

Thou shalt not kill?

Armed with the Catholic catechism—and sometimes a Glock—a priest counsels Chicago Police Department officers on the spiritual implications of the use of deadly force.

By Susan DeGrane



- Father Dan Brandt celebrates Mass twice a month for Chicago police officers and their families at churches around the city.

• KEVIN TANAKA

On a recent Sunday in the chapel at Mercy Home for Boys & Girls, on the near west side, Chicago archdiocesan priest Dan Brandt stood behind a marble altar bearing a black-and-white checkered band similar to the one that appears on hats worn by officers of the Chicago Police Department. The stole draped over his robe also bore the design. In preparing communion for the 50 or so police and their family members assembled, Brandt grasped a wine-filled chalice engraved with a blue cross and a blue line and raised it toward heaven.

"That thin blue line represents all that separates order from chaos," he later said of the chalice's distinctive marking. "The police are that thin blue line." As director of the Chicago Police Chaplains Ministry, headquartered at Mercy Home, Brandt often refers to this metaphor, reminding officers, particularly in times of trouble, that they are "doing God's work."

Anytime of the day or night Brandt drives to all parts of the city to offer spiritual support to members of his flock, Chicago's 11,500 police officers and their families, as well as some 5,000 police retirees, no matter their faith or their lack of one.

"They have probably one of the toughest jobs around. A Chicago police officer sees more trauma in one shift than some people see in a lifetime," Brandt says. "The stresses that go along with police work are vastly different to other professions. When a baker opens up his bakery in the morning, he's pretty sure he's going home at the end of the day. Police, they're not always so sure."

Formerly the pastor of Nativity of Our Lord Parish in Bridgeport, Brandt doesn't miss dealing with the mundane concerns of the parish priest—leaky roofs, parking lots needing to be paved, disputes over use of the church hall or gymnasium. "This is the real deal," he says of the role he assumed in July 2011. "Important stuff. Very often it involves life-or-death matters."

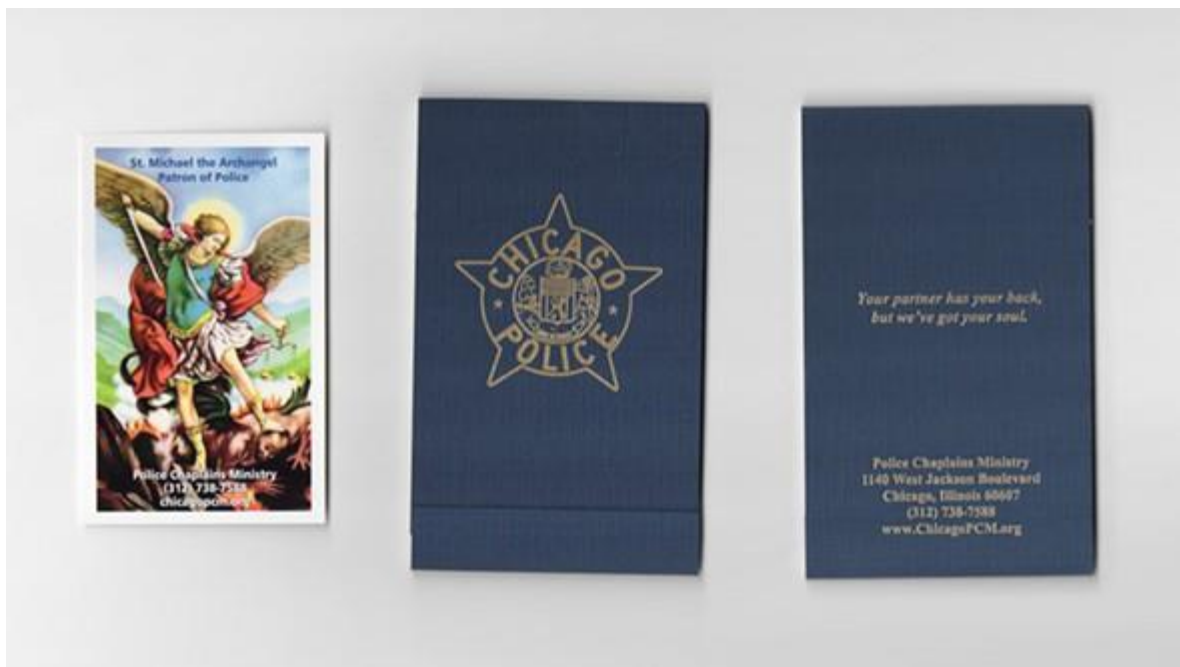
Earlier this month, for instance, Brandt was called on to counsel officers after their grisly discovery of the dismembered, decomposing remains of a child in the Garfield Park Lagoon, on the city's west side. "Someone reported a foot floating in the lagoon. Police responded and found other body parts, including the head," Brandt says. "It's a heavy burden to pick up the head of a dismembered child. It's a traumatic incident, the fact that some animal can do this to a child. It's something someone—even a police officer who is used to holding it together in difficult situations—will never get over."

Following particularly unsettling experiences such as these, Brandt sits down with officers for a "debriefing . . . an opportunity to talk in a safe environment. It's a moment in which they can be themselves and open up or break down if they need to." Prayer too can often be "a crutch in difficult times."

