

Mindszenty Report

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Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation

The Grunt Padre

*The service and sacrifice of Fr. Vincent R. Capodanno
Vietnam, 1966-1967*

The new book *The Grunt Padre* is a thrilling story of heroism, sacrifice, love of God and neighbor which is recommended for all ages, especially students. It is the life-story of an American boy from Staten Island, NY who trained as a Maryknoll missionary. After ordination he was assigned to Taiwan, and then volunteered to serve as a Naval/Marine Corps chaplain in Vietnam. The book was thoroughly researched and prepared while the author, Fr. Daniel L. Mode, of the diocese of Arlington, Virginia, was studying history at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary and unexpectedly learned of the remarkable Fr. Vincent R. Capodanno. Here is what prominent leaders have said about the life of Fr. Capodanno, his service and sacrifice in his love of God and love of neighbor:

Congressman Chris Smith, (R-NJ) Vice-Chairman, House Veterans Affairs Committee: "This Maryknoll missionary-turned-Marine reflected a Christ-like dedication, a personal sanctity, and a humility tempered with humor that makes him the quintessential hero for our times."

Frederick Smith, CEO, Federal Express: "The legacy of Vincent Robert Capodanno lives on in the undying respect and tender compassion he freely gave to each and every soldier with whom he came in contact. His story is the story of the true humanity of the Vietnam soldier's experience."

John Cardinal O'Connor, the late Archbishop of New York: "I am delighted to find the story of Fr. Vincent R. Capodanno's service and sacrifice so admirably recounted in *The Grunt Padre* by Fr. Daniel L. Mode. I myself served as a priest and Naval/Marine Corps chaplain in Vietnam. Fr. Mode has written so eloquently of yet another priest and chaplain-Fr. Capodanno who died in battle for God and country. For over thirty years it has been my privilege to know the story of Fr. Capodanno's holiness and heroism. I am thankful that so many others will come to know that story through Fr. Mode's biography."

The Grunt Padre

Fr. Daniel L. Mode

CMJ Marian Publishers, Oak Lawn, Illinois

2000, 130pp., \$22.95 hardcover; \$13.95 paperback

One thinks of Military heroes as warriors who distinguish themselves in combat against their foe. History is fraught with these stories, and the traditions of our Corps immortalize these historical accounts in which Marines displaying tremendous bravery on foreign shores have exercised selfless devotion to duty and their fellow Marines. It is on the field of battle where each individual is put to the ultimate test, a test that comes in varying degrees evaluating each warrior's actions under fire, challenging each warrior's actions under fire, challenging each

warrior's leadership in the face of adversity, and ultimately measuring a warrior's resolve to accomplish the mission. The Grunt Padre is one such story. It is the story of a man who personified the noblest of warrior attributes: sacrifice, courage and devotion. However, this man was no ordinary warrior, he was not even a combatant. Instead, he was a U.S. Navy Chaplain, a Maryknoll priest, whose desire in life was to serve God and be with his Marines-Father Vincent R. Capodanno affectionately known to his Marines as "The Grunt Padre." (Grunt" is a term for a Marine foot soldier, especially in the Vietnam War.)

The author, Fr. Daniel L. Mode, himself a Navy Reserve Chaplain, provides the reader with an extraordinary understanding of Fr. Capodanno. Capturing his life from childhood to the seminary, out to the mission fields of Asia and ultimately to the fighting fields of Vietnam where he served as a Navy Chaplain for the 7th and 5th Marine Regiments from 1966-1967. The author vividly depicts Fr. Capodanno's life describing the substance of a determined man who sought a simple, disciplined, and noble existence in order to serve others and God.

Fr. Capodanno at age twenty described the very essence of a life dedicated in service: *"I'll be separated from my family and friends and all the things I'm now accustomed to, for indefinite lengths of time, during which all my efforts will be devoted to the people I'm serving. Their lives, both troubles and joys, will be my life."* The note eloquently articulates the true character of Fr. Capodanno's sacrificial service, and most certainly personifies the very spirit of his service to his Marines.

From the onset of his career as a Navy Chaplain, Fr. Capodanno sought to serve with the Marines and in 1966 that meant Vietnam. The author illustrates how Fr. Capodanno was one who did not avoid difficult tasks but rather gravitated to those situations where sacrifice and suffering were the greatest. His attitude of wanting to be where he was needed most was captured by the author in his description of Capodanno's impatience at not being assigned to a Marine unit sooner. On 30 April 1966 Fr. Capodanno's journey with the Marine Corps began-a service that would take him to the 7th and 5th Marine Regiments over a sixteen-month period.

It is during stressful periods in one's life that others are able to observe what truly comprises an individual. Fr. Capodanno was no different; his every action was to be scrutinized and evaluated by combat hardened Marines. The author depicts Fr. Capodanno's service with these marines as he writes: *"What set Father Vincent apart was the way he lived his ministry with the Marines. He was not a religious leader who did his job and then returned to the comfort of his own circle. He lived as a Grunt Marine. Wherever they went, he went. Whatever burdens they had to carry, he shared the load. No problem was too large or too small to take to Father Vincent-he was available to them day and night..."*

Heroes are born out of ferocious times, and Vietnam was no different. Fr. Capodanno's warrior ethic prevailed as he extended his tour in Vietnam. It was September 4th, 1967, and Fr. Capodanno was in his element serving his Marines, sharing their struggle for survival as they engaged the enemy when the radio call echoed through the combat operations center of the 5th Marine Regiment, "number twenty-one is KIA!" Twenty-one is the numerical code for a chaplain (KIA: killed in action). Combat steals lives, it does not distinguish whom it will touch, it simply takes. Fr. Capodanno gave his utmost. His actions on the field of battle that day would earn him the nation's highest honor-The Congressional Medal of Honor. Fr. Capodanno would become one of three Chaplains to receive this medal during the Vietnam War.

