

# Father Kapaun's Remains to Return to Wichita

## Veteran hero makes headlines, draws crowds, continues on path to Sainthood

by Elaine Robinson, editor

As hundreds of Kapaun Mt. Carmel students dress up in formal attire, don boutonnieres and corsages, and prepare for a special night at the annual Homecoming dance Sept. 25, 2021, our namesake, Fr. Emil Kapaun will be having a special homecoming night of his own. His newly identified remains will be coming home to Wichita, a once-in-a-lifetime event that may have just had some divine intervention to coincide with the KMC community's Homecoming festivities.

On March 4, 2021, the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), an agency of the Department of Defense, notified Ray Kapaun, Fr. Kapaun's nephew, that the hero's remains had been positively identified among other Korean War soldiers buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii. President Rob Knapp '82 said finding out about Fr. Kapaun's remains being identified was "unbelievable."

"I went from elation to sobbing to elation all in a span of 30 seconds," Knapp said. "Even though he died 70 years ago [and] I never knew the man, but to think that we have his remains and that we'll have a funeral for him makes his death so present and personal. It will make me and others mourn for the loss of such a great man."

Approximately 95 percent of Fr. Kapaun's remains have been identified by the DPAA.

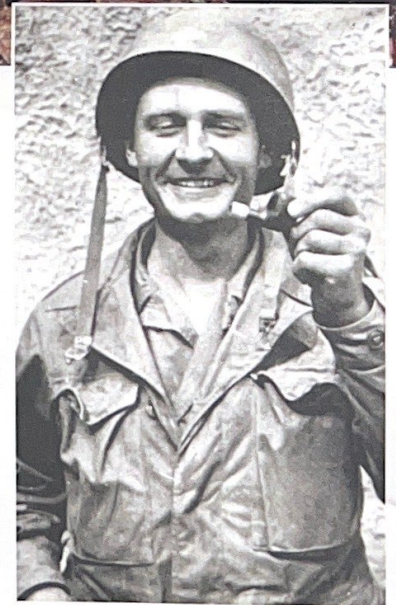
"That is quite remarkable because a lot of the other remains they've been working on recently were just fragments from the battlefield," said Scott Carter, coordinator of the Father Kapaun Guild for the Diocese of Wichita, in an interview with the Wichita Eagle.

After Fr. Kapaun's death on May 23, 1951, Bishop Mark K. Carroll celebrated a memorial Mass for the fallen priest on July 29, 1953, in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, but a true funeral or burial was not possible since his remains were unaccounted for.

"When I heard that his remains were coming, I was super excited," Carter said in the same Wichita Eagle article. "At the same time, [I] thought about Fr. Kapaun's last words to his fellow prisoners: 'Hey guys, don't worry about me. I'm going to where I always wanted to go. And, when I get there, I'll say a prayer for you. And, tell my bishop I died a happy death.'"

Fr. Kapaun's remains were among 848 unidentified soldiers returned to the United States as part of Operation Glory, an exchange of those who died at war, in 1954, a year after the Korean War ended.

In 2019, many of the soldiers' remains were disinterred from the Hawaiian cemetery as part of a plan to exhume and identify all remaining unknown veterans resting there from the Korean War.



The process to identify the remains included the use of X-rays, dental records and DNA samples, and took place at Hickman Air Force Base in Hawaii.

According to the Department of Defense, there are still 7,500 Korean War service members who are unaccounted for.

"After 70 years Chaplain (Capt.) Kapaun has been accounted for," said acting Secretary of the Army John E. Whitley in a March 5 press release. "His heroism and resilient spirit epitomized our Army values of personal courage and selfless service."

The Kapaun family announced April 10 that the priest's remains will be temporarily housed in a crypt inside the Cathedral. His



remains are expected to draw a crowd, as many visitors already parade through his hometown of Pilsen, Kansas, visiting the St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church, and the Fr. Kapaun museum. The family had previously set up a memorial to Fr. Kapaun in St. John Nepomucene Catholic Cemetery. According to Pilsen Tour Guide and Museum Director Harriet Bina, thousands of visitors flock to the town of Pilsen annually, drawn by Fr. Kapaun's story.

