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HUNGER FOR JUSTICE, DAY 17

Navy rebuts fasting chaplain's claims

Says priest not prohibited from public prayer in Jesus' name

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By Ron Strom
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A Navy spokesman and fellow Navy clergyman strongly disagree with contentions made by a chaplain who is in the 17th day of a hunger strike protesting what he says is a prohibition on praying in Jesus' name by service-affiliated pastors in public.

As WorldNetDaily reported, Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt says he will not eat until President Bush signs an executive order allowing chaplains to pray in public according to their individual faith traditions, for example, in Jesus' name.

The chaplain



Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt

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participated in a protest outside the White House Dec. 20, asking Bush to intervene to nullify a 1998 Navy policy on prayer. That was the same day he began his hunger strike.

Klingenschmitt has been in a battle over prayer since his former commanding officer, Capt. James M. Carr, wrote to the Navy board last year, saying the chaplain emphasized his own "faith system" when praying and preaching.

"They taught mandatory lectures [at chaplain school] to all chaplains, that you cannot pray to your God, you have to pray to the civic god," Klingenschmitt, who's been a Navy chaplain for three years, told WND. "The Muslim chaplain can't pray to Allah, a Jewish chaplain can't pray to Adonai, a Roman Catholic can't pray in the name of the Trinity, and I couldn't pray in Jesus' name in public.

"They only let us do that in private. If it's in public, they tell us to just pray to God and say, 'Amen.'"

But Navy spokesman Lt. William Marks, who, along with Klingenschmitt, is based at Naval Station Norfolk, says the chaplain is mischaracterizing both Navy policy and a warning letter he received about wearing his uniform for media appearances.

"You'll hear [Klingenschmitt] say the Navy won't let him pray in Jesus' name in uniform, but that's simply not true," Marks told WND. "That's a misleading statement."

Marks says the Navy actually encourages chaplains to pray "according to their individual faiths in voluntary divine services" – the distinction being that "divine services" are optional events such as a Sunday morning Mass or weekly Bible study. These services are different from non-voluntary "command settings," such as a change-of-command ceremony, where a chaplain might give an invocation or benediction. It is the latter type of event for which the Navy advises its chaplains to pray in an "inclusive" way.

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"These are official military events that are *not* of a religious nature," Marks noted. "A command-sponsored event is not a 'divine service.' In those instances, we ask that chaplains be inclusive."

Both type events are technically "public" since members of the public can attend base church services if they so choose.

So, Marks contends, Klingenschmitt's statement that he cannot pray in Jesus name in public is not truthful.

The spokesman pointed out that the federal law allowing military chaplains to pray "according to the manners and form" of their own churches, in Title X of the U.S. Code, is under the heading of "Divine Services," which restricts that freedom to the voluntary religious events, he asserts.

"When you go to a command-hosted ceremony, that is not a 'divine service,'" Marks noted. "That is a secular service."

Klingenschmitt says with comments such as Marks', the Navy is "trying to split hairs between public worship and private worship."

Said the chaplain: "The U.S. Code doesn't specify private worship services like the Navy's trying to. The U.S. Code is very clear that public worship should be according to my own church."

No-uniform zone

The spokesman also disagreed with Klingenschmitt's interpretation of a letter he received from the commanding officer at Norfolk that states the chaplain cannot wear his uniform during media appearances, citing the U.S. Navy Uniform Regulations. Klingenschmitt, an Episcopalian priest, contends the letter restricts him from praying publicly in Jesus' name while wearing his uniform.

Marks said the regulation is clear that no one can

support a "personal or partisan view on political, social, economic or religious issues" while in uniform, unless he or she receives prior permission.

"The letter simply says you can't go on CNN in uniform and say you're speaking on behalf of the United States Navy," Marks said. "We have to have a separation of the military and politics. We are prohibited from politicking."

Klingenschmitt notes that the letter refers to any media appearances he might make, including, he believes, a worship service that might be covered by a television crew.

"What if there's a TV camera at my worship service?" he asked. "Can I wear a uniform if there are media present at a worship service? Right now I cannot, because I've been told I can't wear my uniform at any media appearance."