Like many of the officers he serves, Brandt thrives in high-adrenaline situations. On Wednesdays starting at noon and into the wee hours of Thursday, he partners with officer and fellow chaplain Bob Montelongo to lend support to the force in some of Chicago's most troubled areas. On these excursions Brandt leaves behind his vestments in favor of a bullet-proof vest and blue jeans. Though he's not a sworn police officer, he was issued a gold badge and sometimes packs heat.

"I own a Glock, but I don't like carrying it," he says. "I have Bob for that!" Tall, sturdy of frame, and bald, with a face of stubble hinting at a goatee, the 45-year-old could appear to be a tough guy. But Brandt's voice is calming, his manner loose; to help officers cope with the stressful and often dangerous reality of the profession, he frequently employs humor. During the demonstrations around the NATO summit in 2012, for instance, he passed out bottled water to cops stationed near the conference. "I told them it was holy water," he says.

Among the four chaplains Brandt oversees is Rabbi Moshe Wolf, who along with Brandt has made an annual habit of performing stand-up comedy at the Laugh Factory in Lakeview. This year's event, Laugh Patrol: The Third Annual Search for Chicago's Funniest Police Officer, is happening Tuesday, September 22.



- To police who attend his Masses, Brandt hands out this prayer card, which features Saint Michael the Archangel, the patron saint of police, and this inscription: "Your partner has your back, but we've got your soul."

Brandt is perhaps most solemn while teaching a course on officer-involved shootings that considers the spiritual and moral implications of the use of deadly force. The two-hour segment is part of an eight-hour class, helmed largely by CPD psychologists who cover

topics such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Whenever an officer fires a weapon at a human being—whether or not injury or fatal consequences result—he or she is required to attend OIS training.

One might assume that as a priest Brandt would preach the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But that's not the case. He looks instead to the Catholic catechism, which condones "legitimate defense of persons and societies," an edict applicable to police work.

"My little piece [of the class] is making sure officers know they are right with God," Brandt says of advising cops following a shooting. "They were doing God's work, even when they've had to take a life. They don't shoot to kill, they shoot to live, to neutralize a threat."

And what about occasions, all too often, in which police shoot someone who is unarmed?

"Most times, I would say, when an officer kills, the other person has decided for them," Brandt says. "When an officer is required or forced to use deadly force—that's not something they look for. They're not starting their shifts looking for someone to shoot." Asked about Michael Brown, the 18-year-old who police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot last August in Ferguson, Missouri, Brandt doesn't waver in his belief that Wilson made the right decision if, as witnesses reported, the teen did indeed grab at the cop's gun. "Trying to disarm a policeman," he says, "that's a death sentence."

But no matter the circumstances of a police-involved shooting, Brandt necessarily concerns himself foremost with the officer or officers involved. "I don't minister to crime victims or suspects," he says bluntly. "My job is to serve Chicago police."

In keeping up with coverage of shootings in which police pull the trigger, Brandt says he has observed a tendency of reports to perpetuate misinformation about conditions that compel officers to use deadly force. He believes community outreach and education about encounters with police might help protect citizens. As an example, he points to the general public's ignorance of the rule that legally allows officers to draw a firearm on a suspect located within 21 feet if that person appears to be brandishing an "edged weapon"; officers can't shoot unless the person makes a threatening move. The rule resulted from law-enforcement training studies that determined individuals standing within 21 feet can reach an officer faster than he can draw and fire his weapon.

While Brandt may believe in the pope's infallibility, he understands cops make mistakes that can be difficult to live with. "These are human beings doing jobs that require split-second decisions, and under incredible stress. A suspect reaches in his waistband or has a cell phone that looks like a gun—what are you going to do? Wait until they shoot you?" he asks. "They have to act immediately. A cop works with what he knows at that very moment."

The priest loyally defends Chicago's finest, but he isn't opposed to recent efforts urging greater police accountability. Legislation signed in August by Governor Bruce Rauner establishes guidelines on the use of body cameras and requires police training to include discussion of use of force and other relevant topics. "As far as the body cams, those get a big thumbs-up," Brandt says. "Chicago police are happy because the cams will show what really goes on."



- Brandt following a "Blue Mass" at Resurrection Church

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Early last month at Resurrection Catholic Church, in Avondale, Brandt presided over a "Blue Mass" memorializing the 572 Chicago police officers who have died in the line of duty in the department's history. He administered Communion to uniformed officers in bullet-proof vests, guns at their side, and outside the church afterward dedicated a new statue of Saint Michael the Archangel, the patron saint of police.

Two Chicago police horses pricked up their ears as a bagpiper played "Amazing Grace" and a uniformed officer blew an especially mournful-sounding "Taps" on trumpet. Brandt's fellow police chaplain Rabbi Wolf spoke about the necessary function of law enforcement. "Where would Chicago be if the police didn't answer their radios for 24 hours? Believe me, the city wouldn't survive without them."

The dedication seemed rather somber until a female officer chuckled after seeing a photograph of herself unfortunately positioned next to the winged statue of Saint Michael. "Hey, I've got wings!" she said.

Brandt didn't miss a beat. "That's about as close to saint as you'll ever get!"