



Military Chaplains and the Ordinariate for Italy: History, Faith, and Service in the Soldiers' Conscience

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The need to ensure spiritual assistance to soldiers arises with the armies themselves. Since the time of Emperor Constantine, when Christianity became a recognized religion of the Empire, **the necessity was felt to accompany the military not only on a material level but also morally and religiously.**

Over the centuries, this need became increasingly structured, until it found a stable form in the Carolingian period (8th-9th century), when it became customary for priests to accompany the troops, organized under a leader known as **Chaplain Major** or **Military Vicar.**

This organization became increasingly independent from local Bishops (**in Spain from 1571, in Austria from 1720, in Piedmont in 1733**).

The progressive autonomy of the military clergy from territorial bishops marked the birth of a true ecclesiastical structure dedicated to the military world.

Chaplains in the pre-unification Italian States and the crisis after Unification

In the pre-unification Italian States, spiritual assistance to the military was far from occasional: **it was part of the military ordinance** and responded to a concrete need, linked to the mobility of the troops and life away from territorial parishes.

In the **Duchy of Parma and Piacenza**, as early as 1816, line regiments had a chaplain framed with **status comparable to that of a subordinate officer**. In the **Grand Duchy of Tuscany**, in 1839, several chaplains were in service, permanently assigned to the units. In the **Papal States**, Pius IX formalized the figure of the military religious leader by establishing the office of **Chaplain Major** in 1850.

The system of the **Kingdom of the Two Sicilies** was particularly structured: until 1861, chaplains were appointed directly by the sovereign, and the Chaplain Major exercised a **quasi-episcopal jurisdiction**, a sign of a religious presence considered an integral part of the discipline and moral cohesion of the armed forces.

When the unification process led to the birth of the Kingdom of Italy, this tradition merged into the new military apparatus: by 1865, the military clergy already numbered **189 chaplains**, permanently integrated into the Army's organization.

With the capture of Rome in 1870 and the consequent deterioration of relations between the State and the Church, the spiritual assistance service underwent a drastic reduction.

In 1878, the chaplains **were almost completely eliminated from the military staff**.

During the colonial campaigns and the Libyan war, religious assistance was guaranteed only **thanks to the voluntary work of diocesan priests and missionaries**, in the absence of official recognition.

World War I and the rebirth of the military chaplain

The imminence of the Great War made it clear that it was impossible to continue without organized spiritual assistance. On **April 12, 1915**, General Luigi Cadorna signed the circular that officially reinstated military chaplains.

On **June 1, 1915**, the Holy See appointed **Monsignor Angelo Bartolomasi** as the first **Military Bishop**, giving him the leadership of the religious service for the Italian Armed Forces.

During the conflict:

- **over 10,000 chaplains** were mobilized
- **2,070** operated directly in combat units
- **93 died in service**
- many were **decorated for military valor**

The chaplains **shared the life of the trenches, provided aid to the wounded, assisted the dying, comforted soldiers and civilians**. Their work represented one of the highest expressions of humanity in an inhumane conflict.

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Monsignor Angelo Bartolomasi was the first Military Bishop of Italy - Photo Free Copyright

Between the two wars and the birth of the Military Ordinariate

After the conflict, in 1922, the service was again reduced. However, in 1925, thanks to an agreement between the Italian State and the Holy See, the **Military Ordinariate for Italy** was finally established, by decree of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation.

Legal recognition came in 1926, while the **Concordat of 1929** definitively sanctioned the presence of the Church in the Armed Forces.

In 1936, the following were established:

- the dependency of chaplains on the Military Ordinary
- assimilation to military ranks
- the stable nature of the service in peacetime

World War II and the toughest test

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the Ordinariate was not yet fully structured, but as the war progressed, chaplains were sent to all fronts: Africa, the Balkans, Russia, the Mediterranean.

Many died in service, others were taken prisoner along with the units. Their actions were marked by assistance to the wounded, moral comfort, and extraordinary dedication.

After September 8, 1943, the Ordinariate experienced a dramatic phase. Monsignor Bartolomasi refused to take a political stance, maintaining a position of **pastoral neutrality**. He ordered the chaplains to continue assisting both the military of the Kingdom of the South and those of the Italian Social Republic, focusing on the person and not the ideology.

The post-war period and the definitive reorganization

In the post-war period, the Ordinariate was progressively reorganized.

The laws of **1955** and **1961** established that:

“The service of spiritual assistance to the Armed Forces is an integral part of the moral formation of the military.”

In 1984, the new Concordat confirmed the presence of chaplains, while in 1986, Saint John Paul II promulgated the Apostolic Constitution **Spirituali Militum Curae**, which transformed the Military Vicariates into **Military Ordinariates**, assimilated to dioceses.

The Military Ordinariate for Italy is a personal ecclesiastical jurisdiction, assimilated to a diocese and governed by an Ordinary appointed by the Pope. Its jurisdiction is **personal, ordinary**, and **proper but cumulative** with that of the diocesan bishops.

By canonical provision and by virtue of agreements with the State, the Military Ordinariate for Italy includes **all those who are permanently or temporarily part of the military organization** and the structures connected to it. Primarily, therefore, **military personnel in service**, both continuous and temporary, and **students** of the Academies, Schools, and Training Institutes.

