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Between the Front Line and Inner Conflict: Emotions in the Notes of Military Chaplains

Med fronto in notranjim konfliktom: čustva v zapiskih vojaških kaplanov

Abstract: This article[1] presents an attempt to analyse the personal notes of Slovenian military chaplains from the First World War in the context of the "emotional front line". Based on fragments from memoirs, letters and rare diary entries by Slovenian military chaplains (e.g. Janez Cegnar, Leopold Turšič, Januš Golec), it was possible to place them in a comparative framework alongside chaplains of other belligerent armed forces and the findings of contemporary researchers who are dedicated to this topic. From this material, it can be deduced that the Slovenian sources are only part of a broader pattern in which military chaplains became observers, comforters and chroniclers of painful and indescribable traumatic events on the front lines of the First World War – events that also left a deep mark on them.

Keywords: military chaplains, First World War, emotions, records, remembrance, pastoral care, Slovenian military chaplains, comparative research

Povzetek: Prispevek predstavlja poskus analize osebnih zapisov slovenskih vojaških duhovnikov iz prve svetovne vojne v kontekstu t. i. ‚čustvene fronte'. Na podlagi fragmentov iz spominskih zapisov, pisem in redkih dnevniških notic slovenskih duhovnikov (npr. Janeza Cegnarja, Leopolda Turšiča, Januša Golca) je bilo te mogoče vpeti v primerjalni okvir predstavnikov duhovne oskrbe oboroženih sil drugih vojskujočih se držav in ugotovitve sodobnih raziskovalcev, ki se posvečajo tej tematiki. Iz pregledanega je mogoče razbrati, da so slovenski vpisi le del širšega vzorca, v katerem so vojni kurati postali opazovalci, tolažniki in kronisti bolečih in neopisljivih travmatičnih dogodkov na frontnih črtah prve svetovne vojne – dogodkov, ki so še kako zaznamovali tudi njih same.

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Ključne besede: vojaški kurati, prva svetovna vojna, čustva, zapisi, spominjanje, pastorala, slovenski vojaški kurati

1. Introduction

In the light of today's increasingly unstable geopolitical and security environment, spiritual care for the armed forces has been attracting growing interest among both domestic (Kocjančič 2021; Primc 2025) and foreign researchers (Grimell 2025a; 2025b; 2025c). Modern armed forces operate not only in large-scale interstate conflicts but increasingly in less-than-war situations – peacekeeping, crisis-response, humanitarian missions, hybrid conflicts and protracted deployments that generate distinct moral, psychological and spiritual pressures. These dynamics raise new questions about spiritual care for increasingly diverse military communities, including female soldiers (Brožič 2017) and personnel with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Vuk 2022), as well as reservists, medics, drone operators and intelligence analysts. Likewise, the expansion of humanistic and non-religious spiritual care, trauma-informed chaplaincy and research on moral injury calls for interdisciplinary approaches that combine historical insight with psychology, anthropology, gender studies and contemporary military ethics.

Any attempt to understand contemporary forms of military chaplaincy inevitably has to reckon with their historical predecessors and earlier models of spiritual care in the armed forces. Over the last decades, interest in this type of historical research has also increased, with the First World War emerging as a particularly important field of investigation (Hagerty 2017; Appelbaum 2014). This renewed attention has also reshaped how the war itself is approached, encouraging scholars to look beyond traditional military and political narratives.

In historical narratives, the First World War is still largely discussed in terms of battles, political intrigues, and various special topics. With each newly discovered piece of correspondence from soldiers, military officers, and civilians who were part of this war, with each newly discovered diary entry, the feelings and experiences of the direct participants, who tried to convey them and put them on paper, are revealed to contemporaries and historians. From these preserved, yellowed pages, we learn a great deal about what happened on the front lines, about everyday life, the presence of death and the battles that took place not only on the front between two warring opponents, but also within each of the soldiers; on the *invisible front (Nevidna fronta)*, to borrow the title of the book by Vladimir Vauhnik (1896–1955), a Slovenian military officer and later intelligence officer (Vauhnik 1965). This invisible front line, in the form of existential questions about meaning, suffering and powerlessness, was sometimes hidden in words, in the written verses of this or that poem, sometimes expressed in idiosyncratic prayerful exclamations, even more often in the silence between the lines. Stèphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Anette Becker put it brilliantly: "When we read the soldiers' correspondence and diaries, and examine the marks and traces they left behind,

even the graffiti on the walls of the trenches they lived in, we discover a genuine spirituality of the front." (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2002, 114) Oto Luthar drew attention to this exploration of the imaginary, to the invisible spiritual events and to the shift in research towards the history of emotions and memory in Slovenian historiography. In his study, he writes, among other things:

> "The war not only broke up families, destroyed economic systems and transformed countries, but also changed language, the way people felt and, last but not least, the way they communicated their feelings. Above all, it aroused in people, both soldiers and civilians, the need to express their fear and horror of the conditions caused by the war. Thousands of people who had felt no need to put their feelings into words before the war became writers and poets virtually overnight. Day after day, countless diaries were written, and day after day, especially in Europe, countless letters were written in an attempt to dispel worries and uncertainties." (Luthar 2000, 10)

This invisible front line of emotions also affected military chaplains, whose primary purpose was to provide spiritual care for the military. Many of them became war correspondents, diarists and meditators, who tried to escape from this uncertainty and anxiety with the help of the written word. While they were entrusted with bringing God's closeness to others, they themselves encountered mud, screams, dying for a fistful of stones, questions about meaning, inner anxieties and nights without comfort. As Thomas Merton (1915–1968) reflected while reading St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) and his famous *Dark Night of the Soul*, the passage through darkness is not abandonment but purification and liberation. As he writes: "The purpose of the dark nights, as St. John of the Cross shows, is not simply to punish and afflict the heart of man, but to liberate, to purify and to enlighten in perfect love. The way that leads through dread goes not to despair but to perfect joy, not to hell but to heaven." (Merton 1969, 148) It was precisely into such *dark nights* that some military chaplains themselves were often drawn.

Contemporary research on moral injury offers an important conceptual lens for understanding these experiences. Moral injury, as defined by Brett Litz and colleagues, refers to the inner fracture that occurs when individuals perpetrate, witness, or are unable to prevent acts that violate their deeply held moral beliefs and expectations (Litz et al. 2009). Modern theory emphasizes that such moral disruptions affect not only soldiers but also those who care for them – chaplains, medics, stretcher-bearers, and other companions of the wounded. In this sense, Habsburg military chaplains, like their counterparts in other armies, often carried the weight of moral rupture themselves, repeatedly exposed to death, fear, and the emotional devastation of others. Their writings reveal that they were not only healers of wounds but also bearers of their own, formed in the shadow of the "emotional front line."

