



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on October 7, 2013

Priests Face Arrest for Performing Mass on Military Bases During Gov't Shutdown

The federal government has threatened to cancel some religious services at military bases during a so-called government shutdown, a move that prompted the House of Representatives to pass, by a 400-1 non-binding vote, a resolution strongly encouraging the Pentagon to forgo such an action. Among those who would be most adversely impacted by the religious service cancellation would be Catholics, who make up some 25 percent of military personnel, according to [CBN News](#), but who are represented by just eight percent of active-duty military chaplains.



The House resolution says that not having full religious services on military bases “threatens the ability of members of the armed services and their families to exercise their First Amendment rights to worship and participate in religious activities.” The resolution strongly encourages the Pentagon to continue allowing religious services on any property owned or maintained by the Defense Department during the shutdown “in the same manner and to the same extent as religious services are otherwise available.”

[CNSNews.com](#) reported that, because there are only a little over 230 active-duty Catholic priests to serve some 275,000 Catholic military personnel, the government has contracted with non-military priests to help perform Mass and other religious functions. But according to the Archdiocese for the Military Services, these non-active-duty military priests face arrest if they perform Mass or other religious services on military bases during the government shutdown, even if they volunteer their time.

John Schlageter, general counsel of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, [explained in a letter](#) on the archdiocese website that during the shutdown, contract priests hired by the federal government to fill in on military bases when no active duty priest is available “are not permitted to work — not even to volunteer. During the shutdown, it is illegal for them to minister on base and they risk being arrested if they attempt to do so.”

Schlageter noted that the the issue could impact Catholic families overseas who have a baptism scheduled or who normally attend Mass at a church on base. Under the government shutdown, they will have to do without because of an unwillingness on the part of federal officials to allow contract priests to perform their duty, even for free. “If you are a Catholic stationed in Japan or Korea and are served by a Contract or GS [government service] priest who is furloughed,” wrote Schlageter as an example, “unless you speak Korean or Japanese and can find a church nearby, then you have no choice but to go without Mass.... Until the Federal Government resumes normal operations, or an exemption is granted to contract and GS priests, Catholic services are indefinitely suspended at many of those worldwide installations served by contract and GS priests.”



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As reported by [CatholicVote.org](#), Schlageter noted that as of Friday, October 4, three Masses had been canceled at Fort Belvoir in northern Virginia. Additionally, he wrote, “a couple that is to be married at an Air Force Base this Saturday and did all of their preparation with a GS priest will now be married by an active duty priest who is being taken in from somewhere else. This means that the priest that the couple got to know over the past few months will not be able to witness their marriage.” Also, he wrote, “one [contract] priest in Virginia Beach will be celebrating Mass in a local park off base,” rather than at the normal chapel on base.

Ron Crews, a retired military chaplain and executive director of the [Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty](#), expressed his deep concern over the ban, telling Fox News: “Catholic military personnel should not have their religious liberties held hostage by this funding crisis. I find it alarming that these priests cannot even volunteer to provide services without threat of arrest.”

Ashley McGuire of the [Catholic Association](#), which addresses issues in the public square that impact Catholic Christians, commented that the “idea that a priest would be arrested for or blocked from celebrating Mass for members of the military is something out of a totalitarian horror show. The government should do everything in its power to make sure that our servicemen and women are not punished with religious liberty violations during the government shutdown. This is yet another example of the Obama administration playing politics with our religious liberty.”

Bill Donohue of the [Catholic League](#) told Fox News that “in American history there has been no administration more anti-Catholic than the Obama administration. For them to deny Catholic men and women the opportunity of the sacraments and to deal with their prayerful vocations is really a stunning statement.”



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