Vets, Faith Teach us the Importance of Sacrifice for the Greater Good

Over the years I've been privileged to know a number of veterans, and I'm so thankful for all they have done to preserve the freedoms we enjoy as Americans and in defense of liberty. And one of the things that has struck me with so many of them is the quiet way they serve, many of them being people of deep faith as well.

Not too long ago, Lawrence McCaule, a veteran from Lawrence, Pennsylvania, was in the news receiving recognition at a Notre Dame football game, and given the Legion of Honor from France for his service on D-Day (75 years after the fact!). (The following is taken from an article that ran in "The Catholic Times," a diocesan newspaper out of Columbus Ohio.

In interviews, he speaks of how his faith guided him so deeply.

Growing up, his father, John, ran a hardware store. He recalls his dad closing his hardware store early every other Saturday and walking to the church to go to confession. He also remembers his dad going on weekend spiritual retreats, and that left a lasting impact on him, the fifth of seven children.

At the height of the Great Depression, which came in 1929, and his father faced the threat of having to close the hardware store, McCauley said some faithful local farmers came to the rescue to keep the business going.

At the church and school, the priests and sisters provided a solid foundation of faith. Twice a week, McCauley said, the schoolchildren attended Mass. He not only was an altar boy but also was tasked with manually ringing the church bells.

As he grew older, he remembers being asked to drive Msgr. David Quailey, the parish pastor from 1923 to 1948, and the priest sitting in the back seat of the car with a spittoon tied around his neck.

"He was a peach," McCauley said.

Because times were tough then, many of the young boys of that generation also worked at jobs in addition to attending school. McCauley was employed in the print shop of the Lancaster Eagle-Gazette, which was dirty and demanding work, and he also made deliveries to nearby towns.

McCauley graduated from St. Mary in the Class of 1941. A few months later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He tried to enlist in the Marines but was passed over because he wore glasses. A few months later, like many young men of that generation, he was drafted into the Army.

As a member of the 65th Armored Field Artillery Battalion in the Third Army, McCauley learned to drive trucks, halftracks and landing craft while training in England.

On June 6, 1944, McCauley was riding in one of those landing craft when the door swung open at Normandy's Omaha Beach during the D-Day invasion. He and his cohorts were immediately greeted with bullets flying everywhere. A buddy next to him was struck in the head, but there was no saving him. McCauley and the other soldiers had to quickly press forward.

After he and his compatriots fought their way from the beach up the bluffs while crawling on their stomachs, McCauley said it was an incredible relief to reach the top.
From there, as the U.S. forces moved across Europe against the German army, he fought in the Battle of Hurtgen Forest later that year and the Battle of the Bulge. It was a blessing when a Catholic chaplain could celebrate Mass on the hood of a Jeep and hear confessions.

In November 1944, McCauley penned a letter to his family that read in part:

"On Christmas Day, if I am fortunate to attend Mass, I shall remember you all by offering my Mass for your intentions. Maybe we all will be together again real soon and the world as peaceful and quiet as the stable in Bethlehem."

As the Allied Forces approached victory in Europe, McCauley was involved in stopping a train filled with Jewish women and children headed to an extermination camp. The U.S. troops sent them toward the American lines to safety.

On April 11, 1945, McCauley's unit was among the first to reach the Buchenwald concentration camp, where the troops freed 21,000 prisoners and spared them from the crematory ovens that he said were still warm and emitted an inescapable odor.
A few years ago, McCauley met two survivors of the Holocaust at a 75th D-Day anniversary commemoration at the National WWII Museum in New Orleans. One of the survivors had been on a train liberated by American soldiers, and the other was rescued from Buchenwald.

For his service in World War II, McCauley received four campaign ribbons, four Bronze Stars and four Silver Stars. In January 2020, he was awarded the French Legion of Honour, the country's highest honor to a foreigner.

After the war, McCauley returned home to Lancaster. When he walked through the door at his parents 'home on Mulberry Street, his father called out, "Is that you, son?" and gave him a bear hug – an answer to prayer for a safe return.

We are so fortunate to live in a country founded upon freedom. But it's so easy to take what we are given for granted. We must never forget that evil is a real presence in the world, and since our country's inception, people have wanted to see our country perish. Others have worked hard to crush freedom, which is why people in the world are still persecuted for their faith. But right now at this very moment are men and women who, by their own choice, decided to go off to far away lands to serve our country to preserve

freedom. These people, don't seek glory for themselves. Rather, they simply serve and do their job because they have a love for our nation and for what America stands for.

There are so many things we can do to honor our vets; from getting to know them and their stories, to instilling in kids an appreciation for all veterans have done in the past and in the present; and perhaps most importantly living out our freedoms of speech and religion. His story, and that of so many vets, is one of sacrifice. The question for us is are we willing to do this too, to sacrifice for the greater good and the truth by not being afraid to speak to what we believe, to sacrifice for our Church and our country and for one another; to being people who live out hope, by which we make this world a better place than it was when we came into it?

Veterans indeed do so much for us quietly, but also show us so much - may we never forget all they do, supporting them, thanking them, and living out our freedoms that they protect and defend.

I'd like to leave you with a special Veterans Prayer from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops:

A Prayer for Veterans Day

Lord God, Almighty Father,
creator of mankind and author of peace,
as we are ever mindful of the cost paid for the liberty we possess,
we ask you to bless the members of our armed forces.
Give them courage, hope, and strength.
May they ever experience your firm support, gentle love, and compassionate healing.
Be their power and protector, leading them from darkness to light.
To you be all glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul