

## **Faith in Transition: The Pilgrimage of a Military Brat**

by Mark Moitoza

One of the most recognizable constants for military-connected Catholic youth is that within two or three years their family is going to move. Experiencing faith in transition is both a gift and a challenge, much like the experience of a pilgrimage. Each year the Diocese of Arlington deals with these transitions as military-connected families depart for a new assignment and others enter in as strangers in well established communities. Recognizing the pastoral needs of military-connected youth and their families can go a long way to encouraging the more important constants in their lives of transition: faith and family. The presence of military brats can also be an asset for youth ministry programs in your parish.

First a word about brats! The term *military brat* may appear to have negative connotations. The acronym *brat* has many different meanings depending on the source. An earlier version finds that the British Army used it to define a British Regiment Attached Traveler. In other words, a brat is someone traveling with the person in uniform. More recent positive versions include Born, Raised, And Transferred as well as Brave, Resilient, Adaptable, and Trustworthy. The term *military brat* is most commonly accepted as a term of endearment rather than a slight. Current publications tend to use the term *military-connected* since the child or young person is not in the military but rather connected to it due to their parent(s) profession.

A parish community is strengthened over time as it builds an identity and develops traditions in response to the Gospel message of discipleship. The parish is a place to belong to that has a shared history. For military brats, however, their faith is a combination of multiple experiences that contribute to the whole. For example, it is normal to ask someone where they are from or what parish they belong to. Asking a military brat these questions, however, pose challenges. Sometimes military brats will say they are “from everywhere” or from the place where they currently reside or they may just say “my parents are in the military.” There is not necessarily a place where they are from because they have not been anywhere long enough to identify it as their home. The Catholic faith becomes their home in multiple places and positive experiences of youth ministry programs can enable them to identify that.

The three goals of the U.S. Bishops’ 1997 document, *Renewing the Vision*, state what it means for the Catholic community to *respond* to the needs of young people and to *involve* young people in sharing their unique gifts with the larger community (RTV 9). To empower, to draw, and to foster a comprehensive approach of youth ministry means that parish programs must take into account the experiences and needs of those trusted to their care. For the military brat a sense of welcome and recognition of their presence go a long way toward fostering their pilgrimage of faith. The military term for this ritual is “hail and farewell.” Unfortunately, it is a tradition extended only to the family member in uniform. Typically, military units have the opportunity at commander-led gatherings to thank the person moving and to recognize the contributions they made. These gatherings also serve as an opportunity to welcome the new person moving into the assignment.

One way to respond to and to involve military brats in parish youth ministry programs is to develop an outreach that seeks to welcome military brats. The Coordinator of Youth Ministry

might develop an outreach team that involves a good number of key leaders in the parish to be on the lookout for new families that visit and/or register in the parish. Reaching out to the newcomer becomes a ministry of hospitality. In doing so, the military brat may be introduced to the particular youth ministry programs available. Take the time to listen to their experiences and learn how they were involved in their previous parish or military Catholic Faith Community. Military brats are flexible and adaptable. They have the ability to blend in to new cultural settings. Sometimes they blend in so well that they are not recognized. Avoid the trap of not encouraging their involvement since they will only be around for a short time. Their ideas and their leadership bring gifts from other communities that will contribute much to your programs.

Often it seems that parishes are just getting to know a family and it is time for them to move on to the next assignment. Make the effort to say goodbye well. Military brats can surf the culture by just surviving one assignment to the next. Before the young person departs have a farewell gathering and prayer. Encourage young people in the parish to recall a memory of the person departing. It could be a program they participated in or led, a way that their gifts helped the parish to grow. It could be as simple as “you often made me laugh.” Give the departing military brat the opportunity to recall memories of the people gathered as well. In doing so you help military brats to realize that their presence mattered. Even though they move frequently the presence of Christ is recognized and shared in the Eucharist and in the lived experiences of the faithful. These simple recognitions of entering in and departing community can be touchstones for the pilgrimage of faith that military brats experience.

Finally, it is appropriate to end with a note on deployment. All military brats have been affected by the reality of deployment. If their parent has not been deployed they will likely know someone who has. When military brats struggle with issues of deployment it is good to have a list of competent resources in your community for referral. Sometimes just matching a military brat with another military brat dealing with deployment is helpful. Other times more professional referrals are appropriate. The Military Child Education Coalition has a resource training called *Living in the New Normal: Supporting Children with Trauma and Loss* which offers multiple ways to support military-connected youth and families. In addition, the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA Office of Evangelization offers online resources to support Catholic military brats and their families, <http://www.milarch.org>.

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