Marks also questioned the appropriateness of a 2004 memorial service sermon for which Klingenschmitt was reprimanded in which he gave an invitation to embrace Christianity.

"This was not a religious service," Marks said. "It was a simple memorial ceremony."

Chaplain 'grossly inaccurate'

A fellow Navy chaplain, Lt. Cmdr. Alan Wilmot, also disagrees with Klingenschmitt's interpretation of prayer policies. Wilmot, a chaplain for 15 years from the American Baptist denomination, is currently based at Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod. (The Coast Guard does not have its own chaplain corps, so Navy chaplains serve at those posts.)

Wilmot says when he reads about Klingenschmitt's complaints, he feels like he's reading about "a different Navy" than the one in which he serves.

"I have never been counseled in how I pray, and I

think it's grossly inaccurate to say we're not allowed to pray in Jesus' name," Wilmot told WND.

Wilmot says he uses two kinds of prayers in his official duties, formal and informal.

Referring to the informal prayers, Wilmot said, "I pray in Jesus' name every Sunday" during regular church services.

Added Wilmot: "When we're talking about a Bible study or a worship service, realistically speaking there are no limitations at all."

Emphasizing that he considers himself a conservative evangelical who believes the Bible to be inerrant, the chaplain says the other type of prayers are for the formal, non-voluntary "command-hosted" events. Wilmot believes praying a more inclusive prayer in those settings is not only exercising common sense but is more professional and a better outreach.

"I think praying more inclusively is actually evangelical," he said. "As an evangelical, I want people who are not Christian to accept Christ as savior. In order for that to happen, I need to be able to build a relationship with them, to develop a relationship so they would actually listen to what I have to say. ... So I don't want to highlight a difference between us that would push them away" by ending a prayer in Jesus' name.

"When I end a formal prayer with 'in Your most holy name we pray,' does Jesus not know who I'm talking to?" asked Wilmot.

Klingenschmitt says if that type of prayer represents Wilmot's "conscience," he believes he should be free to pray that way. "But why does the government not allow me the same freedom of conscience?" he asks.

Wilmot also mentioned on larger ships the chaplain says a prayer at 10 p.m. over the PA system: "It's not a voluntary audience," he said, so those prayers should

be more generic.

Klingenschmitt interprets the evening ship-wide prayer as "public worship," so he believes a chaplain should be able to pray according to his own faith traditions.

"Can I pray in Jesus' name on the ship's microphone?" asked Klingenschmitt. "If I cannot, then they're censoring my prayers.

"My proposal is to share the prayer with diverse faiths. The way to include all faiths is to take turns, not to censor the prayer-giver by enforcing the commanding officer's religion on all the sailors."

Klingenschmitt says his reference to the commanding officer's religion refers to the "generic, government, civic religion, which is the official religion of the Navy."

No prayer formula needed

Wilmot rejects the idea there is an official policy from the Navy restricting prayers at public events, calling the letter cited by Klingenschmitt on [his website](#) as "nothing but an advisory" that chaplains pray in an inclusive way at formal events.

He says he wishes there were a specific order that would specify a consequence for any chaplain that does pray in Jesus' name in a command setting.

"There isn't any official Navy policy that says that," the chaplain said, "and I frankly think there should be.

"I can think of no reason why adding the formula 'in the name of Jesus, Amen' is necessary in a command prayer. ... There's a real virtue to being sensitive to other people's feeling when we're in a command setting."

The controversial memorial-service sermon

Klingenschmitt preached, Wilmot contends, falls into a gray area but is more of a "command setting." Because a Navy crew is expected to attend such a service, it turns into a de facto involuntary event, he said, so discretion should be used.

Wilmot agreed with Marks on the issue of wearing a uniform when expressing a private opinion.

"None of us are allowed to wear a uniform when we're addressing specifically religious and political issues," he said.

Wilmot said he believes Bush signing an executive order to clarify the Navy policy is "totally unnecessary."

Despite his not having eaten for over two weeks, Klingenschmitt says he feels good and vows not to eat until "the president of the United States gives me back my uniform and lets me pray publicly in Jesus' name."

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[Ron Strom](#) is a news editor for [WorldNetDaily.com](#).



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