

# MARIST LIVES

# REVEREND JOSEPH FLEURY, SM

## Builder of Bridges

by Susan J. Illis, Archivist, Archives of the Society of Mary, U.S. Province

Reverend Joseph Fleury, SM, a United States Military chaplain and Marist priest for many years, sees a clear connection between military chaplaincy and Marist charism. Chaplains offer a healing and reconciling presence in the military, with today's forces acting as angels of mercy, delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza and offering tactical advice to Ukraine. Similarly, Marists have been bringing renewal and peace to a polarized world for over two centuries.

Fleury was born in Philadelphia, the cradle of the U.S. Constitution and location of a longtime Marist minor seminary. He was called to religious life after attending a retreat led by Marist priests and entered St. Mary's Manor in Bucks County Pennsylvania at the age of 15. As a seminarian in 1968, he participated in the funeral mass of Rev. Robert Brett, SM, a Marist chaplain killed in the Siege of Khe San in Vietnam. This key experience in Fleury's formation inspired his desire to serve the military as a chaplain. He later recalled, "I was so touched by the experience of sending Fr. Brett to heaven that I said, 'Good Lord willing, I want to continue his work someday.' Twenty years later that dream came true."

Professed as a Marist in 1974, Fr. Fleury was ordained on July 7, 1984. He often observes that military chaplaincy is the largest young adult ministry - if only because 80% of forces fall in the 18-25 age group. His early Marist ministries and experiences in the fields of education and athletic coaching prepared him well for working with young people. Shortly after his ordination, he traveled to Los Angeles, California for the 1984 Summer Olympics as an assistant for the U.S. Kayak Team. As a Marist, he taught and coached at the former St. Peter Chanel High School in Bedford, Ohio and was serving at Marist School in Atlanta, Georgia when he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1988.

In his thirty-five years as a military chaplain, Fr. Fleury has served in locations all over the world. He has witnessed the far reaches of the branches of the Marist tree. In the early 1990s, Fr. Fleury and fellow Marist Rev. Ted Keating, SM, met in the center of Haiti, where both were observing a crucial election - Fr. Fleury with the Army and Fr. Keating as an election observer for the U.S. Bishops on behalf of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (C.M.S.M.). In Afghanistan, Fr. Fleury ran into a reporter who was a student at Marist School when he taught there in the 1980s. Fr. Fleury put another of his early life experiences to honorable use in 1991. A former lifeguard on the New Jersey shore, he saved the lives of a father and son in the surf off the coast of Panama, where he was stationed at the time, for which he was awarded the Soldiers Medal.

In addition to the Soldiers Medal, Fr. Fleury's bravery and achievements have been recognized with a plethora of awards: The Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal (One Silver Oak Leaf Cluster), Joint Service Commendation Medal, Army Commendation Medal (Three Oak Leaf Clusters), National Defense Medal, (Two Bronze Stars), Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal,



Rev. Joseph Fleury's, SM, promotion to Colonel in 2011

Kosovo Campaign Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, Global War on Terror Service Medal, Korean Defense Service Medal, Humanitarian Service Medal (One Bronze Star), Army Service Ribbon, Army Overseas Ribbon (7), United Nations Medal and the NATO Medal. On March 24, 2011, Fr. Fleury was promoted to Colonel and today, as senior chaplain, he serves all armed forces, including the Space Force.

Through his decades of service he has observed some changes in the role of chaplaincy, significantly that the military is improving in recognizing the emotional needs of soldiers. However, while commanders determine what support is needed, chaplains are responsible for its implementation.

He also notes that today's youth tend to be less religious, but more spiritual; however, the forces still seek the spiritual leadership a chaplain can best provide. Another important role of the chaplain is as a builder: the figurative builder of bridges linking different faith traditions, but in the most literal sense, as well as the person in charge overseeing the construction of facilities where people of all faiths will worship, including battlefield chapels.

Fleury summarizes his contributions as a chaplain, "I really am blessed to experience the best of both worlds: to do my duty as an American citizen and also to serve God as a believer. The benefit is I've been able to plant seeds and touch people throughout the world and I can say I have friends throughout the world, good friends, very close friends." But he also does not forget the spirit of the Society of Mary, saying that as a Marist, he aims to "be the presence of Mary and bring the spirit of Mary to this contemporary ministry. It's a spirit of compassion and empathy, one that does not draw attention to itself."