

Obama awards Catholic army chaplain Medal of Honor

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A candidate for sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President Obama Thursday (April 11) at the White House.

The Rev. Emil Kapaun, a priest who served as an Army chaplain in the Korean War, was recognized for his bravery on the battlefield and in a prisoner-of-war camp.

During battles, Kapaun would run into enemy fire to save wounded Americans or comfort the dying. When he was captured and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp, he defied the guards in order to care for other soldiers, physically and spiritually, until he died in 1951.

"Father Kapaun has been called a shepherd in combat boots," Obama said. "His fellow soldiers, who felt his grace and his mercy, called him a saint -- a blessing from God. ... I can't imagine a better example for all of us."

Obama presented the medal to Ray Kapaun, Emil Kapaun's nephew.

Several POWs who survived the camp also attended the White House ceremony. Ray Kapaun said that though he never knew his uncle, their stories have brought Emil Kapaun to life for him.

"If not for these men, I may not have had such a lifelong personal relationship with my uncle," Ray Kapaun said. "I thank them dearly and honor them today for having the strength to survive."

The POWs who survived the camp have been petitioning for the past 60 years to have Kapaun awarded the military's highest honor. The Rev. John Hotze, who began the investigation for Kapaun's sainthood in the Catholic Church, said the medal was a "long deserved recognition to his service to his fellow soldiers."

In 1993, Kapaun was declared a "Servant of God," the first step towards sainthood in the Catholic Church. For Kapaun to reach canonization, the Vatican must find proof of two miracles attributed to Kapaun's intercession.