In memoirs and literature, they were most often portrayed as comical, ineffective or even timid characters; just think of Hašek's immortal curate Katz or the

descriptions in Robert Graves' memoirs *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Recent historical research has thoroughly shaken this image and, in many cases, completely overturned it. As Alison M. Brown (1996) showed in the first systematic study devoted to British military chaplains in the First World War, archival sources, letters and diaries paint a completely different picture of priests who accompanied soldiers even in the trenches themselves. Similarly, Edward Madigan (2011) challenges and debunks stereotypical images of timid priests; many of them voluntarily went to the front line and, through the suffering they shared with the soldiers, earned their deep respect. Michael Snape, a well-known British historian who deals specifically with these issues, has, on the basis of diaries, archival records and material held by the Imperial War Museum, taken a strong stand against the image of chaplains that did not stem from real experiences at the front, but rather from the post-war anti-clerical atmosphere and literary myths. Perhaps this is why he gave his article the subtitle: "Goodbye to 'Goodbye to All That.'" (2011)

Similar studies have also appeared elsewhere; in France, for example, Xavier Boniface (2017), based on archival documents and his own previous research, presented an overview of the organisation of spiritual care and the important role of Catholic chaplains in the French armed forces during the First World War in his article "Les aumôniers aux armées en 1914–1918." He also drew attention to individual diary entries by chaplains, which have recently become available to the wider public and represent their views and experiences of the horrors of the battlefield. He particularly highlighted the diary entries of the Lazarist military chaplain Jean-Emile Anizan (1853–1928), later founder of the Sons of Charity, which were published in 2015. In the diary, we can follow the military chaplain's experience of the horrors of Verdun and his struggle with both the emotional world of suffering soldiers and his own experience of God's silence (2015). Just like Boniface, Anita Rasi May has also examined the spiritual care of the French armed forces. In her study *Patriot Priests: French Catholic Clergy and National Identity in World War I* (2018), she emphasizes that the massive presence of Catholic priests at the front — as chaplains, stretcher-bearers, and medical orderlies — served as a bridge between the Church and the secular Third Republic. Through the language of sacrifice for the homeland and care for the wounded, these "patriotic priests" interpreted military sacrifice simultaneously as a religious and national act, and after the war they contributed significantly to the renewed legitimacy of the Church in French society.

Like the French and British military chaplains, American historian Patrick J. Houlihan (2015) wrote about the Habsburg and German spiritual care. His transnational study compares the experience of war on the German and Austro-Hungarian sides. He also points out turning points, such as 1916, when the rhetoric of military chaplains about the so-called just war was replaced by themes touching on existential questions. Alongside Houlihan, Ionela Zaharia-Schintler has examined military chaplains in Austria-Hungary, focusing in particular on Romanian military chaplains during the First World War (2014; 2017), while in the Slovenian context this topic has been studied by Miha Šimac (2014; 2018).

However, while these studies focus more on comprehensive reviews and the structure of military chaplaincy, individual researchers also devote more attention to individuals or groups of military chaplains, their experiences of the horrors of war, which affected their emotions, raised questions and tested their faith. Such is the study of Australian chaplain William McKenzie (Reynaud et al. 2016), which specifically deals with the research of diary entries and letters and the role of so-called narrative therapy; how the written word helped to process traumatic experiences. A similarly extensive diary by French military chaplain Achille Liénart (1884–1973) is discussed by Catherine Masson (2008). Among more recent works is *Moral Injury and a First World War Chaplain: The Life of G.A. Studdert Kennedy* by retired American military chaplain Dayne Edward Nix (2022). Using the example of the famous Anglican military chaplain Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy (Woodbine Willie) (1883–1929), he takes a modern, interdisciplinary approach to examining the spiritual and emotional consequences of war that Kennedy encountered during and after the war. In discussing this historical figure, the author did not hesitate to use contemporary research on the impact of war on the human psyche.

Abroad, more and more researchers are dealing with the topic of military chaplains and their emotions during the horrors of the First World War; however, these issues have not yet been addressed in detail in Slovenian historiography. Pavlina Bobič touched on them only partially in her book *War and Faith: The Catholic Church in Slovenia 1914-1918* (2012; Slovenian translation 2014). Although the book focuses on testimonies of various expressions of faith among the military, with a particular emphasis on the emotional experience of the battlefields, and also mentions the work of military chaplains, it does not deal with them in detail. There are probably at least two reasons for this. In part, the lack of attention to the clergy can be attributed to the fact that military chaplains have not received much attention or systematic research from historians in Slovenian historiography to date. Another, perhaps even more important reason lies in the fact that very few such records written by priests in the Slovenian area have been discovered so far. Those that have been found are mostly scattered throughout newspapers, memoirs and individual diary entries.

This article is therefore only an attempt to outline, on the basis of previously unpublished memoirs and diary entries by Slovenian military priests, their perception of the war, feelings, emotions and questions about meaning into the broader context of the experience of the horrors of war and to compare them with selected records of military chaplains from other warring armies.

2. The First World War and Military Chaplains

In contemporary historiography, as Patrick J. Houlihan points out, it is necessary to be aware that military chaplains were not only spiritual shepherds or "caretakers of souls," but were also exposed to internal struggles and existential questions, as clearly illustrated by the example of the self-questioning of Karl Egger, a Jesuit

chaplain in the imperial army (Houlihan 2015, 218–219). In this sense, military chaplains can also be understood as "wounded believers" – believers who, under the weight of their experiences, no longer face religious and existential questions as representatives of religious communities, but as individuals on a deeply personal level. To understand these "wounded believers" more fully, we must first set them within the social, political and religious landscape that produced them. Their later crises of faith and conscience did not arise in a vacuum, but were rooted in the way chaplains first entered the conflict: as loyal servants of Church and state, carried along by the same currents of patriotism, expectation, and religiously infused nationalism that shaped major combatant nations on the eve of war.

2.1 On the Eve of the First World War

In the summer of 1914, when the Habsburg Empire declared war on Serbia (28 July), almost the whole of Europe suddenly came to life. Calls for mobilisation, men and boys rushing to enlist, the marching of military boots and the rumbling of trains became the sounds of a new era – the wheels of war, which began to turn inexorably. Within a few days, other declarations of war followed, and by mid-August, much of Europe was already at war. All those involved called men and boys to arms, including the spiritual leaders of various religious communities recognised in different countries. Together with soldiers and officers, they marched along paths into the unknown.

As Philip Jenkins (2014, 15) notes, the First World War was fought not only on the battlefields with weapons, but also in the realm of spirit and faith. Almost all European armies had organised spiritual care for their soldiers, as they had to alleviate not only physical fatigue and fear, but also the mental and religious distress of millions of men. For example, on the eve of the war, there were 117 military chaplains, mostly Anglicans, serving in the British Army, supported by 37 so-called territorial chaplains. By the end of the war, there were more than 5,000 of them, belonging to eleven different denominations, of which about 60% were Anglicans and 20% Catholics. They shared the dangers with the soldiers, heard their confessions, buried them and comforted them; a hundred of them were killed, and three were awarded the Victoria Cross (Houlihan 2015, 10; Snape 2008, 183; 2011, 320–321).

