

2013 - Ceremonial Unit

They call it “baptism by fire.” My first experience with the Ceremonial Unit was very shortly after I was commissioned as the newest chaplain for the Nassau County Police Department. An officer had just died and I was to meet the Ceremonial Unit at the family’s home to discuss arrangements for his funeral. As a priest I have been at the epicenter of death and crises many times, but I was in uncharted waters as the new chaplain for the Nassau County Police Department. I was told to meet with a Sgt. LeBrun at the family’s home. The first thing I noticed was that Sgt. LeBrun arrived in full uniform to meet with the family, which impressed upon me the gravity and dignity of what we were about to do...and the seriousness with which Sgt. LeBrun took his office. Subsequently there were more times I was privileged to be involved with the Ceremonial Unit: Califano, Brietkopf, Catapano, Olivieri, Lopez. Wakes, funerals, memorials, graduations, wreath laying, retirements. Albany, Washington, Headquarters, Ground Zero. And in all those times it was always with the greatest care, respect and patience that Sgt. LeBrun and the members of the Ceremonial Unit cared for those entrusted to them. Scared and grieving parents and children in hospital trauma rooms, thousands of officers at funerals, families planning funerals, coordinating a wake for hundreds, helicopter fly-overs, finding a cemetery, coordinating with a parish church. No room for mistakes. Nothing ever omitted. Everything always accomplished.

It is this Unit which has as one of its many duties, to keep everyone together. Ritual is important because it keeps us united in tradition; and tradition keeps us united with one another and with those who have gone before us. Often these sacred rituals are done in silence...without a single word: a salute, a procession, a wreath laying, standing at attention, or simply just one’s presence. In a crisis, Fr. Joe and I are one of the first ones to trauma rooms in hospitals when an officer has fallen. Usually we arrive before the families have arrived, so we bless the body and await the arrival of the family members to notify them. There are two things I notice at this point: the steady arrival of Police Officers who silently line the halls of the emergency room. The key word is “silent.” Their silent presence is palpable as they stand against the walls. When the priests escort the deceased body through this sea of blue one can in fact feel the fraternal presence. It is an awe-inspiring and emotional moment. The second thing that takes place is when the Ceremonial Unit takes over. Slowly, patiently, every preliminary detail is gone over with the family. And every 15 minutes Sgt. LeBrun will say: “Let’s take a break.”

In putting together these few thoughts I realize that the thoughts are very serious and emotional for all involved at the time, but there is no other way to explain it. This is what the Ceremonial Unit does. It carries us through crises through the tradition of ritual. They carry through when many are too distraught to go on. That’s why we feel the lump in the throat when they do what they do.

Conversely, I have enjoyed the off-duty company shared by this special unit as well. Traveling with them to Albany for the State Memorial and Mass last year was a great experience for me to share in their fraternity and revelry. I enjoyed spending a few days with the group and enjoyed going out to dinner with them after a day of ceremonies. They are an elite and indispensable part of the fraternity most worthy of this award.

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You all receive this award from a grateful fraternity and a grateful community: Richard, Michael, Steven, Fintan, Linda, Michelle, Michael, Daniel, Anthony, Robert, Peter, Scott, Richard, John, Catherine, Robert, Daniel and Terrance.

Lastly, and on a very personal note, I will always be grateful to the Ceremonials Unit for their unexpected presence at my own mother's wake and funeral in December. In those days I was able to understand first-hand what it is like to be the recipient of the graciousness of the Ceremonial Unit. In Catholic parlance, we call that "grace." The help that God gives us to respond freely to His call to service. That is what they do; they bring God's Grace to difficult times. They do it well. They do it every time.

Sgt. Richard Le Brun
Sgt. Michael Savino
Det. Steven Higgins
Det. Fintan McCormac
PO Linda Brymer
PO Michelle Garry
PO Michael Harnedy
PO Daniel Hastings
PO Anthony Jones
PO Robert Kurtz
PO Peter Matchekosky
PO Scott McKendrick
PO Richard McKeon
PO John Meehan
PO Catherine Piccininni
PO Robert Puka
PO Daniel Reilly
PO Terrance Walsh