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DOI: 10.2478/cmc-2025-0020

EDITORIAL

MODERN PASTORAL CARE IN THE ARMED FORCES

Introduction

Amid shifting geopolitical circumstances, the European security space is once again confronted by the need to raise defence capabilities, expand military contingents, and even reconsider the reintroduction of conscription. Many states emphasize that a strong military is a key deterrent and security shield – an outlook also clearly articulated as a doctrinal premise by the North Atlantic Alliance (Ristevska, 2024). Within NATO, however, it is increasingly evident that military strength is not merely a function of weapons, numbers, and logistics; it also requires an inner state of moral and spiritual resilience that only comprehensive support to service members, including at the spiritual-ethical level, can provide. This is well understood in the Slovenian Armed Forces, where a Military Vicariate has been operating since 2000.

Within this framework, structured forms of military spiritual care are gaining ground, as modern militaries, even the most technologically advanced, recognize that moral resilience and spiritual stability are crucial components of defence capability. It is no coincidence that military spiritual care has existed virtually since the earliest historical records of organized armies. The history of the armed forces is also a history of the spiritual accompaniment of soldiers, a fact indirectly acknowledged today by the Geneva Conventions, which classify military chaplains and medical personnel as non-combatants with special protected status (Kocjančič, 2021a; Kocjančič, 2021b; Primc, 2025; Liuski, Ubani, 2020; Bartles-Smith, 2025).

To understand why armed forces maintain systems of spiritual (pastoral) care today, it is helpful to briefly examine their historical development, from the first standing armies in Mesopotamia to contemporary models found in NATO member states and other military structures where spiritual care is organized in various forms (Kocjančič, 2021b).

1 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The connection between the military and religion has accompanied humankind since its earliest days. Its most recognizable expression is the military chaplain: the person in the unit who provides rites, consolation, moral reflection, and spiritual support. Spiritual care typically strengthened wherever permanent military structures emerged; the army was no longer just seasonal but a lasting institution which also required ongoing pastoral care (Hassner, 2013).

An early example of such institutionalization can be found under the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (8th century BCE); priests accompanied his army in an organized way and attended to soldiers' religious needs. Similar practices appeared in the Greek world: the *Iliad* mentions priests and seers whose rituals and interpretations of omens influenced commanders' decisions. Before battles, sacrifices were made to seek the gods' favour – gestures which also strengthened morale. The Roman army likewise understood success as dependent on divine will: altars and shrines stood in the camps, and priests observed signs and informed commanders whether the gods supported their campaign. Religion thus played a dual role: ensuring divine favour while maintaining internal cohesion and courage (Kocjančič, 2021b).

2 CHRISTIANITY AND THE INTRODUCTION OF SPIRITUAL CARE

A turning point occurred in the 4th century, when the Roman state first recognized and then adopted Christianity. Christians became the dominant community, and priests, initially in an unsystematic way, began appearing in units as spiritual shepherds. The Church had to reconsider its relationship with the military; the early ideal that a Christian should not serve as a soldier except in defence of the innocent was gradually replaced by the doctrine of just war (Augustine), which, under certain conditions, legitimized military service and thus established the need for a spiritual companion within the unit. The first clearly documented example of a standing priestly service for the army is a letter by Pope Pelagius I (556–561), which assigned a dedicated priest, accompanied by a deacon and subdeacon, to the Byzantine garrison at Centumcellae, intended exclusively for the pastoral care of soldiers. In the following centuries, we still cannot speak of military chaplaincy in today's sense; some priests accompanied the troops of the Germanic people, yet they also bore arms. Consequently, a principle gradually took hold that a cleric does not shed blood and does not take part in combat. A key milestone was the Frankish church council, the Concilium Germanicum (742), which explicitly forbade clerics to carry weapons. The ban became established only slowly in practice, but it shaped the archetype of the unarmed spiritual companion. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) reaffirmed the prohibition on clerical participation in violence, and emphasized that their mission was pastoral, not warlike (Bergen, 2004).

With the early modern period and the rise of standing armies, both Catholic and Protestant states deliberately integrated permanent pastoral (spiritual) care into military structures. Organized systems of military pastoral care emerged, with defined tasks, responsibilities, and procedures for cooperation with military command. Thus the foundations were laid for the modern, institutionally regulated spiritual (pastoral) care of the armed forces, whose mission is to accompany soldiers in faith, care for their spiritual well-being, strengthen the community's moral compass, and contribute to the internal cohesion of units – a dimension that, in wartime, is often as decisive as weaponry (Kocjančič, 2021b; Muršič Klenar, 2024; O'Malley, 2009).