Its jurisdiction also includes **Catholic military personnel of other nationalities** operating in Italy, **when their chaplain is absent**, and **civilian personnel** employed by the military administration, often an integral part of the daily life of units and entities.

The pastoral assistance of the Ordinariate also extends to the world surrounding the life of the military: **the families of military personnel in continuous service and civilian personnel**, along with **relatives, cohabitants, and service people**, provided they reside in the same house. This is an important aspect, as it recognizes that the military dimension is not only operational but also familial and social.

The Ordinariate also includes those faithful, **priests, religious, and laypeople**, who perform **permanent service** entrusted to them by the Ordinary: among them, collaborating priests, religious engaged in military hospitals, and members of the Association for Spiritual Assistance to the Armed Forces.

Completing the picture are also the **Military Corps of the Italian Red Cross** and the **Corps of Volunteer Nurses**, entities historically linked to service, care, and humanity in the most challenging contexts.

Finally, according to statutory provisions, the Ordinariate also includes **those who serve within the Quirinal Palace** and the residences of the Head of State's endowment: a detail that, more than many others, reflects the institutional sense and historical continuity of this pastoral presence.

Since **April 10, 2025**, the Military Ordinary for Italy is **His Excellency Mons. Gian Franco Saba**, archbishop, formerly pastor of the diocese of Sassari.

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The Chief of SME, Gen C.A. Carmine Masiello with the Military Ordinary for Italy, His Excellency Monsignor Gian Franco Saba at the Army Officers' Club "Pio IX" in Rome in September 2025 - Copyright Military Ordinariate for Italy

The ranks of Military Chaplains

Chaplains are assimilated to military ranks for functional reasons:

- **Military Ordinary** → Army Corps General
- **Vicar General** → Division General

- **Inspector** → Brigade General
- **Chief Chaplain** → Major
- **Assistant Chaplain** → Captain
- **First Appointment Chaplain** → Lieutenant

They do not exercise armed command but play a moral, spiritual, and educational role.

The Blessed and Saint Chaplains

Among the most luminous figures in the history of military chaplaincy are priests who, in serving soldiers, **fully testified to the values of faith, charity, and sacrifice**. Some of them, for the strength of their testimony, have been recognized by the Church as Blessed and Saints, becoming **universal examples of dedication to humanity even in the harshest contexts of war**.

Blessed

Carlo Gnocchi (1902-1956). Ambrosian priest, **he was a chaplain of the Alpini during the Second World War, particularly in the tragic Russian campaign**. He shared the marches, the cold, and the sufferings of the soldiers, assisting the wounded and dying during the retreat from the Don. Returning to Italy **deeply marked by that experience, he dedicated his entire life to the disabled children and war victims, founding the Opera Pro Juventute**. He is remembered as the “priest of the least” and **was beatified in 2009 for his extraordinary work of charity**.

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A beautiful photograph of Don Gnocchi, the chaplain of the Alpini during the Second World War - Photo Free Copyright

Secondo Pollo (1908-1941). He was also a chaplain of the Alpini in the Second World War, **dying at 33 in Dragali, Montenegro, on December 26, 1941**. Despite fragile health, he asked to stay with the soldiers in the field, sharing their hardships and dangers. He was fatally shot while **helping a wounded man under fire**, exemplifying the chaplain's mission: presence, comfort, and service to the point of sacrifice. He was **beatified in 1998**.

Don Secondo Pollo exemplified the chaplain's mission: presence, comfort, and service to the point of sacrifice -

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Daniele Brottier (1876 - 1936), French military chaplain in the First World War, later a great missionary and founder of the Auteuil Orphanage. A French priest, he was a military chaplain during the First World War. **He served at the front, distinguishing himself for moral support to soldiers and assistance to the wounded under bombardment.** After the war, he dedicated himself to orphans, founding and developing the Auteuil Orphanage, still active today. His life combined missionary spirit, concrete charity, and deep attention to human dignity. **He was beatified in 1984.**

Don Daniele Brottier during the First World War was a volunteer military chaplain: he was cited twelve times for his courage and received the Croix de guerre and the Legion of Honor - Photo Free Copyright

Saints

Saint John XXIII. Then **Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli** (1881 - 1963), **future Pope of the Catholic Church** (1958-1963), was a **military chaplain during the First World War.** He served from 1915 as a **medical sergeant and then as a chaplain**, working in military hospitals and assisting the wounded and soldiers at the front.

Medical Sergeant Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli at the beginning of the First World War. In 1958 he would be elected Pope of the Catholic Church with the name John XXIII - Photo Free Copyright

That experience deeply influenced his pastoral vision, characterized by humanity, dialogue, and closeness to people, values he would later bring into his pontificate.

The identification card of the Royal Italian Army for Military Chaplain Don Angelo Roncalli. He was discharged in 1918 with the rank of Lieutenant Chaplain - Photo Free Copyright

The profound meaning of the military chaplain

As Pope **Benedict XVI** recalled, the military chaplain is called to place **the person at the center of his pastoral action**, accompanying the soldier on his human and spiritual journey,

so that even in armed service he can remain fully human, responsible, and aware of his choices.

The chaplain does not bear arms. He does not command. He does not fight.

But he stays beside the man when conscience wavers, when fear dominates, when life is questioned.

And it is precisely for this reason that, for centuries, he continues to be an irreplaceable figure in the Armed Forces.

News link: <https://www.ordinariatomilitare.it/>