

Serving the Liturgy Where the Military Serves

On its website—www.milarch.org—the Archdiocese for the Military Services, U.S.A., describes the role of a military chaplain in words that could also describe pastoral musicians serving military communities: “Imagine your job is to provide spiritual and emotional support and guidance to a parish of thousands of mostly young men and women. Imagine most of the people in your parish move away every three years and that new people move in. Imagine that you too, must move and start learning the ropes of a new place.” Like chaplains, pastoral musicians “go wherever their people are—in a tent in the desert, on the deck of an aircraft carrier, under the sea in a submarine, in the barracks on base, on a fire-fighting line, in the VA hospital, in the halls of the Pentagon.”

Pastoral liturgies occur where the people are, and people in the military services gather wherever they can to sing praise and petition and to affirm faith as the bedrock of their lives. Many times, military parishes and communities cannot hire local, trained pastoral musicians but must rely on the talent found among their own people. Sometimes that means there is no strong leadership for sung worship, but it may also mean that such leadership emerges from surprising sources—from a priest who sings a cappella and hopes that his voice is strong enough to lead the community, to a Muslim chaplain assistant with musical training, to someone briefly at a training base using a borrowed guitar to help out where she can, to someone working in



Singing Easter at Destiny Chapel, Base Speicher, Iraq. *DVIDS*.

the camp kitchen who is willing to recruit choir members, to someone willing to offer such service because, simply, there is no one else.

In the austere setting of war zones, separated during deployments from family and friends, often the only thing that feels familiar to Catholics in the military is the Eucharistic Liturgy and the other rites of the Church. And sometimes, those rites draw other members of the community who don't share the Catholic faith to join in praise and prayer, using a repertoire that may serve as a bridge between traditions, faiths, and communities. Even for those “strangers,” the prayer of the gathered community, singing hymns, often unaccompanied and without hymnals, nurtures the spirit acting in the liturgy, providing peace, strength, and consolation despite an unfamiliar worship environment.

Like any other community gathered for worship, communities of Christians in the military need and rely on the gifts of pastoral musicians, whether those musicians are robustly abundant or precariously

limited to a few volunteers. It is true that a leader of liturgical song is a leader of prayer, and pastoral musicians serving military communities know that no matter where we are and no matter the conditions in which we gather for Mass, the Lord is present in our gathering, in our listening to his Word, and in our sharing of Eucharistic Communion. Even if the regular keyboard player is out on a mission and the only person available to lead sung prayer has a “day job” cleaning pots in the kitchen.