



Father Emil Kapaun Mural and Biographical Information

Father Emil Kapaun is the subject of a 12-foot by 4 ½-foot painting by artist Wendy Lewis that was unveiled in St. John's Chapel at Newman University Aug. 5, 2009. Fr. Kapaun was a Catholic priest who served as an Army chaplain during World War II and the Korean War, and died in 1951 as a prisoner in North Korea. The painting hangs directly opposite a mural of St. Maria De Mattias, the founder of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ (Newman's founding and sponsoring religious order), that was also painted by Lewis and installed in the chapel in 2005.

Fr. Kapaun was a native of Pilsen, Kan., and has many connections to Newman University and Wichita. He was ordained in Newman's St. John's Chapel on June 9, 1940, and was the inspiration for Father Ned Blick, a 1986 Newman graduate, to enter the priesthood. Fr. Blick has served as an Army chaplain in Iraq for the past two years. In addition, Kapaun Mt. Carmel High School in Wichita is named for Fr. Kapaun.

Fr. Kapaun is a candidate for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church. He is currently classified as a Servant of God.

The Painting

Lewis said the painting is intended to reflect grace, mercy and love, qualities that characterize Fr. Kapaun and his work. The painting depicts him kneeling as he blesses a soldier on the ground with one hand, while reaching out to Christ with the other. The painting also includes seraph angels – one holding Fr. Kapaun's soul in a bubble and another holding a replica of the cross that hangs in St. John's Chapel – and a pelican, which symbolizes sacrificing oneself for others.

Lewis said she used family and friends as models for the figures in the painting, including her son, Skylar, and Mike Navrat, who grew up with Fr. Kapaun in Pilsen. To help her portray Fr. Kapaun's character, Lewis read several books about him and met with the late priest's brother Eugene Kapaun, his wife Helen, and nephew Michael, a soldier in Iraq.

Fr. Kapaun Biography

Fr. Kapaun was born April 20, 1916 in Pilsen. He graduated from Conception Abbey seminary college in Conception, Mo., in June 1936. He then attended Kendrick Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Mo. After serving in the Pilsen area under the Catholic Diocese of Wichita, Fr. Kapaun joined the Army in July 1944, and was assigned to Camp Wheeler, Ga., where he and one other chaplain ministered to approximately 19,000 service men and women. He later went to India and served in Burma, and was made captain in 1946. He

returned to the United States later that year and was discharged, then went to The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where in 1948 he earned a master's degree in education. In September of that year, he re-enlisted in the Army. After serving as chaplain at Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas, Fr. Kapaun was stationed near Mt. Fuji, Japan, and in July 1950 went to South Korea as part of a large invasion.

During that time he administered to the dead and dying, performed baptisms, heard First Confessions, offered Holy Communion and celebrated Mass from an improvised altar on the hood of an Army Jeep. He was awarded the Bronze Star in September 1950. In October and November of that year, Fr. Kapaun and his unit were surrounded and overrun by the Chinese army in North Korea. Fr. Kapaun allowed his own capture by staying behind with the wounded when the Army retreated, then risked death by preventing Chinese executions of wounded Americans.

According to many reports by survivors of the POW camp, Fr. Kapaun was a man of great humility, bravery, love and kindness. He worked to keep morale high among the troops and was a source of great spiritual comfort and inspiration. He ministered to the sick and wounded despite the fact that his own feet were badly frozen, and found or stole food wherever he could to keep his fellow prisoners from starving to death. His own condition worsened, however, and he developed a blood clot in his leg. Refused treatment by his captors, Fr. Kapaun died on May 23, 1951, and was buried in a mass grave near the Yalu River. He was posthumously awarded a citation for the Distinguished Service Cross.

Canonization

On June 29, 2008, the opening ceremony of the official Cause for Sainthood of Fr. Emil Kapaun was held at St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church in Pilsen. On June 26, 2009, Dr. Andrea Ambrosi, the Roman postulator for Fr. Kapaun's cause for canonization, came to Wichita to interview doctors regarding alleged miraculous events attributed to Fr. Kapaun. Among these was the claim of 20-year-old Chase Kear, who survived a severe head injury last year because, as he and his family claim, they successfully petitioned Fr. Kapaun to intercede for him. Kear was a member of the Hutchinson Community College track team who fell on his head during pole vaulting practice in October 2008, and was not expected to live or, if he did, resume normal brain and physical function.

The Rev. John Hotze, the judicial vicar for the Diocese of Wichita who is trained in Canon Law, will assist in investigating Kear's case. Fr. Hotze has spent eight years investigating the proposed sainthood of Fr. Kapaun. For the past 16 years, both the Wichita Diocese and the Archdiocese of the Military Services have received reports of miracles involving Fr. Kapaun and have been collecting information on his life. He is being considered for possible designation as a martyr.