"We felt that [the Cathedral] would not only provide a secure place, but also provide a safe and suitable place for all to come to visit and venerate his remains," Ray Kapaun wrote on Facebook.

Knapp said the Diocese of Wichita will keep statistics on the number of visitors to Fr. Kapaun's crypt. It assists in the Vatican's review of Sainthood.

"One of the criteria Rome looks at is the positive following that a person who is being considered for canonization has; how people view this person's life and are inspired by it," he said. "Having his remains lying in state at the Cathedral will provide people an opportunity to come and venerate, give glory to God, while in the presence of [Fr. Kapaun's] earthly remains. Our belief is that the popularity of Fr. Kapaun will become known through the pilgrimages that come to Wichita to venerate in the presence of his remains."

Bina said she has already seen an uptick in the number of visitors to Pilsen since the identification of Fr. Kapaun's remains, with two to three organized tour groups each week in addition to individual families that show up.

The biggest onslaught of visitors to the tiny town, population of 40, located an hour northeast of Wichita, is for the Fr. Kapaun Pilgrimage, an event that begins in early June at the Church of the Magdalen. Hundreds of pilgrims walk for more than 60 miles, culminating their walk of prayer and reflection at St. John Nepomucene in Pilsen. Last year's group brought 200 visitors; this year, the number was closer to 400.



"Part of that is COVID restrictions being lifted, but a big part is his remains being identified, and people have been recharged to learn about Fr. Kapaun," Bina said. "Whenever we have visitors come out, we like to give the Fr. Kapaun talk, then take them to the museum. When they come out and walk in the same place that Fr. Kapaun walked, and they sit in the church where a future saint sat, and learn about his story, it's just different [even if they've learned about him in school]."

Fr. Kapaun's permanent burial site will depend on the outcome of the canonization process.

The process of his canonization was begun after tales of the Army chaplain's wartime heroics and selflessness reached the U.S., brought back by his fellow prisoners of war and other soldiers. It was also at this point, in 1956, when Bishop Mark Carroll named the newly built east-side high school after Fr. Kapaun.

Stories of Fr. Kapaun's bravery included ministering to wounded soldiers in the midst of gunfire, negotiating for the lives of his men with enemy soldiers, carrying his wounded comrades for miles on their way to the POW camp, and his continued faith and caretaking of his fellow POWs within the camp in Pyoktong, on the bank of the Yalu River. The troop was captured on November 2, 1950.

"I don't know the name of that valley, but we called it the Kapaun Valley because that is where Father Kapaun instilled in us a will to live," said Mike Dowe in 2013,

a fellow Korean War POW, according to [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov).

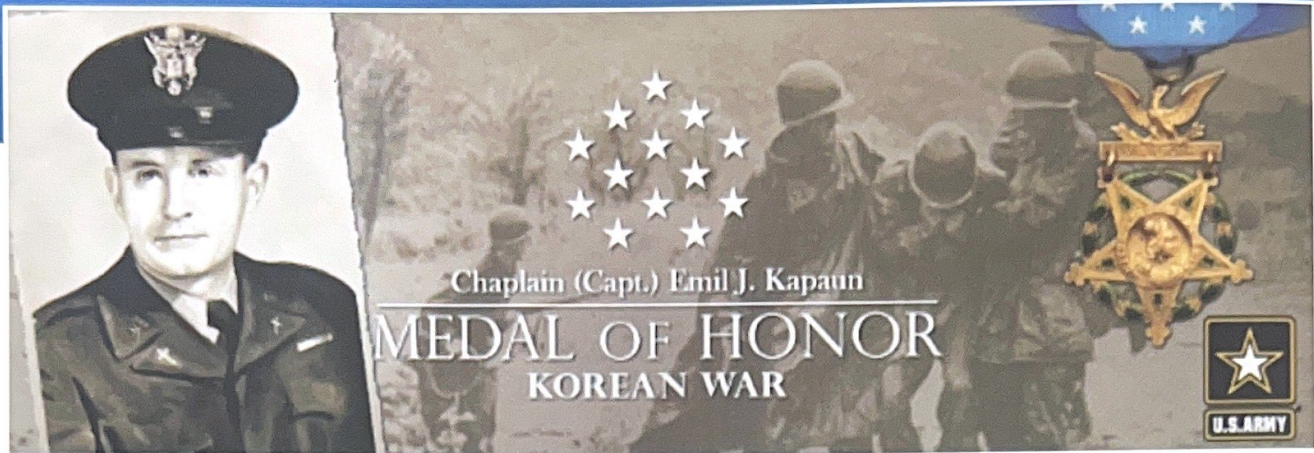
While in captivity, Fr. Kapaun inspired hope in his fellow prisoners by teaching them about God, cleaning their wounds, gathering sticks for fires, melting rainwater for the soldiers to drink, patching their clothes and stealing food for them.

