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SPIRITUAL SUSTENANCE: New Organization Feeds Sacramentally Starved Troops

BY STEVE WEATHERBE, REGISTER CORRESPONDENT Monday, Sep 20, 2010 9:21 AM

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WASHINGTON — When radio-show host Cheri Lomonte heard that some American Catholic troops went months without the Eucharist, she was not only appalled — she was energized.

"I just couldn't believe, at this crucial time, they wouldn't have a priest," said Lomonte, who hosts "Mary's Touch," heard on more than 80 stations in the U.S. "There are over 300,000 Catholics serving in the U.S. armed forces and just 280 chaplains. Some of them, especially those serving in the field, have little to no access to a priest, the sacraments or even the understanding and support of fellow Catholics."

Putting her media smarts and contacts to work, the Lakeway, Texas, mother of six put together a package of Catholic programming for MP3 players that soldiers could carry with them. She launched an organization, Frontline Faith, to raise funds and produced the first run of 1,000 MP3 players to go into the hands of Catholics in hospitals and those awaiting deployment.

Supporting her is the Archdiocese for the Military Services, which serves Catholic servicemen and women, their families and Catholic chaplains. Its archbishop, Timothy Broglio, is heard on the MP3 twice, celebrating Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., and, later in the program, preaching at the same place.

Partnering with Frontline Faith in distribution is the Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality North American Volunteers, which assists Catholic pilgrims, including wounded or disabled military personnel, in traveling to Lourdes, France.

There is a strong Marian flavor to the enterprise: "Mary's Touch," the radio program, features interviews with people discussing the intercession of Mary in their lives. Frontline Faith continues the tradition with 11 stories of American combatants aided in their travails over the years by the Mother of God.

Theologian Marcellino D'Ambrosio, for example, recounts how his father ditched his B-24 in the English Channel after a mission over Berlin in the Second World War, staying afloat several minutes beyond expectations — long enough for his father to escape into an inflatable dinghy after his prayer to Mary.

The MP3 player also contains nine thank-you letters from students at the Cathedral School of St. Mary in Austin, Texas; a sermon preached by Bishop Fulton Sheen to soldiers of an earlier era urging them to be "centurions of Rome"; a sermon from Father Larry Richards on the meaning of the Mass; the Sorrowful Mysteries prayed aloud, and several hymns and meditations.

Lomonte reports that she has already received 3,000 requests for the MP3 players and is busy raising the funds to expand the project. Each player costs \$24. Distribution will be handled by chaplains.



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Faith and Stress

There is no question, says one expert on post-traumatic stress syndrome, that a strong faith will help deal with the stress of combat.

"The trauma of war bends people out of shape," said Dr. Frank Ochberg, a Fulbright Scholar and recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. "The adrenaline rush, the horrible images, the closest of friends destroyed in your presence. It helps you deal with these horrifying experiences if you have something to cling to: symbols, ideas, images."

Ochberg says that while religious faith is an asset for soldiers facing severe stress, he warns against preaching to the unconverted. "They don't want to be pushing a point of view at people at a particularly vulnerable time for them."

Chaplain Shortage

But as Christine Rodda, a spokeswoman for the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, says, "We have no problem with what Frontline Faith is doing, because they are only reaching out to Catholics." Rodda says it is generally known that there is a shortage of Catholic chaplains "and a lot of Catholics without access to priests and the sacraments."

Rodda's organization has never had a complaint about Catholic proselytizing, but has fielded "thousands" of calls from Catholics complaining about fundamentalist Protestant chaplains proselytizing them.

Rodda says Catholics should push for the Armed Forces Network to broadcast a Mass each Sunday; it shows four fundamentalist Protestant programs and no Catholic ones.

In the meantime, Frontline Faith's MP3 players can help fill a void.

Steve Weatherbe writes from Victoria, British Columbia.

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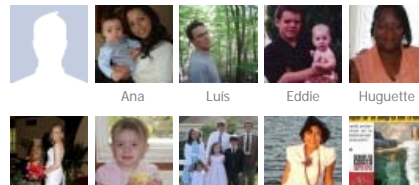
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