3 SPIRITUAL CARE UNDER THE HABSBURG SCEPTRE AND IN THE SLOVENE LANDS

Because the Slovene lands were for centuries part of the Habsburg Monarchy, military spiritual care developed here within its institutional framework. The first organized outlines date to the 16th century, with a turning point brought by a papal brief of 1643 which granted the Emperor's confessor episcopal authority over the entire army in war and peace. With this, the military clergy for the first time acquired a clear canonical status. The next important step was the establishment of the Apostolic Military Vicariate (1773); at the head of a hierarchically organized chaplaincy stood the Apostolic Field Vicar (*Apostolischer Feldvikar*), responsible for discipline, pastoral matters, and coordination with military and state authorities (Šimac, 2014).

As a multiethnic and multiconfessional polity, the monarchy had to provide care for all officially recognized denominations. In 1758 Orthodox chaplains were officially permitted in the units of the Military Frontier, and in 1779 also Greek Catholic chaplains (initially in Galicia). Attempts to include Protestant preachers during Joseph II's Toleration Patent met resistance, but after 1832 the first Evangelical pastors were assigned to units in the Lombardy-Venetia kingdom. An imperial decree of 1860 systematically provided for Evangelical pastors across garrisons (the Augsburg and Helvetic confessions). After the reorganization of the empire into the Dual Monarchy (1867), an 1868 reform of the armed forces likewise restructured military spiritual care, with the law finally ranking chaplains among military officers with full officers' rights, and clearly defining them as non-combatants. Following the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1878), Muslims also entered the army, and the state introduced military imams. For Jewish soldiers, an 1895 regulation provided for the mobilization of military rabbis from the reserves in wartime. By the eve of the First World War, the monarchy had established the most comprehensive multiconfessional system of spiritual care for all seven recognized communities (Houlihan, 2015; Šimac, 2014).

Men from the Slovene lands were present among the chaplains throughout. In the 19th century the 'regimental fathers' enjoyed great esteem; unarmed yet exceptionally courageous, they cared for the wounded and dying and strengthened morale.

The Styrian Frančišek Lavrenčič, chaplain to Maribor's 47th Infantry Regiment, distinguished himself in the wars of 1848–1849 to such an extent that Field Marshal Radetzky pinned on him the gold priestly merit cross. Chaplains also carried out tasks which went beyond a narrow pastoral mission: owing to their language skills, they were key intermediaries in multiethnic units. Curate Janez Tomše in 1854, serving with the 16th Infantry Regiment, acted as interpreter between Italians, the command, and around three hundred Slovene recruits, thereby ensuring discipline and comprehension of orders (Šimac, 2014).

Daily orders and decorations up to the First World War often mention Slovene names; the first chaplain to fall in the monarchy was the Slovene Valentin Rozman (August 1914), a symbolic sign that chaplains shared the soldiers' fate. After the collapse of the Monarchy, the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (SHS) initially retained the service: on 2 November 1918, Janez Klobovs became military superior, and the Croat Dr Ferdo Rožić military vicar. A 1920 legal decree in the Kingdom of SCS confirmed their presence, while the 1929 Act downgraded them from officers to civilian employees subordinate to junior officers. Despite their weakened authority, they remained moral advisers to the command (Milkić, 2005; Šimac, 2014). During the Second World War, priests were present in all formations – from the partisans to the occupiers' units. After the war, the new authorities discontinued spiritual care in the army; only after the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 did the new states, following Western models, again begin to introduce pastoral care in the armed forces.

4 LOOKING AHEAD: THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME

The Military Vicariate of the Slovenian Armed Forces, established in 2000, marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of its work in 2025. During this period, military spiritual care has gained institutional stability, set up an organizational structure, and become a recognized element of the Republic of Slovenia's defence system. Slovenia's contemporary pastoral identity has been shaped not only at home, but also through concrete experience in peacekeeping and stabilization missions abroad (KFOR, ISAF, UNIFIL, EUTM Mali, EUFOR Althea, etc.), to which Slovenian service members have been deployed. The military chaplains and pastoral assistants accompanying them have not only provided liturgy, they have often acted as cultural intermediaries, helping commanders and troops understand the religious sensitivities of local populations, establish relations with religious leaders on the ground, and prevent cultural frictions, an essential component of non-kinetic stabilization in modern operations (Muršič Klenar, 2024).

The experience gained has shown that military pastoral care must be understood more broadly, as an element of moral resilience, cultural intelligence, and ethical orientation within a changing security environment. Lessons learned in the field and through practical experience align with NATO doctrine (AJP-1), which emphasizes that a unit cannot withstand operational pressures without moral and spiritual cohesion, defined in doctrinal documents as moral and spiritual resilience,

an element equal in weight to psychological, medical, and logistical support in the military (Grimell, 2024).