"He was the best food thief we had," Army Capt. Joseph O'Connor, a fellow POW, told *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times* after his repatriation in 1953. "He always used to say a prayer to St. Dismas (the penitent thief) before he went out scrounging. Once, he came back with a sack of potatoes. How he got it I'll never know — it must have weighed 100 pounds."

According to Joe Ramirez, a fellow POW who spoke to the KMC community March 27, 2018, Fr. Kapaun endured the camp's hellish conditions with grace, never complaining about the squalid situation. He performed the most menial and disgusting tasks, like cleaning excrement off his fellow soldiers or picking the lice out of their hair, all while pleading with them to persevere, giving them hope for the future.

"Army Chaplain Emil Kapaun inspired his men during the Korean War with calm, courageous leadership, instilling in his fellow prisoners of war a desire to stay strong — even after he no longer could," wrote Katie Lange in a March 2021 feature for the Department of Defense News. "His actions eventually earned him the nation's highest military honor, as well





as a potential path to sainthood.”

In the spring of 1951, while Fr. Kapaun was suffering from pneumonia and a blood clot in this leg, his captors learned of his illness, and seeing their chance to be rid of the bothersome priest, sent him to the “hospital” to die. The POWs put up a fight, but Fr. Kapaun stopped them with his famous last words, accepting his death. In “The Story of Father Emil J. Kapaun,” found on the Diocese of Wichita’s website, his last moments were also inspiring:

*The soldiers, with tears in their eyes, demanded to carry their chaplain to the Death House themselves. On the way, they marveled at the fact that Kapaun made them stop so he could ask forgiveness of the guards if he had done anything to harm them, and then watched as he lifted his arm to give them his blessing. A few days later on May 23, 1951, alone in the Death House and only 35 years old, Father Kapaun breathed his last, his body utterly spent from his service to his men.*

Fr. Kapaun was awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in battle and the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions during and after the Battle of Unsan. And, on April 11, 2013, then-President Barack Obama posthumously awarded Chaplain Kapaun the Medal of Honor. This Medal is the highest award given to a member of the military, and Fr. Kapaun is just one of five chaplains to have received the award.

“[Kapaun was] an American soldier who didn’t fire a gun but who wielded the mightiest weapon of all — the love for his brothers — so pure that he was willing to die so they might live,” Obama said.

Ray Kapaun, Fr. Kapaun’s nephew and the family’s elected spokesperson, received the award in his uncle’s honor. Back at Kapaun Mt. Carmel, students filled the Commons to watch the ceremony on a big screen while smaller groups watched in classrooms, all celebrating the military achievement of their school’s namesake.

“One of the things unique to Kapaun is that we have the platform to proliferate Fr. Kapaun’s spirit of faith, service and love,” Knapp said. “We need to embrace the opportunity for our school.” History teacher Crista Kouba ’85 Burnett teaches about Fr. Kapaun’s story in both her U.S. History and AP History classes.

She recalls the medal ceremony with mixed feelings.

