

My Witness

Thank you to my friends at AMI for inviting me // especial thank you to our hosts.

My name is Neil Galloway, like you all was until recently a member of the armed forces. I have proudly served in the Royal Air Force for 25 years and was recently Ordained as a Catholic Permanent Deacon.

How did I get here? What brought me to this point in my life?

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I served several operational tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan the experiences I had brought me even more firmly to the belief that my calling was real and it was time to accept it.

It's not been easy, there is no sure certainty, no blinding light, no booming voice from the clouds. In truth it's that wee small voice, the niggles, the itch that won't go away no matter what you do. I have tried to ignore it, I have hidden from it, enveloping myself in my career and service life. I have tried to fill the hole where it was with excitement, adventure, even charity work. But in the end I faced it, I turned to it, listened to it, I let it in and asked the questions I think we all have.

“What do you want from me?” and “Why me?”

I tired the “it can't be me” and the “I'm not good enough” excuse, but when you do finally stop the only question left really is “who am I to say no to you Lord!”

You see I could not escape from him, he was everywhere I looked, he was in every person and situation I encountered,. In the faces of the people I met, in the eyes for the people I love, in the world around me. I found him in the Afghan sunset, in the night sky of the Iraqi desert, I saw him in the children and the villagers I met. He was there in the good things and even there in the bad, I could even hear him in my fear.

With the help of Chaplains and friends I came to a decision, it was very scary but once you just learn to accept and let go of the fears it all seems so natural, seems to make so much sense and you end up asking why you avoided it for so long.

Now I suppose that at first the thought of someone from the Military joining the Church seems somewhat of a contradiction in terms and to some people it would seem to be a rather Politically Incorrect idea.

However as the individual who has served his entire adult life in the Military before now coming to Holy Orders, I can fully appreciate both roles and say that the Clergy and the Military have much more in common than might first appear.

From Soldier to Soldier of Christ, both are a vocation, a way of life, not merely a career path or job, both deserve serious consideration and place heavy demands

upon their members. Both have an ordered and formal way of life, a hierarchical and regimented structure. Both steeped in history and tradition, ceremonials and uniforms. But most importantly, at their heart both exist to serve. True they serve in what at first glance may be totally different ways but, at their core, service for the greater good.

This service is at the heart of the diaconal calling, a ministry that is most often described as one of service to the Word, the Altar and to Charity. Historically the Diaconate served, in practical ways the communities in which they lived. In the current day Deacons fulfil a wide variety of roles within both the Church and community, some working as full time ministers of the Church, while others maintain their secular employment while living their ministry.

For myself as one who was a combatant member for the armed forces I had to , before my ordination, relinquish my rank, service, status and way of life. This is indeed an unusual situation if not unique; however it affords me to opportunity to fully explore my Diaconal Ministry within my first two years after ordination.

Coming from an armed forces background my hope and intent is to return to the military as a Chaplain after an initial two year period of formational experience within Middlesbrough Diocese.

I have already witnessed a wide range of Diaconal Ministry both in the UK and abroad through my service work and that of my position as a delegate to the Apostolate Militare International. I have seen Deacons at work in all manner of roles and responsibilities, from parish work, charity outreach, international relief, school teaching, seminary lecturing, even Chaplain in Chief of the Dutch armed forces, but most prominently in hospital, school, military and prison chaplaincy.

I have new and exciting challenges ahead of me and as I am quickly learning, you just never know where the Lord is leading you.

We all have our place, our work to do, our calling, our part in the work of the harvest. All you have to do is “listen with the ear of your hearts” so that so that you too can do the master will. You too can be Soldiers of Christ.

After all “I am not good enough” and ”I am too busy” are just another way of saying No! And who are we to say No to him.

Christ uncovered faith in a soldier - Eucharistic Prayer - and this is pronounced every time we go to go to the Eucharist in the prayer of the Centurion.

Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

We are called to be servants of the servant king, and I hope to serve the men and woman of the British armed forces in the good and the bad, the happy and the sad times.

This week we will discuss the how we honour our brothers and sisters killed in war and this is one of the pillars of Military Chaplaincy and for us all. But we must ask ourselves the question.

When the bands finish playing, when the prayers have all been said, when the wreaths and flowers have all been layed, who will remain?

Four figures remain, the first two are servicemen, soldiers. The first sits in his wheelchair, his scars for the world to see. He has given his youth and broken his body in service of his country. Who will be there when he can't cope, when he needs help.

Next to him, his friend, he stands tall and straight, in his uniform with his medals. No one can see his scars, they are in his mind and in his heart. Who will be there for him when the terrors come in the night.

The last two figures are the saddest of all, a widow stands alone, she has lost the love of her life, he has not come home. Who will be there for her in the despair and darkness of her grief. Who will be there to help her cope in here life alone, a single mother.

Lastly, and worst of all, a little girl holds her mother's hand. Her Daddy did not come home, he wont be there for Christmas, he won't see her school play, he wont be there to wipe away her tear and kiss her hurt all better. He wont be there to walk his little princess down the isle on her wedding day. Who will be there for her as she asks why mummy is crying.

I have been called - My place is to be there.

I was privileged to serve alongside some of the most outstanding men and woman of our age. I will be honour to serve them and their families as their chaplain.