Confrontation with new technologies, the cyber domain, other forms of warfare, and especially with a different soldier profile – the digital generation, which perceives and communicates in the world differently from previous generations – raises the question of how military spiritual care can continue to fulfil its mission effectively. The future development of military pastoral care will require new modes of engagement (already pursued in some places, for example through apps), a presence in digital media, informal points of contact, and a subtler yet more personally demanding accompaniment of the soldier as a person, not merely as a member of a hierarchical structure. Such questions arise across all armed forces, including the Slovenian Armed Forces, which also faces several other strategic issues: how to develop the chaplaincy towards a more multiconfessional model; how to align it with NATO member practices; and how to design a comprehensive, holistic model of spiritual care comparable to solutions found in other militaries (Brekke, Tikhonov, 2016; Rosén, 2024; Van Dress, 2024).

On the Vicariate's twenty-fifth anniversary, contributions from domestic and foreign authors chiefly invite reflection on the future role of spiritual care within the defence system – one that considers not only structures and combat readiness, but also the inner, holistic care of the soldier, the principal strength of the armed forces.

5 CONTENTS

Matjaž Muršič Klenar, in his article *Spiritual care in the armed forces in the age of authenticity*, places military spiritual care within the postmodern 'Age of Authenticity' of Charles Taylor, characterized by expressive individualism and worldview pluralism. In such a context, chaplaincy cannot be confined to a pastoral/sacramental dimension; it must offer a holistic, individualized approach. The chaplain's role is therefore expanding, from cooperating in medical/psychological care and crisis interventions, to advising commanders on moral issues and supporting families and veterans.

In *Enhancing military chaplaincy in Slovenia: A comparative analysis and recommendations from four NATO allies*, **Teodora Tea Ristevska** and **Jelena Juvan** compared Slovenia's Military Vicariate with the models of the United States, Croatia, Germany, and the United Kingdom. They found that Slovenia has established a modern, secular system grounded in national legislation, thereby avoiding dependence on the concordat arrangements typical of Croatia. Despite a clear legal framework and high financial transparency (comparable to the US and Germany), in practice a gap remains in pluralism: provision is predominantly mono-confessional (Catholic and Lutheran), while Muslims and Orthodox Christians have limited access and funding.

Angelika Dörfler-Dierken and **Mats Nowak**, in their study *Military chaplaincy in Slovenia in the light of military chaplaincy in other states in western Europe*, compare the development and integration of chaplaincy in post-socialist Slovenia with the long-established systems of Western European allies. The Slovenian model (since 2000) has been fully integrated; chaplains are state-paid military employees who nonetheless follow a dual hierarchy: military and ecclesiastical. Their role is crucial in ethical formation and in promoting a liberal, peace-oriented understanding of the military profession; thus, they act as ‘bridge-builders’ between cultures. Empirical data, however, show that the system remains strictly bi-confessional (Catholic and Lutheran) and does not include other religious or worldview communities, despite a plural society. Two major challenges are the lack of organized structures for international cooperation within NATO, and the complex triple ecclesiastical affiliation of Catholic chaplains.

In the contribution *Mission of the military muftiate in the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, **Muhamed Okić** analyses the beginnings, organization, and strategic goals of the military muftiate in the Bosnian defence system. Its core mission is to provide institutional religious care for Muslim personnel, thereby strengthening their moral and spiritual integrity for the effective performance of military duties. The author underlines the fact that Islamic sources understand war exclusively as defensive: the values of peace, life, and homeland defence are binding for every Muslim soldier. The muftiate’s special position, direct communication with the Minister of Defence, and cooperation at the top levels of the department, confirms the country’s Euro-Atlantic orientation and respect for religious freedoms within the defence system.

Joseph Powell has contributed the article ‘*Selassie is the chaplain*’: *Contextualising Rastafari chaplaincy provision in the British Armed Forces*, in which he examines the historically and epistemologically significant decision by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) to appoint the first Rastafari chaplain to support a relatively sizeable community (over 1,500 personnel). It represents a landmark recognition of a spirituality that Britain’s colonial authorities once suppressed as subversive. The author analyses both internal and external tensions: the anti-colonial core of Rastafari sits uneasily with hierarchical military service, and an additional obstacle is the community’s horizontal organization without a central body for the ordination/accreditation of chaplains.

Dejan Okovič and **Mihael Plevnik**, in their article *Ethics management and the role of military leadership in the Slovenian Armed Forces*, analysed legal and strategic documents and professional and scholarly literature, and necessarily limited empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews with members of the Slovenian Armed Forces, which nevertheless provided at least an illustrative picture. The results show that the ethical infrastructure in the SAF is formally established, but ethical principles are only partially realized in practice, primarily due to a lack of systemic

incentives and clear evaluation mechanisms, and the uneven implementation of the Concept of Military Leadership in the Slovenian Armed Forces.

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Disclaimer: This article was written in the framework of the targeted research project V5-24003 Religious and Spiritual Care for Members of the Slovenian Armed Forces in the 21st Century, co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS) and the Slovenian Ministry of Defence.

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* Prispevki, objavljeni v *Sodobnih vojaških izzivih*, niso uradno stališče Slovenske vojske niti organov, iz katerih so avtorji prispevkov.

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