“We watched [the ceremony] in my room,” Burnett said. “I loved it, but I don’t think our students really understand the significance of the Medal of Honor. The fact that Fr. Kapaun received the Congressional Medal of Honor is definitely important to our school, the military... when you understand how hard it is to get a Congressional Medal of Honor, it really makes you appreciate the service and sacrifice of Fr. Kapaun. To have Fr. Kapaun get it so many years later, not only did I think it was deserving, it was very exciting for our school. I think it would be really cool if he was the first military chaplain Congressional Medal of Honor winner to become a saint.”

The Kapaun family keeps the Medal of Honor as part of their personal possessions, but loaned it to Kapaun Mt. Carmel for Fr. Kapaun’s 100th birthday celebration April 20, 2016. The event took place during Bishop Carl Kemme’s designated Year of Fr. Kapaun (June 2015-June 2016), and Ray Kapaun and his brother David, were in attendance. The pair addressed the student body after an all-school Mass.

Burnett uses Fr. Kapaun’s story not only for an example of valor and faith, but as a first-hand experience of war with her students, teaching out of the book “A Shepherd in Combat Boots: Chaplain Emil Kapaun of the 1st Calvary Division” by William Maher.

“I always like to include stories that fit the time period,” Burnett said. “Fr. Kapaun is the perfect example of the role of a chaplain in wartime conditions. He also gives our students a really good example of the purpose of hope as a virtue because that’s what he brought to the men in the prisoner of war camps, the virtue of hope.”

She said her students really respond to Fr. Kapaun as the “good thief.”

“Students like that Fr. Kapaun risked his own life to sneak out and steal food for the men and no one ever reported him, especially since you could get extra food if you reported people who were stealing,” Burnett said. “The kids think is pretty amazing, especially since these men were literally starving to death.”

One of Burnett’s activity is even on the Truman Presidential Library Teacher Resource page. After she presented Fr. Kapaun’s



story at a national conference and the activities she does to go along with it, the presenters posted it on the website.

"I think it's important for our kids to recognize the treasure trove of Fr. Kapaun articles: the cross, the vestments, the letters, the things that we house here in our school that they walk by every day," Burnett said. "I actually do a document analysis activity that we use letters written by Fr. Kapaun prior to his capture and letters written about him by others who were held with him at the POW camp. It gives the kids real first-hand documentation of the conditions of the camps in wartime."



Inspired by his selfless heroics in the Korean War, the Catholic Church declared Fr. Kapaun a Servant of God in 1993, which signifies the beginning of the process of his possible sainthood. Carter said the Archdiocese of the Military was the one who actually began looking into his cause for sainthood.

The Diocese of Wichita, spearheaded by Fr. John Hotze, took over his case for canonization in 2008. A thorough investigation of Fr. Kapaun's life, including his alleged miracles, began. The nearly 8,000 pages of documentation called the *Positio Super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis* or the "Statement of Life, Virtue and Holy Reputation" was sent to an expert in Rome, Dr. Andrea Ambrosi, in 2011, who has been working to make the documentation more reviewable. Bishop Kemme and former KMC chaplain Fr. Daniel Duling presented the case to the Congregation for Saints in Rome on Nov. 15, 2015.

✦ According to Fr. Hotze, once the cause for canonization begins, the remains of the person in question are exhumed from their burial site and placed in a secure location. Diocesan officials, however, were unable to follow this protocol, since Fr. Kapaun's remains were unaccounted for. It was believed that Fr. Kapaun

had been buried in a mass grave along the Yalu River, near the border between North Korea and China.

"We had very little hope that we would ever have his remains," Fr. Hotze said in an interview with the *Wichita Eagle*. "When you think about the awesomeness of it, even if it were not him being in the process of becoming a saint, to think that here was a man who died 70 years ago and now he's coming home. Any person, you would be elated that was able to happen."

In March of 2020, the Congregation of Saints was poised to take up Fr. Kapaun's case, but COVID-driven shutdowns derailed the mission. If his Statement of Life, Virtue and Holy Reputation is approved by the Congregation, Fr. Kapaun would move on to the next step of canonization, and he would then be given the title "Venerable."

The Congregation must approve a miracle attributed to Fr. Kapaun's intercession before he can be beautified, then another one after beautification. The miracles must have no medical explanation. Two cases are currently within the documentation already presented to the Congregation: the unexplained and unexpected recoveries of Chase Kear and Avery Gerleman.

