

Soldier saints, then and now

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From All Saints until Veterans Day, I'm posting a blog series on soldier saints at [Centurions Guild](#). "Ten Saints, Ten Days" explores ten lives, their context, and their relevance to soldiers today. In the Bible, the number ten signifies completion and wholeness—something many soldiers today do not feel. The moral complexity of their service is too often brushed away with a quick "thank you" or an upgrade to first class. But soldiers' experiences, their testimonies, are part and parcel to the integrity of the church—especially in this time of war.

A theologically credible account of war requires the voice of soldiers, the actual bodies that participate in it. Yet many theological perspectives—from just war and pacifist traditions alike—have little to say to grunts slogging along in the desert or trudging along a mountain pass, hoping to make spiritual sense of their experience. Lives hang in the balance, lives swept up by the poverty draft and, too often, bulldozed into immateriality by the bludgeon of ideological rhetoric.

Being the body of Christ to those left isolated by the silence war creates requires a deeper understanding of their unique experience of sin and suffering. It requires seeking soldiers out, seeing them, hearing them, and embracing them as living members of the church—because that's what they are. Christians do not get to "it is finished" without the witness of a centurion holding a weapon of war, the same one used to pierce Jesus' side.

My interest in soldier saints emerged from observing the common veneration of service members and, by extension, their military service. To support "the troops" drowns individual soldiers in the ocean of some amorphous blob called "the military," flattening the incredible experiential and ideological diversity within the armed forces. Patriotism can be blindly uncritical and disengaged when it venerates soldiers.

So can pacifism when it vilifies or disregards them. The letters from Augustine—claimed by just warriors as their earliest proponent—to the military

leaders Boniface and Marcellinus are rightly read as a pastoral response to a particular situation, not the source of some systematic paradigm. But that doesn't mean there's nothing about military service that can or should be held up as theologically compelling.

There are soldiers in the New Testament who follow Jesus, of course. What's more, there are hundreds of years of martial history from which we can draw pacific substance. If you do "anti-recruitment" work, then read about how Maximilian refused to wear the equivalent of dog tags. If you protest against empire, then you have George, the patron of England, in your corner! Do you support war resisters in Canada? John Vianney, the patron saint of all priests, knows the public shaming of draft dodgers and deserters well, because he was one himself. If you want more food for thought, [head to Centurions Guild](#) and count down the days until Veterans Day with us.

No conversation about the modern military in the West can ignore the elephant in the room: suicide. Soldiers largely get one of two messages from society: they are told they are heroes, or they are told nothing at all. I'm convinced the silence is even more deafening and dangerous than the platitudinous gratitude that so many vets have already publicly criticized.

Stories of warriors past are marked by the same despair as those from today: substance abuse, loss of relationships and property, mental breakdown, reckless behavior, suicide. Soldier saints remind us that stories from the military community can be, have been, and must be integrated into the story of the church. These stories must be told because there is no silence that God cannot break. Words have power to break terrible silence—as God's words did at creation, as Jesus' words of forgiveness did on the cross.

Saints lives are letters to those soldier saints today who feel the burning heat of hell at their back, who want to believe that the silence of the grave will be the last, lamentable, lonesome word. But the first, last, and only true word belongs to the many-membered body of Christ. What would it take to take war and veterans seriously, to actively choose them and their pain as worthy of incarnation, as a legitimate force upon our theological attention?