In the French armed forces, although the 1880 law abolished the earlier military chaplaincy structure, it still permitted the presence of religious personnel – especially in times of mobilisation – and this interpretation remained valid even after the 1905 separation of Church and State (Čepar 2014, 19; Seigan 2010, 467–488). Thus, on the eve of the First World War, France maintained an organised – though non-hierarchical – system of military pastoral care. At the start of the war, there were around 150 regular Catholic priests, assisted by volunteers and unpaid collaborators; in total, more than 900 Catholic, 90 Protestant priests and 46 Jewish rabbis served during the war. These representatives of religious communities became a symbol of the so-called *union sacrée* – the spiritual unity of the nation at war – in the secular republic (Boniface 2014, 105–122; 2022; 473;

2021). It should not be forgotten that a considerable number of priests had to serve in the army with weapons in their hands, which was often reported in newspapers.

Such requirements were unknown in the Russian imperial army, where at the beginning of the war there were approximately 750–800 active military priests of various faiths – Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran and Jewish – organised according to military districts. Approximately three-quarters of the soldiers were Orthodox, nine percent Catholic and two percent Muslim, reflecting the religious diversity of the multinational imperial army (Karceva 2014, 143–145).

Similar to the Russian imperial army, the Serbian armed forces also took care of religious soldiers. At the beginning of the war, approximately 190 Orthodox military chaplains served in the army. By the end of the war, the number of active priests had risen to 231, including two imams and a rabbi. There were no Catholic military chaplains; Catholics were occasionally cared for by priests from the allied armies (Milkić 2016, 47–52).

In the Habsburg Monarchy, spiritual care was also organised for seven recognised religions. On the eve of the war, there were 186 military chaplains in active service in the armed forces, which proved to be insufficient during mass mobilisation. Numerous reserve chaplains were therefore called up for the war, so that according to official data, by 30 September 1916 there were already almost 2,800 military chaplains of various denominations in the combined army and home guard – including 1,874 Roman Catholics, 177 Greek Catholic and 736 other (non-Catholic) priests (*Pastoralblatt für die k. u. k. Katholische Militär- u. Marinegeistlichkeit* 1916, 27; Šimac 2014, 222–223).

Alongside soldiers and officers, military chaplains – spiritual guides during the apocalypse – also found themselves on the battlefields. At the outbreak of war, priest Jožef Somrek (1871– 1936) wrote: "Nowadays, a priest must not be merely a spectator, but must be an officer on the battlefield of hearts." (*Voditelj v bogoslovnih vedah* 1915, 101–102) Many military chaplains on the fronts of the First World War understood their role in a similar way. The famous English chaplain Geoffery Studdert Kennedy (1883–1929), known as 'Woodbine Willie', emphasised in his speeches and poems the active presence of military chaplains, who must share the fate of soldiers, which he justified with frequently quoted verses from his poem: "I bet my life on Christ – Christ crucified." (Kennedy 1927, 7) Although Somrek was a priest in the rear in 1914, it was precisely such "officers on the battlefield of hearts" that all those who were called up for active service by the authorities of the warring countries as military chaplains or who, in their idealistic conviction, had volunteered for it themselves. Such was the Irish priest William Doyle (1873–1917), who volunteered for military service:

> "I have volunteered for the front as a military chaplain, though perhaps I may never be sent. Naturally I have little attraction for the hardship and suffering the life would mean; but it is a glorious chance of making the 'ould body' bear something for Christ's dear sake. However, what decided

> me in the end was a thought that flashed into my mind when in the chapel: the thought that if I get killed, I shall die a martyr of charity and so the longing of my heart will be gratified. This much my offering myself as chaplain has done for me: it has made me realise that my life may be very short and that I must do all I can for Jesus now." (Doyle 1914, cited in O'Rahilly 2000, 1)

Why some volunteered is, of course, another question; but the fact is that there were many such voluntary enlistments into military service in the Habsburg Empire as well; so many, in fact, that newspapers reported in August 1914: "The War Ministry announces that so many clergy of all denominations have volunteered for service in the army that no more can be accepted. The War Ministry thanks the clergy and asks them to use every opportunity in their pastoral work to awaken patriotic feeling." (*Slovenec* 27. 8. 1914, 3)

2.2 Baptism by Fire

The prevailing belief at the time that the war would be short-lived, and romantic notions of a single decisive battle that would end the war, were shared by soldiers on all sides of the front. The well-known saying "before the leaves fall, we will be home" was probably based on the fact that there had been no major military conflicts in Europe since 1870/71, and therefore several generations had no experiential knowledge of war as such. This is also evident in the diaries of ordinary soldiers. Ivan Matičič (1887–1979), a Slovenian member of the 27th Home Guard Infantry Regiment, wrote about the baptism of fire that he experienced on 26 August 1914:

> "And then they gave us a proper 'blessing' and baptised our regiment and the entire Third Corps with heavy fire and lead. /.../ Our troops marched forward like calves to the slaughterhouse, without a leader, without guidance ... We had always thought that everything would go as smoothly as it had at the training ground and during parades ... But now everything was falling apart, writhing in blood, screaming, hiding, running away ... Everything was crashing, whistling, flying and the Galician fields were covered in blood ... We had never imagined such a war, and our officers had never told us about it. Now they were all surprised and confused, hiding wherever they could, leaving the leadership to young cadets who were not much more capable than the active officers ..." (Matičič 2006, 17)

This was how soldiers experienced their baptism of fire, and military chaplains wrote similarly about their harsh encounters with the reality of war. Canadian Anglican chaplain Frederic George Scott (1861–1944) described his first encounter with the trenches to which he had been sent and one of the first artillery barrages he experienced on the front line at Armentières, France. In his memoirs, he mentions that quite a few shells flew over their heads that afternoon and that "the novelty of the thing made it most interesting" – but much later, with some em-

barrassment, he admits that those first days were "like war in a nursery" and that at that moment "the romance and chivalry of the military profession disappeared forever" (Scott 2009, 25). This is the Slovenian military chaplain of the 97th Infantry Regiment, Januš Golec (1888–1965), who, like Matičič, experienced his baptism of fire at the end of August 1914 in Galicia, realised much earlier. In his memoirs, he described the feelings that overwhelmed him that day:

> "This first clash was something terrible, because for the first time we were almost instantly engulfed and gripped by all the horrors of war. From the front, there was heavy infantry fire and fierce fighting; from the side, enemy artillery rained down on us like hellfire. /…/ As I moved back across the damp, smoke-filled battlefield, I couldn't believe that I had experienced the full horror of war in just a few hours. I realised that all the descriptions of armies and battles I had ever read in my life were not even a shadow of what was happening and being experienced in reality. My first battle! You will remain unforgettable in my memory until the day I die." (*Slovenski gospodar* 25. 1. 1917, 1)

The shift from enthusiasm to disillusionment can also be found in the diary entries of Irish military chaplain Francis Gleeson (1884–1959). The day before the Battle of Aubers Ridge on 8 May 1915, he wrote: "The scenes of enthusiasm are extraordinary … The men all sing hymns, 'Hail Glorious St Patrick' … I go further up – near the trenches, and bid goodbye to al. So sad." After the bloody attack, however, Gleeson wrote in a completely different tone: "What a day for all the Munsters. We lost at least 350 men, between killed and wounded and missing. Spent all night trying to, console, aid, and remove the wounded. It was ghastly to see them lying there in the cold, cheerless outhouses, on bare stretchers with no blankets to cover their freezing limbs..." (Gleeson, diary 8–9 May 1915, cited in O'Riordan 2015)