The Grunt Padre contains many firsthand accounts from those who received friendship, comfort and aid from the Grunt Padre. It is noted that Fr. Capodanno was *"the best known*

and sought after chaplain in the Marine Corps, and a living hero." This story draws the reader into the life of a man who served valiantly and faithfully during the heart of combat. For Marines, this story reveals the nature of heroism and it provides a different perspective on combat leadership. This man of God, whose heart was to serve those most in need, gave everything and now resides in the hallowed Pantheon of Heroes.

Reviewed by Major Vincent C. Kucala, USMC. Major Kucala, an intelligence officer, assigned to the Strategy and Planning Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, as a Information Operations Action Officer.

The following book review is prepared by Fr. Jordan Aumann, O.P., professor emeritus of the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome and reprinted from CRISIS magazine October 2000. Order the book from CRISIS at 800-841-2541

Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century

Robert Royal, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, 430 pages, \$39.95

In his encyclical *Tertio Millenol Adveniente*, preparing for the jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II stated: "At the end of the second millennium, the church has once again become the church of the martyrs... *This witness must not be forgotten* [emphasis added]."

The author of the present book tells us that a group of lay people in St. Aloysius Parish in New Canaan, Connecticut, took the pope's words to heart. They began composing files on the Catholic martyrs of the 20th century, and soon they had collected copious material from all over the world. Nothing further would have resulted from the project if Robert Royal had not undertaken the extensive work of researching and planning that resulted in the publication of this volume on the Catholic martyrs of the 20th century. We are prompted to join the author in expressing gratitude to the various persons and foundations who supported the work financially.

In an article published on August 13 in *Our Sunday Visitor* is a verification of Royal's statement to the effect that more Christians have died for Jesus in the past century than in all previous 19 Centuries. The article is a report on an address given by Glenn Penner, the development director for the Canadian branch of Voice of the Martyrs, founded in 1967 by Richard Wurmbbrand, a Lutheran minister. Penner reminded his audience in Vancouver that the organization is truly ecumenical; all Christians suffering persecution are treated equally because they are all suffering for Jesus Christ.

For example, in the past 15 years, more than a million Christian believers, mostly Catholic and Anglican, have died at the hands of the Muslim government of Sudan. In China, Catholics are targeted in particular. Similarly in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, all has been more violence against Christians by Hindus in the past the peace-loving Buddhists are attacking Christians. All of this should refocus our attention to stop thinking of martyrs as those who suffered and died centuries ago but to take a stand for Christ in our contemporary world. That is the value of Royal's book.

This leads us to the question: what is a martyr? At one time, the answer was simple: A martyr

is a person who dies for his faith in Christ. In this century, however, the concept of martyrdom has been extended to embrace various forms of Christian witness. For example, in canonizing the Franciscan friar Maximilian Maria Kilbe, Pope John Paul II decreed in October 1982 that he who had been venerated as a confessor after his beatification, should henceforth be venerated also as a martyr, even though he died as a "martyr for charity" rather than strictly at the hands of non-Christians acting in *odium fidei* (in hatred against the faith), as the martyrs of the first centuries. But there was a precedent for this, because St. Maria Goretti, who died in resisting rape in 1902, was hailed as a "martyr for charity" by Pope Pius XII.

Since the days of persecution of Catholics in Russia, Nazi Germany, and Vietnam as well as the more recent murder of Catholic Clergy and laity in Latin America, theologians such as Jon Sobrino of San Salvador have been calling for the recognition of a new type of holiness, namely "political holiness." This, however, does not settle the question concerning the death of Juan Jesus Cardinal Posadas, who was shot to death on May 23, 1993, at the airport in Guadalajara, Mexico. After several years of investigation, Church and government officials have concluded that the cardinal was killed as a result of mistaken identity. Until further proof is forthcoming, it is not possible to say that he died for the faith and is, therefore, a martyr.

This book deals with *Catholic* martyrs of the *20th century*. Consequently, although Pope John Paul II has paid tribute to numerous Protestants who suffered and died for their faith (e.g., at Kosice, Slovakia, July 2, 1995), Royal has restricted himself to Catholics who are acknowledged as martyrs for their Catholic belief and practice.

However, Royal does not neglect to mention numerous non-Catholic but Christian martyrs who suffered and died for their faith. Those of us who lived through World War II are fully aware of the heroism of Christian pastors and laity in the various concentration camps in Nazi Germany, but now, at the start of the third millennium, the spotlight has shifted to Uganda and the Sudan in Africa as well as the Islamic extremists in Indonesia and Algeria. No, the persecution of Christians has not ended it has merely moved to other parts of the world. The words of Cardinal Arinze sent to Muslims in the name of the Holy Father in 1996, are well worth remembering:

Our relations as believers, Christians and Muslims, should go beyond mere tolerance, understood simply as putting up with one another. A brother is not just tolerated; he is to be loved. For us as Christians and Muslims to reach beyond tolerance to reconciliation and love there is still a long way to go. As we prepare for the future, we cannot afford to forget the past or neglect the future.

How do we see our future: As one of confrontation or a mere coexistence? Or marked by mutual understanding and respect and fruitful collaboration? Is this not what God wants of us? Is this not what God wants of us? [February 15, 1996]

Royal's book deserves the widest possible distribution. It acquaints the reader not only with those who made the ultimate sacrifice but with the obligation of all people to abide by the moral law—whether from revelation or reason.

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