

"NO ONE HAS GREATER LOVE THAN THIS, TO LAY DOWN ONE'S LIFE FOR ONE'S FRIENDS." JOHN 15:13

SERVANT OF GOD - ARMY CHAPLAIN

## FROM FARM FIELD TO BATTLE FIELD

Emil Joseph Kapaun, was born on April 20, 1916 in Pilsen, Kansas, USA and grew up on his parents' farm. Emil enjoyed the physical farmwork, and his skills with repairing farm implements stood to him in later life. Throughout his childhood and highschool years a desire to serve others as a priest grew in his heart, and Emil eventually was ordained a Roman Catholic priest. Following a number of years of parish life, Fr Emil enlisted in the US Army and became an army chaplain in India and Burma during World War II. Having served in World War II, Fr Emil could have retired to quiet parish life again, but he chose to serve as Chaplain again during the Korean war.



Capt. Emil Kapaun (right), former chaplain with Headquarters Company, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, helps another soldier carry an exhausted Soldier off the battlefield early in the Korean War.

Sent to Korea in 1950, Fr Emil decided his place was with his men at the front where the fighting was. He would run from foxhole to foxhole, encouraging the men, praying with them, rescuing men from the thick of battle or administering Last Rites on the battlefield. When fighting died down, he would celebrate Mass in abandoned buildings, or the hood of his jeep. His "boys" loved this Kansas-farmer turned Catholic Chaplain because they knew he cared and was man of authenticity and service.

## KOREAN WAR

*Fr Emil Kapaun celebrating Mass on the hood of his Jeep.*



The war took a decisive turn when the Chinese military came to the aid of the Koreans sending 20,000 men as reinforcements. Fr Kapaun's unit was surrounded and the men fought hard to resist capture. He risked his life many times during this intense period of battle. When it became apparent there was no hope for them, Fr Kapaun had the option to escape, but he chose again to stay with his men as they were captured. The Chinese troops forced the American prisoners on a 60 mile death march to the prison camp. One wounded soldier, Herb Miller, was too injured to walk. Fr Kapaun carried him on his shoulders because he knew Miller would be shot if the captors saw the extent of his injuries.

## PRISONER OF WAR CAMP

Conditions in the prisoner of war Camp No. 5 were horrendous. Men had scabies, scurvy, beriberi and pneumonia. Thousands died that winter in the sub-zero temperatures. Bodies piled up outside huts, frozen stiff in death. Starvation set in as they were given small handfuls of birdseed and millet each day, no more than 300 calories. In desperate times, men were driven to desperate thoughts and acts to survive, but Kapaun did all he could to keep them calm and keep hope alive. He showed a new level of ingenuity, stealing food to give to the men, praying to Dismas, the Good Thief for his intercession before each secret raid into the country-side at night, sneaking past guards, scrounging for bits of wood, ears of corn, red peppers torn from frozen bushes, anything they could find. They stole from warehouses where guards stored food. Fr Kapaun boiled snow in pots he cleverly made from scraps of tin, announcing "Hot Coffee" to the fellow prisoners, joking to keep their spirits up. When they were no longer able to clean themselves or their clothing, he cared for them like a mother. He even picked the lice off them. When the Chinese officers rolled out their propaganda sessions to brain wash the Americans to accept communism, Kapaun calmly told them they were wrong or made fun of their efforts to keep up the American morale. He was depised by the guards for this, as well as for his Catholic beliefs.

*Dismas, the Good Thief*





"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING."

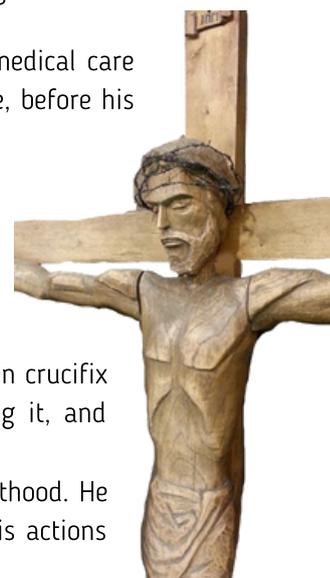
In Easter of 1951, Fr. Kapaun held a prayer service, even though it was forbidden. He encouraged the men to keep going, and to believe that Jesus could and would bring joy out of their suffering, just like he rose from the dead after he suffered on the cross. The prisoners said this was one of the most poignant and inspiring events of their lives. Malnourished, freezing and caring for those who were seriously ill, Kapaun himself eventually developed pneumonia. The men tried to keep this a secret from the guards, as they knew what would happen once they realised the truth. Kapaun would be taken to what the Chinese captors called "the Hospital," a mud shack where he would be left to die. When the guards came to take him, his men wanted to fight to keep him with them but Fr. Kapaun said that everything was okay, because he was going to heaven soon. One of them told the others, later, that he had heard the chaplain whispering: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing."

Fr. Kapaun died on May 23rd, 1951 in the prison "hospital" because he was not given any medical care and could not feed himself. He was only 35 years old. He was buried in a shallow grave there, before his remains along with other American POWs were returned to American soil after the war.

It was another two years before the war ended and the remaining POW survivors were able to return home, but Fr Kapaun's example inspired them to keep going through the difficulties. When they finally got home, many of them told stories of Fr. Kapaun's bravery, and how he saved their lives. They said that things would have been a lot different without Fr. Kapaun there to care for them.

At the end of the war, surviving prisoners of war emerged from the camp with a 4-foot wooden crucifix they made in Kapaun's honour. The group spent months secretly collecting firewood, carving it, and using radio wire for a crown of thorns.

The Roman Catholic Church has declared him a Servant of God and he is a candidate for sainthood. He was posthumously awarded the U.S. military's highest decoration, the Medal of Honour, for his actions in the Korean War. In fact, he is the most decorated military chaplain in US history.

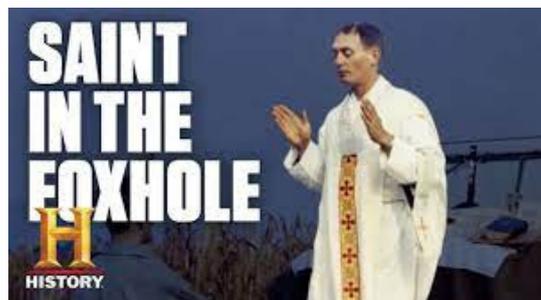


Crucifix carved in honour of Fr Emil Kapaun.

## TIME TO REFLECT:

- IF YOU COULD MEET FR KAPAUN, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO HIM?
- WHERE DO YOU THINK FR KAPAUN'S STRENGTH CAME FROM?
- WHY DID FR KAPAUN NOT TAKE THE OPTION TO ESCAPE HOME? DO YOU THINK HE WAS RIGHT TO STAY WITH THE POWS?
- WHAT INSPIRES YOU THE MOST ABOUT FR KAPAUN'S LIFE AND DEATH?

## FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES



- Research more heroic (and sometimes humorous!) details about Fr Kapaun's life and learn about his cause for canonisation on <https://catholicdioceseofwichita.org/father-kapaun/>
- Choose an episode from Fr Kapaun's life and dramatise it / mime in a small group.
- Research [Fr Vincent Capadanno](#) or the [Irish Jesuit Fr Willie Doyle](#) and compare and contrast their lives.