

Father Kapaun - A Willing Captive

November 2025

In my September article I promised to build out Father Kapaun's work in the prisoner of war camp in Korea. It was during this time that he had his greatest impact on the soldiers he served as a chaplain.

When the Chinese entered the Korean War, they sent wave upon wave of soldiers against limited American forces overwhelming them. As the Chinese closed in on Father Kapaun's men, he made the choice to remain with the wounded soldiers even though their capture was certain. He didn't have to stay; he could have been evacuated safely but consistent with his character he insisted on serving where the danger to his men was the most intense. On November 2, 1950, he was captured.

Father Kapaun and the other POWs, numbering several thousand were forced to endure weeks of forced marches in the brutal Korean winter. They marched 60 miles to Pyoktong, another 12 miles to Sombokal and then back again to Pyoktong and Camp 5 along the Yalu River. Despite their wounds, injury, or illness, POWs were expected to keep up the demanding pace set by their captors. Failure to do so resulted in POWs being shot or left along the roadside to die.

It was during these marches that Father Kapaun organized the POWs to carry or assist their fellow POWs. These efforts were very much discouraged by the enemy officers, but Father Kapaun insisted and convinced his captors to allow it. He aided many prisoners and personally carried or otherwise assisted Sergeant Herb Miller for at least 30 miles.

Once at the POW camp conditions were brutal. The winter of 1950 was reported to be the coldest in 50 years. The huts they were housed in were so crowded that one man's leg rested upon another as they slept. There was no medicine for the sick or wounded and very little food. Father Kapaun would give his food rations to others who he insisted needed it more than he did. He would either steal or barter with his captors for additional food that he would give to those prisoners more in need than he. Before he went on these extra food runs, he would pray for the help of St. Dismas, the Good Thief. Before long he had the entire camp praying to St. Dismas.

In the camp, officers and enlisted men were kept in separate huts to keep officers from organizing resistance or enhancing morale. However, Father Kapaun would sneak

into the enlisted men's huts every evening to keep their spirits up, offering encouragement, spiritual comfort and to distribute the extra food he was able to scrounge. These efforts were so successful that the survival rate in his prisoner of war camp was twice that of other prisoner of war camps in Korea.

Father Kapaun was known to the POWs often even before they met him. They had heard about this fabulous priest called Kapaun from other prisoners. **Mike Dowe**, who became one of Father's most ardent supporters after they were released from captivity remembers Father for his humor even in the worst of times. Mike Dowe just recently passed away. Father Kapaun had a phrase he used all the time when encouraging the men. He used these Latin words, "***Ni illegitimi carborundum esse***". It roughly translates into English as, "**Don't let the bastards get you down**".

Chaplain Kenneth C. Hyslop, a Northern Baptist minister, grew weak during his march to the camp when he fell behind, as a result he was beaten severely by his captors and was near death. Father Kapaun heard about his plight and found him in the dark. He comforted Chaplain Hyslop throughout the night, praying with him as his colleague

slipped into a coma and died. Father Kapaun made sure he received a decent burial. Father consistently got on the burial detail to ensure that all men who died were given a dignified burial.

Captain Robert Burke tells the story about how Father Kapaun always left you with a good impression. Captain Burke would say that, with a big, broad grin he extended his hand and said, “My name is Kapaun, glad to have you share our paradise.” He further stated that, “His calm, easy manner and winning smile soon relaxed us, and his words of encouragement gave us new hope, and the clouds of dismay and disappointment would disappear, and our heavy hearts became lighter, our aching feet, numb fingers and tired bodies didn’t seem to hurt so much now.”

Finally, in the interest of brevity I would like to share just one more story, the story told by Dr. Sidney Esensten. Dr. Esensten was a surgeon of the 2nd Battalion. He and Dr. Clarence Anderson were allowed daily to treat the prisoners in Kapun’s Valley. Kapaun’s Valley was the name the prisoners gave the piece of land approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile wide and 3 miles long where the camp sat. Every day after their rounds they looked up Father Kapaun because he

wanted to know how the enlisted men were doing. Father had limited access to the enlisted men because he was housed with the officers, and it was difficult for him to interact with them. Father, however, did heroic work with the officer corp. He would always chop ice frozen in the streams that provided their only water. He would always clean up after men who were sick with dysentery and soiled themselves. He would wash their clothes in those same frozen streams ensuring they had clean clothes. He volunteered to clean out the latrine and made runs to pick up the limited supplies they were allowed. These tasks were welcomed but according to Dr. Esensten, his greatest contribution was how he built up their morale. He would greet everyone offering prayers and quick services.

These are just a few of the testimonies from the men Father Kapaun served as a Chaplain. It doesn't even mention the crucifix built out of scrapes by Major Gerry Fink, a Marine corps fighter pilot after Father Kapaun's death. For more detailed information about this story and many others from the men Father Kapaun served with I encourage you to read the following books about Father Kapaun; "No Bullet Got Me Yet", by John Stansifer and "The Story of Chaplain Kapaun", by Father Arthur Tonne".

This is the man we are honoring with our memorial to Chaplain Kapaun at the State Capitol. Donations to the fund are steadily coming in as we approach the \$100,000 mark, but we still have a way to go. I encourage every Knight in the state of Kansas to stand with Father Kapaun. Please, consider contributing generously to the Father Kapaun Memorial Fund and to spread the word about this remarkable man and priest.

Remember if you wish to host a fundraising event for the Father Kapaun memorial or to help raise awareness of his cause for sainthood contact Michael J. Grothoff at mgrothoff2@gmail.com or 913-481-5973. I want to recognize and thank Coronado Assembly #0285 in Great Bend who raised over \$4,200 and Council #862 in Great Bend who contributed \$1,000 for the Kapaun Memorial Fund. They did this with proceeds from a chicken dinner lunch. Also, at this luncheon they educated those in attendance about Father Kapaun and his cause for sainthood. They are a model for how assemblies and councils can raise funds for Father's cause. I encourage all knights to consider helping raise funds for a memorial to Father Kapaun at our state capitol in Topeka and advance his cause for sainthood.

Contribute today at:

2025 Chaplain Kapaun Memorial Committee
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