The brutality of the bloody conflict, witnessed by Gleeson as he confronted the wounded and dying, was also experienced by Austrian military chaplain Karel Drexel (1872–1954) at the beginning of the war in 1914. In his memoirs, he described this first encounter with wounded and dying soldiers as follows:

> "There are no words to describe what it was like. Around four hundred seriously wounded soldiers lay together, wounded in the head, in the stomach, some without arms or legs, two without both legs. In between them lay several hundred more lightly wounded soldiers who also needed care, but could not count on it; everyone had to take care of themselves and each other. The entire space was filled with moans, sighs, groans and cries of pain. 'We are powerless.'" (Drexel 1940, 12)

This powerlessness was also reflected in the military, which was plunged into collective, emotional silence, as we can see from Drexel's following description:

> "From that day on, a heavy shadow fell over the regiment; everyone saw de-

> ath strike healthy people, friends, acquaintances, comrades; everyone saw the tears of their mother or wife at home, whom they confidently shook hands with when they said goodbye and comforted when they cried: 'I'll be back soon!' As long as we were at the front, I no longer heard the imperial hunters singing, and it was noticeable how a new line had appeared on many faces, a new expression on their lips and in their eyes." (Drexel 1940, 14)

This new expression on the faces of soldiers and officers of all armies was caused by the death of friends, the awareness of the transience of life and a sense of inevitability. No wonder that the boys who had been singing cheerfully only yesterday lost their voices after this sobering experience of war. They were no longer carefree heroes – death had "invaded" their world and the horror of what was happening was shrouded in silence. The military chaplain was a witness to this and, in a way, also participated in the turning point: the war did not only wound bodies, it cut deep into souls.

This intrusion into the inner world was also expressed by military chaplain Jan Eybl (1882–1968), who first encountered the reality of war in Šabac, Serbia, a half-destroyed and looted town where the soldiers resembled a rabble rather than a disciplined army. On 24 November 1914, he wrote meaningfully in his diary: "Where has culture come to?" (Eybl 1914) Janko Cegnar (1887–1939) probably asked himself the same question when, as a military chaplain of the Ninth hospital of the Third Corps, he marched through a village that had been practically wiped out. He wrote: "You cannot imagine how sad my thoughts were. Nothing remained of the entire village. Only the cross in the cemetery still stands. The tin roof of the bell tower and a bell lie in the snow, and all around, stoves protrude from the snow – a sign of where the houses once stood." (*Vzajemnost* 1915, 70) In this description of Cegnar's sadness, we can sense an even deeper question, which he probably did not want to write down due to censorship – the question of the disappeared inhabitants of this place. Eybl also expressed his shock at such destruction and the collapse of order, especially when he encountered death and the miserable condition of suffering prisoners in the aforementioned Šabac, some of whom were "crawling on all fours." Eybl also testified to the gap between the grandeur and knowledge of war through books and speeches and the real situation in the following descriptions, when, as a regimental chaplain, he experienced everything that the soldiers experienced: shelling, panic, flight, indecisive commanders, confusion and the aforementioned looting. No wonder, then, that at the end of 1914, Eybl wrote the following lines in his diary – as a kind of spiritual protest and self-questioning: "Polish cannons and heavy howitzers are thundering like in the worst storm. Humanity is spilling blood – why and for what? God will judge." (Eybl 1914) In his memoirs, Januš Golec also wrote about this insatiable appetite for war and bloodshed when describing the battle at Grodek in September 1914. He wrote:

> "It was the last battle in this global slaughterhouse, where they shot, killed and fought each other on open plains with modern weapons, but without

> trenches and dugouts on our side. The artillery and machine guns had a clear and open target. I also believe that no battle to date has demanded and consumed as many young, strong, healthy male and military victims as this one. For centuries to come, people will write, read and learn about the voracious dragon of Grodek, which came to feast on blood on 8 September 1914." (*Slovenski gospodar* 19. 4. 1917, 1)

He himself believed that this day was not 'as deadly as the first', but it still affected him deeply: "It carved furrows of war, cruelty and despair into my heart." (*Slovenski gospodar* 19. 4. 1917, 1)

This dragon of Grodek thus became his image of the "world slaughterhouse," which Francis Gleeson also witnessed on the Western Front. He, too, was troubled by questions about the meaning of bloodshed, and at Christmas 1914 he wrote in his diary: "Such desolation. Such suffering! If all militarists had hearts at all they should bleed, if they saw the scene of frozen men I saw today – this Christmas day of 1914 AD. How I felt on that death region today! Good saviour of the world – will you deem to bring peace and abolish all war forever?" (Gleeson 25 December 1914, cited in O'Riordan 2015) Houlihan (2015, 112–114) states in his study that between 1914 and mid-1916, sermons were still imbued with the heroic rhetoric of "August 1914," i.e. the beginning of the war, but by mid-1916 (after major offensives and under the impression of mass bloodshed) they increasingly turned to more existential questions. Such questions, arising from experiences as we read in Eybl and Gleeson, prove that the first serious cracks in the heroic rhetoric appeared much earlier and that this "ecstatic, enthusiastic rhetoric" began to lose its power in the first months of the war due to the brutal reality.

On the contrary, the war had only just begun. After the first defeats, many hoped that the war would end, as did Golec: "After the unfavourable outcome of the battle with the Russians at Krasne-Busko, many of us were firmly convinced that the war would now end and that we would soon be rushing back into the loving embrace of our homeland." (*Slovenski gospodar* 29. 3. 1917, 1) However, they were mistaken, and the war continued, with new units arriving at the front and death reaping mercilessly. In the early months of the war, Janko Cegnar wrote that they were sent here and there with the hospital, depending on the dynamic movements of the front and the needs of the military authorities: "I don't know how many times we travelled along certain roads, but I do know that I am familiar with every bend in some of them and that I know every street in many villages and towns in Hungary and Galicia." (*Vzajemnost* 1915, 70)

However, these rapid marches and shifting fronts soon turned the battlefield into a static war of trenches, shelling, exhaustion, attacks and counterattacks, and the constant presence of danger and death. Military chaplains from all the armies involved worked in this environment, and if the French priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) (1965, 49) was still wondering in 1915 when he would finally experience his baptism by fire, for some chaplains it had already proved fatal very early on. At the end of August 1914, Slovenian newspapers reported

the death of a Slovenian, the regimental chaplain of the 7th Infantry Regiment, Valentin Rozman (1871–1914), in Galicia. While administering the sacraments to the wounded on the battlefield, he was hit by a bullet (Šimac 2014, 209–210).

