet regime was ultimately responsible for the death of somewhere between twelve and twenty million Christians throughout the Soviet Union.

It is within this context that Father Capodanno, whose instincts and views on the Church seem to have been considerably more traditional and conservative than those of Daniel Berrigan, probably viewed the conflict in Vietnam. And it is worth noting that, while Berrigan was approaching the war in Vietnam from the perspective of traditional Thomist just-war doctrine,

his anti-war perspective was inspired by a progressive critique of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia and the Third World that was just emerging in the American public sphere during the 1960's. Further criticism of Capodanno's perspective on the Vietnam conflict might arise not from critiquing the cause of the war (*ius ad bellum*) but rather from the proportionality of the American war effort and the way in which the war was conducted by the U.S. military (*ius in bello*). Indeed, Berrigan addressed this question in his response to the *National Catholic Reporter* in the excerpt which I quoted from above. The reality however is that the indiscriminate nature of the sustained aerial bombing of Vietnam, known as Operation Rolling Thunder beginning in 1965, was not widely known by the American public until 1967, when questions about the campaign's effectiveness began to be raised by the U. S. Senate. Members of the U.S. armed forces had even less access to controversies associated with this bombing campaign, given that news in Vietnam was controlled by U.S. military censors. In this respect, it may be unfair to have expected Father Capodanno to have understood every facet of the conflict in which he was engaged.

It is also possible that the moral exemplum Father Capodanno provided to his marine unit led the soldiers under his spiritual care to treat enemy soldiers and civilian with greater respect. In Vietnam, other chaplains who worked alongside him attested to Father Capodanno's love of the Vietnamese people and mentioned in particular his work on development projects in local villages throughout the Chu Lai area of South Vietnam. In September 1967, the month in which Capodanno was killed, the My Lai massacre and other notorious massacres of civilians by American troops had not yet occurred, but there had already been numerous massacres of civilians perpetrated through the conflict in Vietnam by the South Korean armed forces, the North Vietnamese Army, and by the Vietcong, which suggests that by 1967 military discipline

had already broken down on all sides. The Berrigan quotation, with which I began this essay, suggests that violations of proper conduct in war was already a concern for critics of American involvement in Vietnam.

The exemplum that Capodanno probably provided for the men in his pastoral care can be seen in the narrative of one minor but significant interaction, which Capodanno had with an enlisted officer during the beginning of his service with the Marines. At one point, he was bunking up with other officers of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, including an operations officer named Lieutenant Jerry G. Pendas, who was annoyed at having been forced to bunk up with a military chaplain. To show his displeasure over the sleeping arrangements, Pendas tacked up nude pictures of women around the priest's bunk. Father Capodanno responded by ignoring the provocation and treating Pendas no differently than he treated any of the other officers. After a few days, Pendas became embarrassed about his actions and removed the photographs. In effect, the example of Capodanno's humility and temperance had the effect of triggering an expression of conscience in his fellow soldier.

A related perspective can be gained from considering the example of other military chaplains, whose moral authority was, in contrast to Capodanno's example, very obviously compromised by the truly malevolent nature of the war effort in which they were participating. The historian Doris L. Bergen has written about the experience of military chaplains within the German military during World War II. During the period, of course, the Nazi regime, which promoted a pagan ideology, was officially hostile to the presence of military chaplains, but tolerated them for the benefit of maintaining the morale of the German soldiers to which they were assigned. In a memoir about his service as a military chaplain with the German army, Hans Leonhard describes a visit to a military hospital during the war. On entering a ward packed with

men suffering from sexually transmitted diseases, he was jeered by patients who ridiculed priests for telling Old Testament tales of “pimps and cattle traders.” This was apparently a taunt that German military chaplains often faced by soldiers who had been conditioned by a military ideology that viewed the practice of organized religion and prayer as indicative of cowardliness and mental weakness. Leonhard’s response, that he would leave them in peace if any of them could recount any such story from the Old Testament, was initially also met with ridicule, but Leonhard later showed how effective his non-confrontational strategy was when he recounts that his exchange with the soldiers in the hospital ward apparently inspired the entire ward to show up at his worship service the next day.

Bergen’s historical work on German military chaplains shows that, within the hyper-masculinized culture of the German military during World War II, chaplains were often associated with effeminacy and weakness. They often compensated by attempting to present themselves as paragons of Christian manliness, stressing that Christian faith often had the effect of driving out fear but also distorting significant tenets of the religion which focus on humility and modesty. In this respect, there are important differences with the American military, with its tradition of fostering religious plurality and freedom of religious practice. Nazi ideology taught German soldiers to be suspicious of Christianity, which German authorities condemned as having Jewish roots. At the same time, German authorities recognized that it had a morale-boosting effect, especially on the front lines. As a result, they were careful to choose chaplains who were utterly loyal to the national cause, precisely so that they would not elicit “qualms of conscience on the part of men engaged in an unconventional war.” After the war, German veterans expressed bitterness that their chaplains had raised no words of protest against the

murder of civilians in areas of Eastern Europe under German occupation. But of course, German military chaplains had all along been carefully chosen to avoid such expressions of conscience.³

One of the aspects of Father Capodanno's service in Vietnam that is remarkable in the context of such modern histories of chaplaincy is how different military service was for chaplains in the United States armed forces. Within the context of his service in the Da Nang province, Capodanno seemed to have had a wide latitude to minister to his men in whatever way he felt served their spiritual needs. Throughout his time in Vietnam, it seems that Capodanno lived in such a way as to identify with the spiritual and physical travails of his men, but his men also sought him out again and again for spiritual direction and especially for the rite of reconciliation. Of course, one role that Capodanno fulfilled among the men under his care was that of strengthening their morale, but this role seems ultimately to have been secondary to the spiritual direction and moral exemplum that he provided for them by means of his own exemplary conduct.

Ultimately, the military ideology that suffused the U.S. Marine corps, in which Capodanno served, was formed within the forges of American perceptions of World War II, a conflict which lent itself to a more straightforward Manichean struggle between right and wrong. Men who served in the Vietnam War, especially before the watershed year of 1968, tended to see the conflict in Vietnam in similar Manichean terms. And it is true that this ideology probably caused everyone involved, including military chaplains, to ignore the emerging critiques advanced by a contemporary Thomist perspective or the anti-imperialist American left. Even if they had seen reason in one of these perspectives, however, it is probably the case that the moral exemplum that chaplains like Father Capodanno provided to American soldiers helped to insure that those soldiers did their best to recognize the humanity of enemy soldiers and civilians. In

other words, the presence of exemplary chaplains such as Father Capodanno ultimately had a salutary effect on the conduct of the American soldiers (*ius in bello*) during the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. In this respect, one could argue that even those concerned about the justice and morality of the American presence in Vietnam such as the Berrigan brothers owe a debt to more traditional priests such as Father Capodanno, who gave their lives for the pastoral care of American soldiers.

¹ Daniel Mode, *The Grunt Padre: The Service and Sacrifice of Father Vincent Robert Capodanno, Vietnam 1966 - 1967* (CMJ Marion Publishers, 2000), p. 108.

² Cited from James Finn, *Protest: Pacifism and Politics, Some Passionate Views of War and Nonviolence* (Vintage Books, 1968), pp 141-53, 142.

³ Doris L. Bergen, "German Military Chaplains in World War II and the Dilemmas of Legitimacy," *Church History* 70 (2): 232-47.