

Credible Witnesses

“What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people...capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life.”—Porta Fidei 15

Servant of God Father Vincent Capodanno

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Father Vincent Capodanno (1929–1967), an American Maryknoll Missioner and military chaplain, died in action while ministering to wounded Marines during the Vietnam War and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest possible decoration granted to a member of the U.S. military.

Capodanno was born and raised on Staten Island, the youngest of ten children in a close-knit, deeply Catholic Italian immigrant family. After dropping off his date and returning from the high school prom, he woke his mother and announced that he felt a calling to the priesthood. While taking evening classes at Fordham, he worked for a time as a clerk for a Wall Street insurance company. In 1949 he entered the Maryknoll Missionary Seminary in Ossining, New York, and was ordained in 1958.

His first assignment was to Taiwan, where he served the Hakka people for six years. His next assignment was to teach in Hong Kong. But Father Capodanno, tall, lean, handsome, and with a charismatic personality, felt another call. From Hong Kong, he appealed to his superiors to volunteer to serve as a military chaplain in Vietnam for the U.S. Marine Corps. His place, he'd become convinced, was among the front-line troops.

After a period of training, he was assigned in April 1966 to the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division in South Vietnam. Known among his men as the “Grunt Padre,” he suffered the same hardships—heat, thirst, exhaustion, and filth—that they did. His door was always open: to the anxious, the doubting, the heartbroken, the angry. A soldier to whom Father Capodanno once gave his own rosary during confession returned to the Church and has kept the beads to this day.

He served a year’s tour and returned home on leave. This time his family noticed a change. His hair had turned prematurely gray. No longer did he laugh so easily. “What is this war about?” a cousin asked. “Why are we even there?” “I’m not interested in war or politics,” Father Capodanno replied. “The point is men are dying. I’m there to bring Christ.”

He insisted upon volunteering for a six-month extension, and in June 1967 he returned to Vietnam. In August, he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.

On September 4, 1967, a few dozen men of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, encountered a North Vietnamese Army unit of twenty-five hundred near the village of Dong Son. Men from the 3rd Battalion, among others, joined the battle.

Unarmed, Father Capodanno went among the wounded and dying, comforting them and giving last rites. Wounded himself that afternoon in the head, arms, and legs, he

refused evacuation, and in the early evening, while going to help another seriously injured soldier, he was hit by enemy machine gun fire and killed. His body was brought home and he was buried in the family plot in Staten Island's Saint Peter's Cemetery. In 1969, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

His cause for canonization, officially opened in May 2002, is supported and promoted by the Father Capodanno Guild (www.capodannoguild.org). Called and Chosen, a 2017 documentary, movingly depicts his heroic courage and faith.

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