

# “When Divinity Meets War”

John Shoemaker, Commissioner

In a continuing effort to bring recognition to the Veterans residing in the Town of Highland Beach, I had the opportunity to converse with the town’s special Parish Pastor, Father Brian Horgan, of St. Lucy Catholic Church. With a dominant position in the community, St. Lucy Catholic Church is a jewel where residents of all denominations are welcome to worship.



Prior to becoming pastor at St. Lucy Catholic Church, Father Horgan accomplished an incredible number of academic achievements. A Bachelor and Master’s Degree in Arts, a Master of Divinity Degree and became a Priest. He joined the US Air Force and went to Officer Candidate School (OCS) to become a commissioned officer. OCS training was difficult for Father Horgan, as he voiced harsh treatment because of being a priest. OCS is excruciating training, as it is designed to break one’s spirit.

Father Horgan, describes himself as “gentle in manner’ and ‘strong in deed”. Considering the juxtaposition with his assignment to the war zones of the Middle East in support of the battles for Iraqi Freedom (Iraq and Saddam Hussein), Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) campaigns, having many different religions, and in dealing with the horrors of warfare, he experienced how important his role was in supporting members of all armed services. Father Horgan said, “I was a priest to some and a chaplain to all”. Of course, confidentiality is sacred, and he would listen to the confessions, conflicts, and concerns of soldiers, naval personnel, and airmen before and after their missions.

The Air Force operates out of major bases with large hospital tents, for immediate medical attention to those enlisted in the service. In moments that will stay with Father Horgan forever, especially at times of mass casualties, he listened and held the hands of many in their final moments. The need for someone who could bring comfort to those with severe wounds, the loss of limbs or worse, was his mission. He would conduct as many as 12 religious observances a day, on a base or in undisclosed locations before combat missions were launched. For the soldiers that developed habits of counting the days of returning home, he encouraged them to focus on their jobs and on self-improvement.

His lessons from warfare are “don’t take things for granted”, but more subtle; “war and military training does change your perspective where you can appreciate what you have when so many have it so hard” and that “such experience blunts the edges of one’s personality.” Most importantly, it brings focus on having “purpose” in life. Without purpose, people may become depressed, despondent and turn to drugs. This is true for those in the military or civilian life. Father Horgan “always has a heart for those who suffer”. He says we all must remember the trauma we have experienced in various wars, assassinations, the Challenger disaster, the terrible 9-11 Attack, and with today’s Internet use, which creates more real-time trauma for children and adults alike. Everyone is affected by this and so his work is ongoing.

Father Horgan continued his life commitment to learning by earning a Master’s Degree in Criminal Justice (MS) and a Master’s in Social Work (MSW). Also, while in the Air Force, he rose to the rank of Major and while stationed in Arizona, he earned a Doctorate Degree in both Philosophy and Psychology.

For sure, as is the case for most Veterans, Father Horgan’s military experience impacted his life immensely where he could contribute his expertise, as a social and trauma counselor and religious leader. Father Horgan wants to be “at service” to the Town of Highland Beach in any manner in which makes sense, for the benefit of one or as many as possible. He considers himself a team player and welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with town officials in the future. Just as in the military, teamwork and communication is critical in building relationships.

Upon ending my conversation with Father Horgan, I asked him for suggestions. He immediately responded “the answer is always yes, now what’s the question?” Questions can drive solutions. He reinforced the importance of Integrity, Service, and Excellence in all areas of life.

I for sure walked away from the rectory thinking, “Highland Beach is paradise under God”.