

Introduction to the First Working Group

Rev. Msgr. Guy Chapdelaine,

Chaplain General of Canadian Armed Forces

It is a tremendous privilege for me to be here with you today, to discuss the special role that we have as chaplains in preventing human rights violations. As I reflect on what I sincerely believe to be a unique role within the military construct, I do so as a priest first, called to military service, in which I live out my priesthood. I'll get back to why I think this is an important claim to make, in a few minutes.

So to the question: what is the role of the military chaplain in the prevention of human rights violations, and in particular, in the emerging operational frameworks in which we find ourselves? Increasingly, the conflicts in which our militaries are involved include non-state actors, child soldiers, and the use of semi-autonomous drones as both surveillance and targeting systems. What is the role of the chaplain in this kind of environment to help prevent atrocities?

There are two dimensions that I want to identify: first, what chaplains do, and second, what chaplains are; in other words, first the performative, second the ontological.

First, what chaplains do: chaplains have specific duties, skills and training – such as in ethics or conflict resolution - that can help them play an effective role in the prevention of human rights violations. They offer a ministry of presence that embodies the moral consciousness of those who serve in uniform. Chaplains are natural “bridge-builders”, who can encourage dialogue and understanding, in particular where there are divergent perspectives, and claims about truth. As they are embedded with military personnel, whether in garrison or in the battlespace, chaplains are able to be a witness to what military leaders often call “the truth of the ground”. Their proximity to military personnel and unfettered access to Commanders in an advisory capacity are powerful

tools to identify the potential for human rights violations to occur, or to identify where they have occurred. This is what I am calling the performative dimension of military chaplains – those concrete actions that the military chaplain can undertake in the battlespace or in garrison to intervene and witness to the rights and the dignity of all.

Second, and I think most importantly in this question of the role of military chaplains, is who chaplains *are*; that is, the ontological dimension of military chaplaincy. What we do as chaplains to prevent human rights violations is grounded in who we are as chaplains: it is grounded in our key beliefs and claims about human dignity that are incarnated in our calling to serve within our faith traditions as religious leaders.

As chaplains, our credibility is linked – embedded, really, in our first call to ministry. Our voice that has the power to speak truth to what we see that either supports the rights and dignity of the human person or degrades it only has power in so far as it is seen to be a credible one. As faith group leaders in our own right, we have a credible voice that is both a part of the institutional structure of a standing military force – that is recognized and credentialed – and that is distinct from it; that is, chaplains are accountable to their endorsing traditions. The uniqueness of this dual accountability that is recognized by both the military structure and the endorsing traditions gives the chaplain a role that is unique, but only so long as we maintain our integrity as faith group leaders, as well as military officers. We must nurture and tend the “call within a call” that is at the heart of military chaplaincy, if we are to be an effective presence, both on and away from the battlespace, that will support and defend the human rights and inalienable dignity of each human person.

The emerging context in which chaplains will live out their call to serve is a complex one. How can chaplains provide concrete advice in a virtual battlespace? How can a chaplain provide pastoral care and advice to a drone operator who pilots a targeting system by day over a country half a world away, and then goes home to have dinner with her family? How can a chaplain witness to the use of children on the battlefield as a weapon of war, and keep their own soul intact? The need for formation and training for

chaplains early in their military career to prepare them to provide ministry in this unique context is evident. This does not only include training and education in such fields as ethics, moral injury and international humanitarian law, but also fieldcraft, military doctrine, policy, and the fundamentals of what it means to serve as an officer: if we are to be advisors to Command, we need to know how to relate to military officers using their own military language. Chaplains need to be well prepared to accompany their soldiers, sailors and air personnel into the field, and not just back in garrison. If military chaplains are to be effective agents for intervention and witness in the face of human rights violations, they need to be able to accompany their units wherever they go, whenever they go. For those chaplains who are already trained and equipped, regular professional development, and opportunities for vocational renewal are essential to keep them strong in their own identity and calling, and to prevent possible vicarious traumatization.

At the heart of this complexity is a fundamental concern that we all share for the dignity of human life. As we talk together about the role that military chaplains can play in preventing human rights violations in the emerging security environment, let us keep this fundamental concern always before us. Thank you.