In the same month, newspapers also reported the death of a young French seminarian who fell while performing his duties. Seriously wounded and without help, the dying man wrote the following poignant words with a pencil:

> "I am still here, nailed to the cross, if I may use such an unworthy comparison with my Saviour … My courage is not broken, I fear nothing. I hold the cross in my hands and, looking at it, I pray and bow to God's will. You know that since my departure I have offered my life to God, and since yesterday morning I have renewed this offering many times and I repeat it now with everything that dear God wants to add or take away. I am not afraid of death. I see it too close before me at this moment. There is nothing terrible about it, for it brings bliss. But you, I beg you, bear this accident quietly, resignedly, yes, joyfully." (*Slovenec* 3. 11. 1914, 3)

The moving testimony of faith of a young seminarian, which turned into a peaceful and complete sacrifice to God, was just one of many testimonies that appealed to those coming to take their places.

2.3 Pastoral Care in Wartime

The request of the young seminarian was also fulfilled in their own way by the military chaplains of the warring countries, who cared for the spiritual welfare of the soldiers, administered the sacraments, offered words of comfort, buried the dead and celebrated Mass. After all, for the military chaplains themselves, it was precisely the faith of the soldiers that was a source of comfort in those times of war and horror. In the first weeks after finding himself abroad, often lonely, Januš Golec beautifully described what the sound of church bells meant to him in wartime and in foreign lands:

> "I know that never before or since has the lovely sound of the bell rung so gently and comfortingly in my ears and heart as it did then, when I felt so abandoned and lonely. I remembered that today is the Lord's Day and the sound of the bell is calling the faithful to God's temple. I quickly left the cold, empty room and hurried towards the heavenly, inviting sound of the bell. /…/ The house of God was full of believers who, kneeling humbly and praying aloud, were waiting for the most holy sacrifice. /…/ I too fell to my knees and prayed fervently with the people. A Roman Catholic priest approached the altar with fervour, and the throats of all the faithful sang a Polish mass song so mournfully resonant that even I was moved to tears. It seems to me even today that all the misery of the then still unknown world war was poured into that same song. This holy sacrifice, prayer and singing of this people supported my broken heart after a sleepless night with powerful consolation. I forgot about my wet clothes and empty room,

> because it seemed to me that I was kneeling in a Slovenian pilgrimage church at home." (*Slovenski gospodar* 28. 12. 1916, 3)

However, such delights were rare; much more often, they had to celebrate Mass themselves in all sorts of positions, or, as military chaplain Jernej Hafner (1888–1955) vividly described it: "Now we celebrate Mass wherever our superiors remember to do so; most often in the woods, in the mountains (previously, when we were still climbing the Carpathians), and last Sunday in a shed next to a barn, where a cow was mooing in its own way. We preached (at least the parishioners were afraid of me in this respect) for three quarters of an hour, but now they say that ten minutes is too long." (*Slovenec* 23. 11. 1915, 1) Cegnar wrote similarly in a letter to his sister in October 1914 about celebrating Mass in the immediate rear of the front line: "Last Sunday we had a joint service. We removed the door of a room, I set up an altar at the threshold, we propped up the door so that it stood upright, and hung an image of the Mother of God, 'Help of Christians,' on it; the soldiers stood outside. Ah, how heartfelt one can pray at such a Mass; tears came to my eyes at such a Mass. In between, cannons boomed in the battle that was being fought nearby." (*Slovenec* 14. 11. 1914, 1) Holy Masses and sermons in the trenches were not uncommon (Šimac 2014, 165).

Military chaplains therefore had to be bearers of hope and good news – the gospel in changing wartime conditions, which meant that they preached everywhere, in trenches, barracks, dressing stations and hospitals in the rear. This concern for others was beautifully demonstrated by Irish military chaplain William Doyle when, after breakfast, he found "a large number of men waiting for confession" in front of him. After confession, he gave them Communion, even though – contrary to regulations – they were not fasting, but because they were in mortal danger, as they were going into battle, into the front trenches, he gave them Holy Communion as a viaticum. And, as he wrote, for many it was indeed their last supper: "It was the last Communion for many poor fellows who, I trust, are praying for me in Heaven now." (Doyle 1914, cit. O'Rahilly, *2000*, 3) The sight of such a large number of penitents and communicants was more common in the rear, while at the front lines they confessed as and where they could. Jan Eybl described in his diary the events of 17 April 1916, when he was in Zagrajca, where he confessed members of the regiment: "I confessed in a pasture, sitting on a stone, while the soldiers knelt on the turf and prayed in nature and kissed my Jerusalem cross, moved to tears. A beautiful, sincere atmosphere. It moved me too." (Eybl, 17. 4. 1916) Although Eybl was enthusiastic about this, this enthusiasm was not universally shared, as the response in individual units varied considerably depending on the circumstances and the time spent at the front. Hafner mentions that some perceived invitations to confession as "pressure" or "coercion" (*Vzajemnost* 1917, 5–6; 51–53), which was certainly not easy for priests to accept; moreover, it probably also represented an "exercise" in patience for them as they sought new ways to appeal to soldiers. It is true, however, that such opportunities for confession were often not available at all due to the war situation and the dangers

involved, so military chaplains often granted universal absolution, especially before going into battle. This was done, for example, at the request of the commander of the 17th Infantry Regiment by the regimental chaplain Franc Kulovec (1884–1941) on 20 September 1914 (*Slovenec* 27. 2. 1915, 1). It should be added that the effectiveness of a military chaplain was greatly influenced by his personal contact and relationship with the soldiers. In his own way, the Serbian military priest Svetozar Ivošević (1882–1949) also tried to draw close to his men. In his diary he describes how, on 6 May 1916 at Mesongi, he celebrated his patron saint's day, St George (*slava Svetog Đorđa*), among officers and soldiers, with around 300 of them gathered at the festive table. While they sang folk songs and hymns in honour of St George, he was overwhelmed by conflicting emotions, noting that "*meni suze često kapale* (tears were often running down my face)" and asking himself whether "*slava ova bila više dan tuge i bola, nego radosti* (this *slava* was more a day of sorrow and pain than of joy)" (Ivošević, cited in Milkić 2017, 134).

In general, it seems that priests of all religious communities had to show a great deal of flexibility and resourcefulness in their pastoral work on the front lines. This did not only apply to those who found themselves in the trenches, but also to all those who worked in the rear, searching for answers to the pastoral questions that arose. In doing so, they often came into contact with members of other religious communities and tried to take care of them as best they could, either with a kind word or a small favour (a cigarette, a letter, etc.). However, this also raised profoundly pastoral questions, such as those faced by Janko Cegnar. Among the wounded and sick, almost half were not Catholic: "What about them? If they are fatally ill, should I leave them?" Cegnar sought a solution in an emergency, which may not have been the right one, as he himself was aware, but in his concern for souls, he nevertheless tried to do everything he could to offer them spiritual assistance. He himself admitted in a letter that these were "cases that I had never thought about in peacetime, of course." At the same time, he admired the piety and sincere, fervent faith of the soldiers in his letters. What is more, some even helped him to "anticipate" and alerted him to those who had not yet received the sacraments: "They seemed to me like chaplains helping me in my work of mercy," wrote Cegnar, adding that he had not yet had the opportunity to "observe the hearts of these heroes completely laid bare; how much love for God and devotion to His will there is in them." But this was evident in representatives of all religious communities: Cegnar, for example, recalled, how a Protestant from Transylvania (German: *Siebenbürgen*) asked the military chaplain to pray for one of the wounded, "because nothing else helps!" At the same time, the Protestant pointed to two others and said: "Look, these two were moaning earlier, but since you prayed for them (I anointed them), they are so calm and feeling better." (*Vzajemnost* 1915, 5; 70–71)

