



Office of the
Archbishop

Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA

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Basic Expectations for the Pastoral Care of Catholic Personnel and Staff in Veteran Affairs Institutions

Introduction

Many Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Catholic priest-chaplains have asked for clarification regarding Archdiocesan policies on expectations of priest-chaplains and for the pastoral care of Catholic patients and staff in our VA institutions. These requests have increased following the publication of Basic Expectations for the Pastoral Care of Catholic Personnel, which was written for the Active Duty Military Services. The following is provided to assist VA priest-chaplains in fulfilling their obligation to serve the men and women of the Department of Veterans Affairs entrusted to their care. Hopefully it will provide clarification on the expectations of your endorsing agent about your ministry when shared with your supervisors.

Note. The term **Catholic** as used throughout this and other documents refers not only to the Roman Catholic Church, but also to all Eastern Catholic Churches in union with Rome.

1. Essential elements in the life of Catholic personnel that are necessary for pastoral care of the sick and DVA staff.

- 1.1 Catholic priests given endorsement and permission/faculties (faculties) by the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA (AMS) to serve Catholic personnel are to ensure implementation and support of these elements in the interest of Free Exercise of Religion.
 - a. Sunday/Holy Day/Daily Mass.
 - b. Daily availability of the sacraments of Holy Communion, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick.
 - c. Religious Education and Sacramental preparation, with emphasis on the pastoral care of the sick.
 - d. Spiritual Assessment drawing from the rich Catholic tradition of spiritual direction as well as the assessment of spiritual injury.
 - e. Pastoral support and pastoral counseling of Veteran patients, their families, and the staff who care for them.

2. Primary place of the Blessed Sacrament in the life of Catholics.

- 2.1. Catholics believe the Blessed Sacrament is the real presence of Jesus Christ in our midst. It is central to their spirituality.
- 2.2. The Blessed Sacrament Chapel, which is allowed by VA regulation (*VHA Handbook 1111.2; 21 a. (1)*), should be provided for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, in all VA hospitals where a priest-chaplain is assigned. Catholics have a right to access the Blessed Sacrament for their devotion and spiritual growth.
- 2.3. The Blessed Sacrament Chapel needs to follow the regulations of the AMS (*Priest's Manual 4.3.14.1-5*). These regulations may be briefly summarized as follows: The tabernacle should be secured firmly and locked. The key needs to be safeguarded by the priest-chaplain and cannot be entrusted to any non-Catholic person, even to a non-Catholic chaplain under any condition. No other faith group may share either the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, or the tabernacle. The Blessed Sacrament chapel must be open to the faithful at least some hours every day. A sanctuary lamp, which may be electric, needs to be lighted continuously before the Blessed Sacrament.

3. Sunday and Daily Mass.

- 3.1. Priest-chaplains, when they are on duty, without exception, are expected to celebrate daily Mass for the VA patients and staff.
- 3.2. Catholic patients and staff in the VA should have access to weekday and Sunday Mass at times and places convenient for them.
- 3.3. This sacred duty of the priest-chaplain must take precedence over all other responsibilities.
- 3.4. A priest-chaplain will celebrate Mass privately on days off, holidays, or times when a scheduled Mass is not feasible. Personal spiritual sustenance is sufficient justification for this expectation because of the special challenges of priests living the VA priest-chaplain lifestyle.

4. Sacrament of Reconciliation.

- 4.1. Catholics in the VA will have access to both scheduled celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and opportunities for reconciliation on the wards.
- 4.2. The scheduled times must be separated from Mass by a least 15 minutes.
- 4.3. Care should be taken not to introduce information about the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with any particular individual into progress notes, or event capture workload accountability.

5. Availability of the Priest for Spiritual Care

- 5.1. The Constitutional Free Exercise of religion includes assurance that Catholics in the VA have access to pastoral and spiritual care according to the traditions of their own faith. Within the VA an AMS-endorsed priest-chaplain is the primary agent to deliver this care. He alone can provide the full spectrum of sacramental ministry to which our veterans, their families and staff members are entitled.
- 5.2. Within the VA only an AMS-endorsed Catholic priest may be hired to fill a position as a Catholic chaplain. Only an AMS-endorsed Catholic priest may use the title of "Catholic chaplain."
- 5.3. Providing pastoral and spiritual care to Catholic men and women in the VA and their families is the principal responsibility of our priest-chaplains. They are also to facilitate care for non-Catholics when a non-Catholic chaplain is not readily available.
- 5.4. While ward assignment for initial visitation, assessment, and some pastoral support is appropriate, a follow up visit by a priest-chaplain to each Catholic patient is essential for further assessment, particularly in terms of Catholic issues and sacramental needs, and for sacramental ministry. Non-Catholic chaplains are not authorized to provide sacramental ministry to Catholic patients/staff.
- 5.5. If full time, part time or intermittent chaplains are not sufficient to provide proportional Catholic coverage, then contract or fee-basis Catholic chaplains should be used in accordance with VA regulations. These should be used to supplement, not to replace regularly hired priest-chaplains. To use them, rather than regularly hired priest-chaplains, is to decrease the quality of pastoral care offered to Catholic patients. Prior to assuming any duties, the AMS must endorse such contract or fee-basis priest-chaplains.
- 5.6. In support of his ministry to Catholic patients, particularly confession and counseling, appropriate work and office space conducive to confidential counseling or confession is required.

