

US Rep. Gallagher: Colleagues blast Biden administration for leaving catholic service members and veterans with insufficient pastoral care at Walter Reed

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI) joined Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and a number of his colleagues in writing to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to express concerns about pastoral care for Catholic service members at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The letter comes after the hospital issued a “[cease and desist order](#)” to Holy Name College Friary, which has provided pastoral care to service members and veterans at Walter Reed for nearly two decades. The Franciscans received the cease and desist order right before Holy Week, a sacred and solemn time for Catholics worldwide.

The letter, which was also signed by Reps. Doug Lamborn (R-CO), Michael Waltz (R-FL), Cory Mills (R-FL), Jim Banks (R-IN), Congresswoman Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R-IA) and Carlos Giménez (R-FL), along with Senators Roger Marshall (R-KS), James Lankford (R-OK), and Jerry Moran (R-KS), blasts the decision and demands answers from the Pentagon over why the contract was then awarded to a secular contractor which cannot do the work since they cannot provide Catholic priests.

In part, the members wrote, “We have made promises to our service members and veterans that if they take care of us, we will take care of them. This extends to not just providing quality healthcare at our nation’s military medical facilities, but by also providing the ability to freely practice their religion to those under the care at these facilities. It is a tenet engrained in the very fabric of who we are as a country,

and the DoD's actions to deny Catholic Pastoral Care from service members and veterans at Walter Reed goes against the morals, way of life, and rights that make up the fabric of our great nation."

The full text of the letter is below.

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write with regard to the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) awarding a contract for Catholic Pastoral Care to a for-profit entity that cannot provide Catholic priests. As you know, the Franciscan Friars at Holy Name College Friary have provided Catholic Pastoral Care to service members and veterans at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for nearly two decades. Yet, the DoD served the Holy Name College Friary a cease and desist order on March 31, 2023, leaving Catholics at the largest Defense Health Agency (DHA) medical center without adequate pastoral care during Holy Week.

Holy Week is an important time for all Christians, but for Catholics, the sacred liturgies during this holy time require the presence of validly ordained priests. For example, on Holy Thursday, the Catholic Church celebrates the institution of both the priesthood and the Most Holy Eucharist, which Catholics believe to be the true presence of Jesus Christ in body, blood, soul, and divinity. Depriving service members and veterans, who are receiving care, of the ability to enter into the Paschal Mystery with priests is utterly unconscionable. DHA doctors are advocating for minors to receive experimental gender transition procedures, but no one seems to be advocating for the right of our service members and veterans to receive the most important sacraments during this most sacred time of year.

According to the Archdiocese for the Military Services (AMS), Walter Reed's chaplain office has claimed Catholic care was provided by one active duty priest through liturgies during Holy Week. As the chaplain's office at Walter Reed has acknowledged, pastoral care requires more than just one active duty priest. However, we understand that the new contract was awarded to a for-profit secular defense contracting firm that is unable to fill the needs assigned. Specifically, the firm has no way of providing Catholic priests to Walter Reed, which would deny service members and veterans the rights and abilities to practice their religion and participate in certain practices such as pastoral care and the sacraments which can only be carried out by an ordained Catholic priest, including celebrating Holy Mass and hearing Confessions.

We have made promises to our service members and veterans that if they take care of us, we will take care of them. This extends to not just providing quality healthcare at our nation's military medical facilities, but by also providing the ability to freely practice their religion to those under the care at these facilities. It is a tenet engrained in the very fabric of who we are as a country, and the DoD's actions to deny Catholic Pastoral Care from service members and veterans at Walter Reed goes against the morals, way of life, and rights that make up the fabric of our great nation.

Given our glaring concerns about the DoD's lack of consideration for the needs of Catholic service members and veterans receiving care at Walter Reed, we request answers to the following:

- What factors led to the DoD's decision to issue the cease and desist order with Holy Name College after two decades of providing consistent pastoral care?
- What considerations did DoD give to awarding the new contract to a for-profit secular firm given that this entity cannot provide Catholic pastoral care?
- Did a priest celebrate any of the following services during the Triduum: Holy Thursday: Mass of the Lord's Supper, Good Friday: Service of the Lord's Passion, Holy Saturday: Easter Vigil and Easter Sunday: Mass of Easter Day? If so, please provide confirmation.
- Are there Catholic priests currently available at Walter Reed to provide care to service members and veterans? If so, how many, and how much longer will the current active duty priest be at Walter Reed?
- What pastoral care was provided to service members and veterans at Walter Reed during Holy Week?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,