Some might say the highest achievement as a Catholic is to be canonized a saint. And the highest achievement as someone who wears the uniform of the US armed forces is to earn the Medal of Honor. And only one man is on the verge of attaining both.

Fr. Vincent Capodanno was a Maryknoll priest who became a Navy chaplain during the Vietnam War and served with the US Marines in some of the worst fighting in the country. Fr. Capodanno was so well-known for refusing to stay in the relative safety of the base and instead venturing out on dangerous missions with "his" Marines, that he became known as the "grunt padre."

As the youngest son of 10 children in an Italian immigrant family in New York City, Fr. Capodanno knew from a young age that he wanted to be a missionary priest and was eventually ordained in the Maryknolls, serving in Taiwan and Hong Kong. But in 1965, he felt a calling to volunteer for the Navy chaplain corps and to serve in Vietnam.

1965 was a turning point in the war when US military involvement in the Southeast Asian country rapidly escalated. By the end of that year, there were 38,000 Marines in South Vietnam, all of them in need of the spiritual leadership that chaplains can bring.

The reason for Fr. Capodanno's request to change missions is unclear, but the fact that three of his older brothers served in the US military during World War II imbued him with a firm sense of patriotism and service, plus an understanding of the spiritual needs of men who serve in the darkness of war.

In Vietnam, Fr. Capodanno celebrated the sacraments and organized programs, but also went
"outside the wire" with the Marines, eating with them, helping them with their work, and listening to them. He also took on the chaplains' duty of writing to the family of every Marine under his care who was wounded or killed.

By September 1967, Fr. Capodanno was with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines when a massive battle broke out. Fr. Vincent got permission to fly out to the battlefield with the medevac helicopters because he knew he would be needed. Throughout the devastating battle and in the face of heavy weapons and small arms fire and hand-to-hand combat, Fr. Vincent dashed out among the hail of bullets, going from wounded Marine to wounded Marine, pulling them to safety when possible and giving them the Last Rites when it wasn't. He carried on like that for hours, despite suffering a grievous wound to his right hand, telling every Marine that Jesus is with him and to have faith.

After suffering another injury that rendered his right arm useless, he used his left hand to move his right to anoint those he tended.

Finally, as night fell, Fr. Vince came upon the wounded Corporal Ray Horton, who reports to this day that when the padre found him, everything became still and quiet and he felt at peace as Fr. Vince reassured him that God is with him. Immediately after, Fr. Capodanno rushed over and threw himself between a barrage of bullets and an injured corpsman. Both men died instantly.

As Jesus said in John 15:13: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Fr. Vincent Capodanno embodied that Gospel message to the end.

In 1969, Fr. Capodanno was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions and many memorials have been dedicated in his name, including the USS Capodanno, which was blessed by Pope St. John Paul II on September 4, 1981, when the ship visited Naples.

Fr. Capodanno's cause for canonization was opened in 2006 and a miracle obtained through the intercession of Fr. Vince has been reported to the Vatican and is under investigation as of mid-2020. If approved, he could be declared Blessed. A second miracle could lead to his canonization and his becoming the only saint also awarded the Medal of Honor, which would be a fitting legacy for the Grunt Padre.

For more about Fr. Vincent Capodanno, listen to American Catholic History, Episode #53.
American Catholic History, hosted by Tom and Noelle Crowe, finds the hidden gems and compelling stories of Catholic Americans who have contributed to their nation by virtue of their faith over the past three centuries. In less than 10 minutes per episode, American Catholic History will introduce you to the amazing men and women who came to these American shores and were born here and contributed in ways both great and small, celebrated and unheralded. Send us your feedback at history@sqpn.com.

To find more stories from American Catholic History and to subscribe to the podcast, please visit sqpn.com/history. SQPN, the Star Quest Production Network, is a Catholic non-profit organization that serves the Church, evangelizes the world, and forms authentic community through the creation of audio and video programs that explore the intersection of faith and modern culture. To find all of our podcasts, to subscribe, and to support our mission, please sqpn.com.