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## Keeping faith alive on the front line

Ministry hopes MP3 players with spiritual content strike chord with troops

By Eddie O'Neill - OSV Newsweekly, 11/7/2010

While the news of parishes having to consolidate or close due to lack of priestly vocations seems to be more common these days, nowhere is the priest shortage more acutely felt than in the military. According to recent statistics, there are only 281 Catholic chaplains for 300,000 active Catholic servicemen and women. When Lakeway, Texas, native Cheri Lomonte heard that news, she decided to take action.

"When I learned that a soldier could go seven to nine months without ever seeing a chaplain, let alone a Catholic priest, that stopped me dead in my tracks," Lomonte told Our Sunday Visitor. "That would be like you or I not being able to attend Mass or receive the Eucharist until next summer."

Her vision was to put together an MP3 player filled with hours of solid, interesting Catholic audio and get it into the hands of the troops. She called her efforts the [Frontline Faith Project](#) and launched it in 2009.

### Faith-filled mission

Lomonte is no stranger to Catholic media. Since 2007, she has served as a co-host for "[Mary's Touch](#)," a weekly, half-hour, nationally aired radio program that tells the story of the Blessed Mother at work in the lives of everyday people.

With input from members representing all four branches of the armed forces, Lomonte and her staff of volunteers were able to put together seven hours of audio on each MP3 player.

She said that once they began talking there was no shortage of great ideas. The MP3 player includes classic talks by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, a Mass, letters from children to the troops, as well as a Rosary, inspirational music and a number of powerful testimonies and heroic stories from military personnel and veterans.

"All I did was ask, and people would gladly volunteer their time to record this or that for us," Lomonte said. "It has been truly blessed from the start."

The project has received the endorsement and encouragement from Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, the head of the [Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA](#). On the Frontline Faith website he is quoted as saying, "These players will provide another avenue of spiritual support for the men and women of the armed forces who are often in isolated places where our Catholic priests cannot reach them."

### No soldiers left behind

Since May, Lomonte estimates that more than 6,000 players have been distributed. All of this has been provided free of charge to the soldiers who request them.

Lomonte said she and her crew are scrambling to keep up with the requests. "We can't get them to the troops fast enough," she said.

When Sgt. 1st Class Ricardo Gutierrez recently received his Frontline Faith MP3 player, he was delighted. Currently stationed at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, and serving in the 264th Medical Company, Gutierrez said that he planned to distribute the four players he received to his soldiers who will be deployed.

The 35-year-old Catholic said that he has been fortunate to have a priest nearby for much of his military career, including a year spent overseas in Egypt and 15 months in Iraq. His heart goes out to the Catholic chaplains who are always on the go.


"Because of the priest shortage, they put in more miles than any other soldier in Iraq, traveling

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from camp to camp," said Gutierrez. "In the Army, we say that the noncommissioned officers are the backbone of the Army, but I like to add that the chaplains are the heart and soul of the Army."

He said that a related problem facing today's Catholics in the military is the lack of knowledge. "We don't know enough to answer questions from Protestants and others on the Bible, and what we as Catholics believe," he said.

To that end, Gutierrez said that these players are a step in the right direction: "I believe the Frontline Faith Project helps keep soldiers' morale up and helps them to stay focused on their mission. It is a great project, and I pray that it will continue to grow."

Eddie O'Neill writes from Wisconsin. For more information, visit [www.frontlinefaith.org](http://www.frontlinefaith.org).

**For Safety of Soldiers**

Almighty and eternal God, those who take refuge in you will be glad and forever will shout for joy. Protect these soldiers as they discharge their duties. Protect them with the shield of your strength and keep them safe from all evil and harm. May the power of your love enable them to return home in safety, that with all who love them, they may ever praise you for your loving care. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer from: [www.usccb.org/liturgy/prayertroops.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/prayertroops.shtml)

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