The highest ranking Roman Catholic cleric in the U.S. military will celebrate the annual Lafleur memorial Mass

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"The story of Father Lafleur's ministry is an example to others in the military," Broglio said in a recent phone interview. "In a very real sense, his life was a saintly one."

Just as Catholics in this region hold dear the memory of Charlene Richard, the "Little Cajun Saint" buried in St. Landry Parish, they keep Lafleur, a Ville Platte native, in prayerful regard. The Cajun chaplain died on a Japanese prisoner of war transport 71 years ago Monday.

To mark that event, Broglio will make his first visit to St. Landry Parish and the church of the saint for which it's named. He'll be the main celebrant for the annual Lafleur memorial Mass.

A permanent altar to the 32-year-old priest is in the rear of the church. "I first became acquainted with the story shortly after I was in—"
stalled as archbishop in 2008," Broglio said. "My vicar general had a manuscript copy of the book 'But He Dies Not,' a biography of the priest and Army Air Corps chaplain by Peter and Suzanne Guerra. "He told me, 'This guy looks like the real thing.'"

Lafleur's priesthood lasted only six years, but his actions before and during the war became the stuff of legend. Assigned to St. Mary Magdalene Catholic parish in Abbeville, he organized a baseball team for the boys. Only after his death did they find out he'd pawned his watch to buy the equipment.

The young priest joined the Army Air Corps — forerunner to the U.S. Air Force — months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. His military service took him to Clark Field in the Philippines, a base the Japanese bombed the day after their attack that drew the United States into World War II.

The chaplain earned the Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts to rescue and administer last rites to the wounded and dying.

Rather than evacuate to a safer location as the Japanese occupied the Philippines, Lafleur remained with the troops. As a fellow prisoner, he established a makeshift chapel he called St. Peter in Chains, and offered his clothing and food to men who needed it more.

Late in the war, Japan decided to move its prisoners to its mainland where they could work as forced labor. Lafleur was one of 750 conscripts aboard the transport vessel Shinyo Maru when a U.S. Navy ship torpedoed it, unaware that it was carrying Allied prisoners.

In an episode depicted in a monumental sculp-