"No matter the title, Fr. Kapaun willingly gave his life for his fellow soldiers, and they recognize the action of Christ in this," Carter said in a 2016 KMC yearbook article. "Sainthood is another question, because we have to wait for another miracle to occur after he's beautified, so that's kind of up to God."

Bina agrees with Carter's sentiments, saying the community of Pilsen continues their mission to spread Fr. Kapaun's story to inspire those who visit.

"We have the mock camp [in the museum], so the kids can visualize it, and it makes the stories come alive for them," Bina said. "Recently, we had a history class, they were a mixed group of Protestants and Catholics... We took them to the museum and when we tell them about the alleged miracles, that touches their hearts. Two of the students came up and said 'You know, we aren't really what you would call good Christians, we don't really go to church, but after we heard the story of Fr. Kapaun, after we hear about the alleged miracles, we need to look into this a little more, study more about Christianity.' Fr. Kapaun took care of people of all faiths in that prison camp and he's still doing it."

Bina said she witnessed the call a vocational call to the priesthood during a Pilsen pilgrimage of Fr. Richard Daise. Daise was a veterinarian in the U.S. Army for 28 years before becoming a priest. According to an article by the Catholic News Service, Fr. Daise attributes Fr. Kapaun as the reason he is a priest today. He called him a "hero all Kansas Catholics should know."

"We did have one school group come from Colby and that was kind of interesting," she said. "Their priest (Fr. Daise) used to come out for Fr. Kapaun Day as a military man, and the third





day he came he said 'Father, you're calling me to be a priest?' and he ended up retiring early, and they sent him to the seminary.

"Now he brings groups out every year, and when he says Mass here, he'll have them bring up a ring of barbed wire. He'll tell them how Fr. Kapaun was held by barbed wire behind enemy lines, and he'll have them bring up a shovel. He'll talk about how they buried

the soldiers who died. Fr. Kapaun buried soldiers, even buried his enemy soldiers, because they have family members too... it was just beautiful to listen to."

Knapp said he feels personally connected to Fr. Kapaun through his involvement in the spiritual formation group Kapaun's Men, that, according to their website, focuses on emulating "Fr. Kapaun's virtues to become better husbands, fathers, leaders and friends."

"We've used his virtues to [awaken] the spirit of our men and hundreds around the community," Knapp said. "We have awaked the faith of literally thousands of men, within our diocese and literally around the world—there's a Kapaun's Men group in Korea and Germany right now."

While the path to sainthood for Fr. Kapaun could still take years, the next steps in his local veneration are mere months away. The vigil and funeral for Fr. Kapaun are currently planned to be at Hartman Arena for Sept. 28 and 29, respectively.

His remains are scheduled to arrive at Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport in Wichita on Saturday, September 25, 2021. A procession will take him to St. John Nepomucene where Pilsen residents will be able to see his remains before they are moved to the Cathedral. The diocesan office expects 3,000 to 5,000 people at each service.

"The Diocese of Wichita has asked us (KMC) to be available to participate in as much as can be allowed," Knapp said.

Knapp hinted that there will be more items planned around the homecoming of KMC's namesake, especially since it lines up with the school's Homecoming festivities.

Follow KMC online to stay up-to-date on activities and events regarding Fr. Kapaun's homecoming and burial.



PRAYER FOR THE BEATIFICATION  
AND CANONIZATION  
OF FATHER KAPAUN

*Lord Jesus, in the midst of the folly of war,  
your servant, Chaplain Emil Kapaun,  
spent himself in total service to you  
on the battlefields and  
in the prison camps of Korea,  
until his death at the hands of his captors.*

*We now ask you, Lord Jesus,  
if it be your will, to make known to all the  
world the holiness of Chaplain Kapaun and  
the glory of his complete sacrifice for you  
by signs of miracles and peace.*

*In your name, Lord, we ask,  
for you are the source of peace,  
the strength of our service to others,  
and our final hope.*

*Amen.*