6. Others assisting in the Catholic Program.

- 6.1. Supervisors should recognize that at times priest-chaplains are in need of assistance in providing for even basic pastoral care. In such circumstances, deacons, qualified religious and laity should be contracted to assist the priest- chaplain. Their service must be consistent with the policy of the AMS. They are to assist, not replace Catholic priest-chaplains and they may not use the title "Catholic chaplain."
- 6.2. Such individuals cannot normally be used, if there is no Catholic priest-chaplain to provide ecclesiastical supervision.
- 6.3. Deacons must have faculties from the AMS and the contract or fee-basis use can only be for ministry allowed by those faculties.
- 6.4. Religious or laity, either contract or volunteer, must be commissioned as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion (EMHC), and their assistance is limited to the work for which they have been commissioned.
- 6.5. The priest-chaplain must request commission from the AMS for each EMHC. He is responsible and accountable for their training, installation, and ecclesiastical supervision. He is responsible to assure that they do not replace Catholic priest-chaplains but work within their commission to assist employed priest-chaplains. EMHC must receive annual training and must be re-commissioned every three years. (*Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, Policy for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion*)
- 6.6. Deacons, religious and laity cannot be used to replace endorsed hired priest-chaplains.
- 6.7. An AMS-endorsed priest-chaplain must have final authority over the Catholic program at any VA facility.
- 6.8. All deacons, religious, and Catholic laity who assist the priest-chaplain are to be supervised (ecclesiastically) by him.
- 6.9. Separate approvals have been granted for the hire of non-chaplain Catholic religious and lay CPE supervisors/education specialists. These are not to function as chaplains.

7. Resources

- 7.1. It is expected that within the regulations of *VHA Handbook 1111.2* and the *General Post Fund* regulations, local structures that give the priest-chaplain a voice in the expenditure of funds for the spiritual welfare of Catholic veteran patients/staff will be developed. Since the priest-chaplain is the final authority over the Catholic programs at any VA hospital, this is essential.

8. Ecumenical and Inter-religious opportunities for Understanding and Unity

- 8.1. The AMS values highly our historic collaboration with other faith groups. It is our continuing desire and the desire of our priest-chaplains to work with personnel and chaplains of all faith groups to provide complete spiritual care for our veteran patients, staff and their families.
- 8.2. In that spirit, priest-chaplains provide first and foremost for the needs of their own Catholic people in the VA, and then help facilitate the spiritual care of those belonging to other faith groups. All priest-chaplains must care for the spiritual and moral needs of all our veteran patients, staff and their families regardless of their religious preferences.

- 8.3. An Ecumenical and/or Inter-religious Service is one which prays for and fosters unity and understanding among all those sharing in the Service. A Catholic priest-chaplain who participates in a true Ecumenical/Interfaith Service should bring something of our Catholic tradition to the celebration (Catholic prayers, excerpts from Conciliar/Papal documents, early Church Fathers, etc.). These should be chosen in order to foster unity and understanding.
- 8.4. Given the unique centrality of Holy Week in Catholic tradition, Easter Sunrise services are not appropriate Ecumenical opportunities in which Catholics or Catholic priest-chaplains should participate. The feast of the Resurrection is considered the most sacred feast in the Catholic Church and Catholics are required to actively participate in the celebration of the Mass. Alternate services may be confusing to some about their obligations.

9. Responsibilities of Priest-Chaplains to maintain their Endorsements.

- 9.1. The Catholic bishops and religious superiors who provide priest-chaplains expect that the responsibilities of the priest-chaplain for sacramental, pastoral and spiritual welfare of our Catholic veterans/staff will be acknowledged, protected, and fostered by authorities within the VA
- 9.2. Priest-chaplains are expected to submit required reports to the AMS.
- 9.3. Priest-chaplains should maintain close relations with their own (arch) dioceses or religious orders.
- 9.4. Priest-chaplains should, upon assumption of duties, contact the local (arch) diocese and request faculties. These faculties are not required to minister within the VA.
- 9.5. The AMS expects all priest-chaplains to wear clerical garb including a Roman collar while on duty.
- 9.6. Priest-chaplains employed 1/2 time or more in any hire category (full-time part-time, intermittent, contract or fee basis) will attend either the annual Convocation of the Archdiocese for the Military Services or the National Conference for VA Catholic Chaplains (NCVACC). All others are encouraged to attend. It is hoped that the VA will assist priest-chaplains to attend these mandatory conferences, by granting authorized absence and to the extent possible financial assistance.
- 9.7. Membership in professional organizations such as the National Association of Catholic Chaplains and/or the NCVACC is encouraged.
- 9.8. Priest-chaplains are encouraged to seek and maintain Board Certification as Catholic Hospital Chaplains from the NCVACC and continuing education is expected proportionate to the level of employment, in various fields related to clinical Chaplaincy, e.g. CPE, CAC, Pastoral Counseling, Spiritual Direction, or Bio-ethics Consultation etc.
- 9.9 We are grateful for the good will, understanding, and ongoing cooperation of other endorsing bodies and the VA National Chaplain Center (NCC), as well as our daily partnership with other chaplain resources.

In the Lord

// signed //

+Edwin F. O'Brien
Archbishop
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