Such dilemmas and improvised solutions were not unique to Catholic chaplains in the Habsburg forces. Similar patterns of practical, often deeply personal ecumenism can be traced elsewhere, for instance in the Serbian army. A few particularly revealing diary entries on interfaith, almost ecumenical cooperation can also

be found in the diary of the Serbian military chaplain Svetozar Ivošević. In the autumn of 1917, he served at the 2nd British–Serbian Hospital, where he integrated well among the British staff. On Mitrovdan Memorial Saturday, 3 November, he travelled from Kremjani to Sorovich, where he conducted a *parastos (Orthodox memorial service)* at the military cemetery. With the help of the hospital superintendent, Professor Simpson, a field church was set up in Kremjani using tents, and it was there that Ivošević celebrated the liturgy for the first time on 11 November in the presence of numerous officers and soldiers. He continued to do so on all subsequent Sundays, explaining the Gospel and delivering edifying sermons. British representatives regularly attended the Orthodox services. As a sign of gratitude, Ivošević in turn attended Anglican services and often socialised with the Anglican chaplain Robert George Dalrymple Laffan (1887–1972) (Milkić 2017, 143–144).

While Cegnar strove to alleviate spiritual concerns, there were also military chaplains who went even further in their care for others. In addition to assisting doctors in hospitals, including during operations, some even offered to participate directly in the treatment of wounded soldiers. On 6 November 1914 (3), the *Slovenec* newspaper published a note about a priest's empathy and willingness to help others. A military chaplain from Würzburg described in a letter to his father how, after numerous operations he had attended, the moment came when he voluntarily lay down on the operating table to save a wounded soldier whose right arm had been torn apart by a grenade and whose left shoulder had been deeply wounded. Although two fingers had to be amputated and his arm was now healing well, his shoulder would not heal without a skin graft. The military chaplain offered to donate his own skin, and the doctors cut about fifteen pieces of skin from his right thigh without anaesthesia and used them to cover the soldier's wound (*Slovenec* 6. 11. 1914, 3). Even greater care for one's neighbour was embodied in his own way by the Jewish rabbi Abraham Bloch (1859–1914) on the Western Front. He came across a wounded, dying Catholic who mistook Bloch for a Catholic priest and asked him to bring him a cross. Bloch fulfilled his wish, but in the next moment, both were victims of a grenade explosion (*Rorate Cæli* 2014). This was empathy in its highest form, certainly exceeding all regulations, and it was long talked about afterwards as a symbol of interfaith solidarity.

When it came to interfaith solidarity, representatives of all religious communities in the armed forces often found themselves at the centre of debates about faith in their daily work. One such debate is reported by military chaplain Leopold Turšič (1883–1927), who wrote in his diary on 8 January 1915 that they had had an "interesting discussion" in the evening. Colonel Dr. Horaček claimed that after the war he would leave the Church and "join the Protestants." Turšič wrote: "Here I saw what our officers and intelligentsia are like. No faith whatsoever. They only ask you trivial questions." (Turšič, 8 January 1915) The discussion about faith continued the next day with First Lieutenant Ernst Jappel, whom the chaplain assessed as follows: "A good man, but stuck in his own shallow thinking." (Turšič, 9 January 1915). These brief diary entries reveal that military chaplains had to deal

not only with the questions of suffering and dying soldiers, but also often with the doubts, irony and theological objections of the military. It remains unclear to what extent such questions were a genuine expression of sincere searching and to what extent they were merely an outlet for inner pain, bad experiences with the clergy or general anger towards the Church as such. Certainly, however, these experiences, combined with religious indifference and the "superficiality" of individuals' thinking, presented Turšič with another, distinctly pastoral question: how to speak about faith in such an environment? Faced with such confrontations, he probably had to rethink and strengthen his own faith.

2.4 The Dying and Care for the Fallen

But while they could still debate, argue and quibble about theological questions during these evening discussions, other pastoral questions were much more pressing and concrete: how, if at all, to care for the dying and the fallen. Countless times, priests were present with the dying in field hospitals, hospitals or trenches. Leopold Turšič described a harrowing scene of how he confessed a dying wounded man at a medical station, directly behind the front line. The wounded man was already aware upon arrival: "My God, I am going to die!" "Friend, hurry," whispered my fellow doctor. "I leaned closer, whispered a few words of comfort, gave him absolution and the last rites – his eyes were already fading. 'God's will be done,' whispered his blood-stained lips, and he breathed his last." (*Slovenec* 18. 9. 1915, 1) A similar scene of administering the last rites to a mortally wounded soldier is described by the Irish Jesuit William Doyle on the Western Front. He could barely find a spot on the dying man's broken face where he could apply the holy oil; in doing so, Doyle writes, "my hands were covered with his blood." After the anointing, the moaning ceased – as if the mere touch of the sacrament had brought relief (cited in Walker 2016, 29).

The Presbyterian chaplain Lauchlan MacLean Watt (1867–1957) also described a dying soldier who asked him: "Hold my hand, Padre, and try to bear it till the doctor comes round. And it was a hand like flame that he put into mine." (Watt 1917, 164) In many cases, it was military chaplains who, in addition to the sacraments and words of comfort, were able to offer soldiers in their final moments that purely human closeness – a handshake that replaces any words, no matter how eloquent. Or, as Stèphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker (2002, 141) wrote: "Silence replaced words in the presence of death. The living became mute before the dying. Words, and sometimes even prayers, no longer sufficed."

How the priest himself felt about this can be gleaned from the account of Silvin Sardenko (1876–1942), which we search for in vain in his short paper. Although literary in tone, they nevertheless conceal countless tragic experiences when, as a priest, he administered the last rites and gazed upon the dying. Among them were many men who were leaving their wives and children at home: "The priest's heart was breaking in his chest. He himself has neither wife nor children, but he would like to die in this man's place. But a priest's heart cannot die; it must suffer even more compassion and mercy. What you must have suffered when you saw

your son dying on the cross, Sorrowful Mother of God." (*Slovenec* 18. 9. 1915, 2)

A similar feeling can be detected in Watt's description of how he accompanied the dying in a military hospital ward and one day a nurse said to him: "'Father, today is a sad day in this tent!' These words meant much more than they expressed; there were so many young, courageous lives in agony, crippled and broken, brought here as if on a wave of sorrow from the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And so little could be done. Words were powerless." (Watt 1917, 164) At that time, military chaplains could only perform a final act of piety, accompanying the deceased on their last journey with prayer and providing a Christian burial. Of course, this was only possible behind the front line, and many were denied even these last moments of reverence, as they lay in no man's land. Where possible, individual military chaplains tried to at least bless the dead, as Januš Golec did in Galicia in 1914: "I blessed them as they lay scattered, and we crawled back to the brickworks," wrote the military chaplain (*Slovenski gospodar* 19. 4. 1917, 1).

