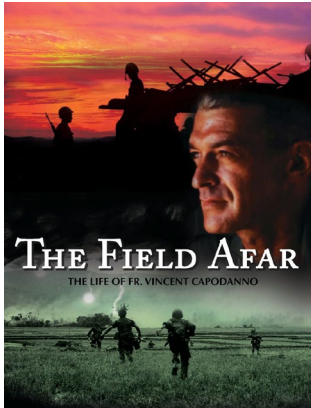


Today's Martyrs

Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom

Movie Review – The Field Afar

Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. - John 4:35



A field is well understood in Christianity as a place to sow and reap for the Kingdom of God. When a handful of American Catholics in 1906 started a journal to promote foreign missionary activities, they named it *The Field Afar*. Five years later the men and women who were attracted by this journal founded what became commonly known as the Maryknoll Missionaries. Maryknollers, as these men and women are also called, would live and suffer and die while laboring in the fields of Asia and Latin America.

Vincent Robert Capodanno was one of them. He is the subject of a new film directed by Tim Moriarty and Jake Ehrlich, *The Field Afar: The Life of Fr. Vincent Capodanno*, which documents the major events of his life and the effect it had on those he served.

Vincent Capodanno was born in 1929 on Staten Island in New York City. He joined the Maryknoll Missionaries in 1949 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1958. He was first sent to a rural location on Taiwan, but after a few years was transferred to teach English at a school in Hong Kong. He was very unhappy with this assignment, and in 1965 he was granted his request to become a chaplain in the U.S. Navy; upon his acceptance he requested further training so that he could then serve with Marines, and he then promptly volunteered for an assignment in Vietnam.

The Field Afar is a near-perfect documentary. It briefly but meticulously describes the atmosphere of the Catholic Church in the United States of the 1950's, a time of strong awareness of Communist persecution of Christians and others in Europe and Asia. Vincent Capodanno went to Vietnam in the belief, as many others did at the beginning of the U.S. combat commitment, that he was doing God's work. What made him different was that he fervently saw his role as aiding the salvation of the men on this other field, what the men who fought on it would call with many emotions the 'field of valor'.

Father Capodanno did not usually wait in the medical battalion for casualties to arrive. He would wait for the last helicopter to leave on a mission and he would then attempt to board it – as a Marine officer would later put it, when everyone who could stop him had already left. Once on the battlefield he would cradle the wounded in his lap and pray over them, sometimes after dragging them out of the line of fire without regard for his safety. Back at base he would talk with the men about their salvation, about the reality of God and heaven and their need to have faith and to be prepared for death. He acted with the calm passion of a man who really believed it all.

He went back home to Staten Island in mid-1967 to visit family. By then the antiwar movement was gaining strength. *The Field Afar* documents the growth of dissent against the war both in the Church and within the Capodanno family. It didn't matter. He went back for another tour. He flew on the last helicopter to another battle near a village called Dong Son, where he continued to minister to the wounded and dying. He gave his gas mask to a Marine during a tear gas release and continued without it. He tried to aid three men lying wounded near a North Vietnamese machine gun emplacement; the gun opened fire and he was instantly killed. He would be mourned by his family, by his fellow Maryknollers and New Yorkers, and above all – as the documentary shows - by the men he served in Vietnam.

At the time of this writing in 2019 *The Field Afar* is in pre-release; the trailer for it can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/277008264>

Postscripts: In late 1968 Vincent Capodanno was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest decoration of the U.S. military, and in 2006 the Catholic Church declared him a Servant of God, marking the completion of the first step in the process of canonization, which could end in the official recognition of his sainthood.

Watching *The Field Afar* makes one truth obvious: it is hard for people born after the 1960's to understand what life was like before their time. Another documentary could have explained the failures of the Vietnam War in all their heroism and woe for all sides, something that has yet to be done (there is a reason why historians often say a hundred years must pass before an event can be fully understood). Another documentary could be made that enlarges on the cultural changes of those years, with measured respect for all viewpoints. Another documentary could have expanded the understanding of the role of Catholic Christianity in the history and tension of those years: the apocalyptic battle with Communism, latent pacifism, the Fatima 'secrets', the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terra* [*Peace on Earth*], and all the rest. But such a documentary would be the story of America, or Vietnam, or Catholicism. It would not be the story of Vincent Capodanno. *The Field Afar* has made the correct judgement as to where to draw the line with the historical and cultural backstory.

Yet these glimpses of history raise a question: is the faith of a Vincent Capodanno possible today? His world, after all, is not our world.

Maryknoll experienced its peak of martyrs just after Vincent Capodanno entered the seminary, in China and Korea. The Catholic Church was not shy in those years about preaching the suffering of its contemporary martyrs, nor were other Christian churches. Yet by 1970 martyrdom was not heard very often from the pulpit. Scripture tells us "*Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured*" [Hebrews 13:3]; this is an *obligation* on all Christians, not an option. The Church Fathers tell us "*the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*" [Tertullian], and so we should see Christianity strengthened by such stories. Conversely, we should expect that a de-emphasis of martyrdom would weaken Christianity. This is what seemed to have happened in the United States and the rest of the Western world since that time.

If this is the case, then much of the blame probably lies with the Vietnam War. By 1970 real bitterness had set in with much of the American public. There was a belief, reinforced by the contents of the so-called Pentagon Papers, that the public had been tricked and manipulated into supporting the war. In a way, the stories of Christian persecution under Communism became suspect: they were now seen as possible tools of deceit even if they were true. Few wanted to hear about it anymore.

Certainly, reticence and doubt about martyrdom's place in the Church has not been the only factor in the decline of the Faith in West, not even the most important. Today the men and women who are called to follow in the footsteps of Vincent Capodanno and other ministers have many impediments thrown in their paths. There is little that Christian churches can do about the external forces, other than to accurately describe them and their warped progeny, but as churches they can certainly be true to themselves and to the memory of those who stayed steadfast in faith. Please God that *The Field Afar* and other such films serve these ends.

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For more information please visit our web site at: <https://todaysmartyrs.org/>

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