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Year for Priests (2): A priest on the ground, under the sea, and in the air

An interview with Father Juan Jose Sanchez chaplain of Venezuela's Naval Academy. He lives in Guaira, Venezuela, and is a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

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Father Juan Jose's main occupation is pastoral ministry to 500 cadets who are preparing to be officers in

Venezuela's armed forces. His work has taken him places few priests go.

Have you done much parachuting and diving?

As a layman I taught parachuting in a club I directed. Now as a Navy Chaplain, I jump right along with the men in training. It's part of the job. I learned diving here at the Academy.

The previous chaplain placed several images of the Virgin Mary under the water, and each year on the feast of our Patron, Our Lady of the Valley, or some other feast, he would celebrate Mass aboard ship, bring flowers, and give a blessing. To do that he would descend to the images, and so he learned to dive. When I succeeded him, I learned the ropes from Coast Guard rescue divers.

And you recently added another image of Our Lady?

Yes, we put it under the Pampatar Bay. It's on the north face of a huge white stone, about 160 feet down. Many people came to help, many fishermen.

You belong to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. What is that?

It is made up of diocesan priests who receive formation according to the spirituality of Opus Dei. Members do not belong to the Prelature of Opus Dei, but remain dependent on the bishops of their dioceses, from whom they receive their pastoral assignments and to whom they are responsible. It's an excellent way for a priest to be fully at home in this world and not clash with it.

I'm told that a short while ago you beat the Venezuelan record for a parachute jump.

That needs to be clarified: I wasn't alone in it; there were 32 of us. I was

just one of them. I've often taken part in such group jumps. Both in combat and in normal conditions, a chaplain jumps with his men. I've also jumped with the Armed Forces' Special Operations Group.

It's understandable that a military chaplain wants to be a part of that life. To make it possible, the Church provided for military chaplains. One way to be with the men is doing what they do. The fact that I've jumped 800 times gives me a spiritual opening with the cadets. Obviously having parachuted or dived with the group isn't the main point, but it is a distinct advantage. Evidently it is by having that in common that a chaplain can better understand the men, become a friend and talk over their problems with them. It's another way to bring Christ's doctrine to these men.

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