Burials along the front lines usually took place at dusk, often accompanied by enemy artillery fire. Owen Spencer Watkins (1873–1957) and Douglas Percy Winnifrith (1875–1955) described such actions after battles (e.g. at the Marne) on the Western Front, when they performed prayers and conducted ceremonies amid the whistling of bullets, without mentioning their own fear in their writings; only about the "sad, never-ending task" (Walker 2016, 36–37). Leopold Turšič also described such a sad task. In the twilight and snow, he made his way to the cross by the road defended by the fallen officer. Instead of the cemetery, they chose the cross at the crossroads as his final resting place. In the darkness, amid flares and artillery fire, the officers gathered at the grave with their commander. Turšič writes: "I could not see their faces, but the solemn silence told me how sorry they were for their dead comrade. When, after the ceremony, the commander said his farewell words and we saluted the dead hero, we were all shaken to the core, and I heard the muffled sobbing of the heroes around me, who face death every day." Turšič then wondered in his notes whether they had all really been buried: "Surely they were buried by the enemy, who must respect heroes and their deaths! Are their graves known? Who knows? Does a cross, the sign of our redeeming faith, stand over their graves? Who knows?" (*Slovenec* 6. 11. 1915, 2–3) Even in the midst of these circumstances, Turšič tried to preserve a sense of humanity, and his questions were not merely rhetorical – in a way, they express a silent plea for all the fallen and his powerlessness to care for them. Many chaplains, however, tried to take care of the fallen, even those of other faiths, and to give them at least a respectful send-off on their final journey. This was also the case with Salesian Franc Walland (1887–1975), who wrote in his report that in March 1916 he also accompanied non-Catholics to their final resting place in uniform (ÖSTA/KA, AFV, carton 218, Pastoral Report March 1916, Walland Franz).

Military chaplains often showed compassion, even outside the regulations and pre-war frameworks, to those soldiers and officers who took their own lives on the front lines or in the immediate rear. Of course, the Catholic Church did not officially allow church burials for those who committed suicide. Those who com-

mitted suicide "deliberately and willfully," wrote Emmerich Bijelik (1860–1927), separated themselves from the Church and thus lost the right to a church funeral: "Only those who die as members of the Holy Church may be buried in a church." (Bijelik 1913, 26) As early as 1911, military chaplain Valentin Rozman (1871–1914) discussed suicide, its causes and consequences at length in his booklet *Krščanski vojak* (*The Christian Soldier*). In it, he writes, among other things, that the Catholic Church allowed them to have a church funeral, but only if doctors had declared that the suicide had been caused by "mental derangement" (Rozman 1911, 111). During the war, suicides also occurred among soldiers on the battlefield, which military chaplains then had to deal with. Houlihan cites the example of military chaplain Karl Laska, who stated in his report that he buried suicides with the same honours as those who had fallen in battle (Houlihan 2015, 233). Slovenian chaplain Ignac Brvar (1887–1949) testifies that Laska was not alone in his actions. In January 1918, he was working at military field hospital No. 820. A corporal who served at the local reserve bakery took his own life. The military chaplain wrote about the corporal: "At the time of the act, he was agitated because he did not bear full moral responsibility for his actions, and he was given a church burial." Brvar then buried the soldier who committed suicide in the military cemetery in Kolomeja (ÖSTA/KA, AFV, carton 237, Pastoral Report January 1918, Ignaz Brvar). It seems that, especially during the horrors of war and in these tragic cases, military chaplains tried to balance official norms with great pastoral sensitivity, prayers, and understanding for human vulnerability.[2]

2.5 Dilemmas and Questions

All such experiences left a deep mark on the hearts and souls of military chaplains and raised many questions concerning faith, feelings and the meaning of suffering. Some soldiers and officers themselves expressed such questions at the front or wrote them down in their diaries. In April 1917, officer Franc Rueh (1887–1968) wrote in his diary:

> "Today is Good Friday. Good Friday, which has lasted for three whole years! When will you bring us resurrection, when will Easter Sunday follow? Oh Christ! Have mercy on us! Enough blood has been shed; enough punishment has been inflicted on poor humanity. Christ, have mercy on us! How long will the innocent suffer for the sins of others! O Lord! If you do not have mercy on us soon, we will despair completely! Christ, – Christ!!" (Rueh 1999, 115)

Echoes of Rueh's experience of the "Good Friday" of the war can also be found on the Western Front. In his book The Hardest Part, British military chaplain Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy describes a conversation with a wounded officer in hospital, who told him bluntly: "What I want to know, Padre, is, what is God like? I never thought much about it before this war. I took the world for granted. I was

[2] Even in the third millennium, military chaplains continue to convey a similar formative and communal aspect of prayer. (Muršič Klenar 2024)

not religious, though I was confirmed and went to Communion sometimes with my wife. But now it all seems different." (Kennedy, 2015, 3)

While Turšič's account reveals the inner pain of a chaplain who would rather die than see a man with a wife and children die, Kennedy's wounded soldier expresses the other side of the same pressure: it is only in war that he truly asks for the first time who God is and how he should think of him in light of what he has seen and experienced. As Kerry Walters summarises in his introduction to Kennedy's life and message, the horrors of war forced him to confront the problem of what kind of God would allow the madness and brutality of war, and what it means to believe in a loving God after the "hell of war" – can we still love him at all? (Walters 2008, 12–16) As early as 1918, William Moore Ede (1849–1935), dean of Worcester Cathedral, described Kennedy's reflections in his preface to the author's writings as "theology forged on the battlefield" (Kennedy 1918, ix). The war forced Kennedy to question his pre-war understanding of faith and compelled him to reflect on how it is possible to believe in a loving yet omnipotent God in the midst of mass suffering (Walters 2008, 12–16).

The third perspective, alongside Turšič and Kennedy, is offered by Canadian Anglican chaplain Frederick George Scott (1861–1944), who does not question God himself so much as his own role as a servant of the Lord – how he should act so as not to undermine the faith of his soldiers through any wrongdoing on his part. In the introduction to his memoirs, he asks very directly what it would mean if a chaplain fled during shelling; in the case of an officer, he says, many would say that he had suffered "shell shock" and would be at least somewhat lenient in their assessments, but in the case of a chaplain, it would be different: "about six hundred men would say at once, 'We have no more use for religion.'" (Scott 2009, 1) Scott was partly right, as descriptions of priests who served on the front lines of the war show that those who remained with the soldiers even in the most difficult moments gained the most respect. A good example of this is the military chaplain Valentin Jerše (1882–1947), who celebrated Mass for soldiers in the trenches even under the heaviest shelling: "Many times during the service, shrapnel and grenades exploded around him, but he never left the altar until he had completed his service. Every week he read Holy Mass to us right in the trenches, when there were barely 30 of us, in one place even only 7 steps away from the enemy. Enemy bullets were hitting the iron, but our chaplain did not allow himself to be disturbed in his sacred work. On Christmas Eve, he held midnight mass for us in a cave." (*Slovenec* 4. 8. 1917, 6)

However, despite the fact that individuals gained prestige among soldiers and officers by being present with them in this way, there were also those who feared it. Houlihan (2015, 98) mentions Andreas Farakas, a military chaplain of the 25th Infantry Regiment, who feared the front and celebrating Mass in the trenches. Even more frequently, historians have clung to the descriptions of Robert Graves, a participant in the battles on the Western Front. In his autobiography *Goodbye to All That* (1929), he described the deep distrust of British soldiers towards military chaplains, who were supposed to stay in the rear and preach to soldiers, just before they went into battle, on topics completely removed from their experiences. However, Michael

Snape's research points out that such literary accounts – among which he explicitly highlights Graves – should be understood as one of the myths about "chaplains in the rear," which is largely refuted by archival material (Snape 2011, 318–345).

Regardless of this, soldiers, officers and, last but not least, military chaplains still faced doubts and internal dilemmas in the face of the horrors of war. Patrick J. Houlihan points to the tension between spiritual care and serving national propaganda in the example of German military chaplain Jakob Ebner (1873–1960). In the early years of the war, Ebner saw the slogan *Gott mit uns* (God with us) as an opportunity for the "spiritual renewal" of soldiers, considering the call to war the best "searcher for God" and the danger in the "rain of bullets" the best "searcher for the found God" (Houlihan 2015, 112–113). After the offensives of 1916 and the rivers of blood that were shed, his view changed. After a conference of military chaplains on the Western Front, he sharply rejected those who still spoke of "God's assured victory": "So where are the defeated and where are the victors? Let them come to us at the Somme and they will see!" During a visit home, he wrote in his diary: "Many questions about the war. I don't know the answers to most of them myself. I also have many questions." (Houlihan 2015, 113–114) For some soldiers and military chaplains, these inner questions led to an experience of faith in the trenches, while for others they led to a severe religious crisis, which in some cases even led to a loss of faith among priests (Fiennes 2011). No such records have been found in Slovenia so far, as diary entries by military chaplains are extremely rare. Therefore, their thoughts and perceptions of the war efforts of the last two years of the war can be gleaned more indirectly from secondary sources, such as recorded speeches or notes by soldiers who preserved the memory of the military chaplain's address. Two examples that can be compared and that illustrate certain views at least to some extent are the address by military chaplain Jožef Ogris in November 1917 and the sermon by chaplain Anton Gnidovec in Ivanje Selo in early 1917. The sermon is known from the notes of Ivan Matičič. According to him, the chaplain did not present himself in the sermon as a representative of the state, but as a messenger of compassion and an advocate for the soldiers. In the first part, he very specifically describes their fatigue, the horrors of the day and their concern for their families. He also highlights their "bloodstained hands", clearly emphasising that the soldiers are not to blame for the destruction and "the unjust spilling of so much innocent blood", which continues to be shed in this long war:

> "Neither I nor God blame you. My poor ones! Your souls are cold, but your hearts yearn and long for peace and freedom! You are innocent, the blood that has been shed does not stick to you, and the Lord of the armies of war will be a merciful judge when your suffering is complete. And he will judge fairly and condemn harshly all those who are to blame, who have blood on their souls and upon whom all the streams of unjustly shed and innocent blood will pour." (Matičič 2006, 146–147)

The speech thus combines a marked empathy for the suffering soldiers with a veiled but sufficiently clear condemnation of the war decision-makers. Ogris's

address, of course, has a different context, as it was addressed to soldiers on 1 November, i.e. on All Saints' Day. Therefore, it pays tribute to the memory of fallen heroes, to the "vast cemetery" stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic and the Alps. In his address, however, he does not see soldiers only as victims, but in the light of eternity as those who "fought the last difficult battle to the end." In his speech, he therefore emphasises above all the hope for eternal life and the eternal bond of love between the living and the dead, symbolised by the cross above the graves. (Ogris 1917, cited in Šimac 2014, 335–339). Both addresses reveal in their own way how Slovenian military chaplains tried to meaningfully connect the Gospel message, the experience of the "world slaughterhouse" and pastoral care for soldiers, the wounded and the dead.

But peace was not to be, and this longing was increasingly expressed in the written words of soldiers and military chaplains. We hear such a voice on the Western Front in the British chaplain Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, who in 1918, in his poem *A Song of the Desert*, summarised in a few verses everything we read in Hafner's reports mentioned above – soldiers and military chaplains were, after years of the horrors of war, tired of the pathetic rhetoric after years of the horrors of war, many were apathetic about everything and wanted above all for the war to end and for peace to come. He says: "An exile in a weary land, My soul sighs for release, It wanders in war's wilderness, And cries for Peace—for Peace." (Kennedy 1918)

3. Conclusion

Organised spiritual care, placed within the hierarchy of army structures, figures on active military chaplains and pastoral plans – all this presents representatives of religious communities in military uniforms primarily as part of a system of organised spiritual care. However, this in itself does not tell us much about who they were, what they experienced, and how they experienced the horrors of war. Only letters, newspaper articles, sermons, memoirs and diary entries reveal their inner world, the tensions and emotions that gripped them as they tried to be bearers of the gospel and, even more often, of simple humanity – in the midst of the horrors of the First World War.

As Miljan Milkić has shown in his study of the Serbian military priest Svetozar Ivošević, some chaplains left remarkably candid records of their emotional lives. Ivošević did not hesitate to note when he wept or laughed, when a sermon left him too agitated to sleep, or how deeply he was moved on receiving a photograph of his wife and children while serving with the 2nd British–Serbian hospital (Milkić 2017, 146–147). Taken together with the Slovenian material discussed above, his diary underlines that chaplains across different armies experienced the war not only as religious professionals, but as men whose own emotional and spiritual worlds were profoundly shaken – and reshaped – by the "emotional front".

These sources reveal the experiences of men who cared for the spiritual well-being of others, while at the same time being constantly tested themselves; sometimes

torn between loyalty to their country and the Church, sometimes between faith and the inner dilemmas raised by everyday situations in the war effort. The emotional register of military chaplains is thus extremely vivid and varied: from enthusiasm to apathy, from heroic rhetoric to protest and longing for peace. Their writings reflect everything that we also find in the diaries of officers and ordinary soldiers on all sides of the war: fervent faith and doubt, compassion and the breaking down of prejudices that they brought with them at the beginning of the war. While military chaplains remained, in the eyes of many, mere figures caught between the altar and the throne, a closer look at their own notes reveals them to be real people – companions on the spiritual and emotional topography of war, which cut deep into the hearts and souls of all those involved. No wonder that these experiences challenged them as well; not only on the level of personal faith, but especially in the field of theological questions and ecumenical dilemmas, which, for example, on the Catholic side, at least in individual actions (not exactly in the written word), already indicated the path that would later be charted by the Second Vatican Council.

The tensions in the discourse between faith and patriotism, between the gospel of peace and the reality of the horrors of war, show how words often failed them too, leaving only the "theology of silence" – a handshake, a presence at the dying, a silent prayer. This contribution attempts to place the experiences of Slovenian military chaplains in the broader context of studies devoted to military chaplains, through the prism of research, and to at least partially restore their voice in historical memory, in which they had to remain silent for too long.

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