

# *Dominican Chaplains in the Civil War\**

By BRO. RICHARD KING, O. P.



IN the opening days of the great Civil War that separated the Southern from the Northern States, the Dominican Fathers of St. Joseph's Province were closely following the march of events.

One of their number, the Very Rev. Joseph T. Jarboe, O. P., unable to withstand the call of his Southern people, resigned the presidency of the Dominican College at Sinsinawa, Wisconsin, and entered the Confederate Army as chaplain. Unfortunately, little is known of his activities among the men in gray, save that he distinguished himself for bravery in attending the wounded, especially at Pittsburgh Landing, or Shiloh, as it has come to be known. Until the time of his death Father Jarboe, carried about with him a remembrance of this engagement in the form of an old penknife.

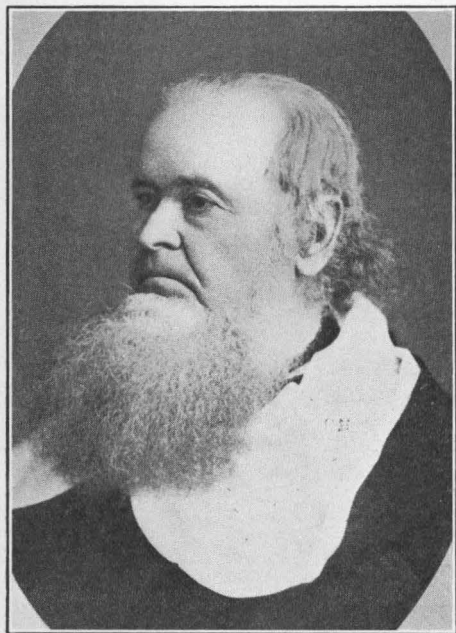
The fight was at its height and the comrades of the chaplain were falling on all sides while he was busy ministering to the dying. Finding a young soldier suffering from a mortal wound, Father Jarboe was preparing to cut away the boots for the anointing of the feet when a bullet shattered the knife he held in his hand. Before the priest recovered from this shock an exploding shell struck the injured soldier and tossed him from his position. As it did so, a penknife dropped from one of his pockets, was put to immediate use by the chaplain, and preserved as a souvenir of Shiloh and the war.

Solicitude for the spiritual welfare of the Union forces led Father Jarboe across the lines, under a flag of truce, during the latter part of this encounter. His mission of mercy ended, he endeavored to return to his regiment but was seized by pickets of the Army of the North and brought before General Nelson. That officer, famous for his fiery disposition, totally unaware of

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\* We take this opportunity to thank the Very Rev. V. F. O'Daniel, O. P. (author of "An American Apostle, Very Rev. M. A. O'Brien, O. P."), for kindly permitting us to use, in the compilation of this article, valuable records from the archives of the Dominican Order in the United States.

the priestly character of the gray-clad man before him and seeing in him only a rebel and a spy, was about to order the death penalty for the unfortunate chaplain. Luckily for Father Jarboe, an officer of General Nelson's command recognized him. Thus the timely intervention of Provost Marshal John G. Key removed the doubt of the men of the North as to the real mission of the Southern soldier-priest. Not satisfied with simply saving



**Very Rev. Joseph T. Jarboe, O. P.**  
Confederate Chaplain

the life of Father Jarboe, this Catholic officer gave him a permit of admission to the Federal camps where he might continue his work of mercy. When his labors for the Union troops were over, Father Jarboe spent some time seeking permission to return to his own companions of the Southern cause. God had other things in store for him, however, and when ultimately he was refused permission to carry out his own desires, the former chaplain was assigned to parochial duties in the North.

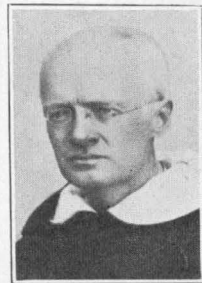
While Father Jarboe was prevented from carrying on in person his good work for the sol-

diers of the Confederacy, it must have been a consolation to him to know that his sacrifice and zeal animated his brother Dominicans serving at Memphis, Nashville and Chattanooga. Like him their activities were not confined to the men fighting under the Southern standard, but were shared equally with the soldiers of the North. One of their number, Father John T. Nealis, then living with Bishop Whelan, did yeoman service for the soldiers of both sides. From old St. Rose Priory, in Kentucky, Father

James P. Heaney and other Fathers stationed there were called forth on hazardous trips for the spiritual well-being of the fighting forces. The customary peace and quiet that surrounded this hallowed cradle of the Order in the United States was not infrequently violated by the clatter of hoofs, the boisterous yell of the soldiers and the occasional sound of a musket shot as the roving bands of provision troops sought supplies for their comrades. One day while the friars were assembled in choir chanting the Divine Office, the door burst open and a group of Union soldiers interrupted the sacred service to demand the surrender of the best horses the Fathers possessed.

At Lexington, Kentucky, not far from the Priory of St. Rose, two more Dominicans, Fathers John H. Lynch and Peter C. Coll were able to exercise their sacred office among the men of the North as well as those of the South. One afternoon Father Lynch paid a visit to the mother of the well-known Confederate leader, John Hunt Morgan. Next morning the priest was surprised to see Morgan, who had unexpectedly appeared in Lexington, coming in person to thank him for the courtesy shown his mother. That evening, however, one of the many uncertainties of the war forced the Southern troops to turn over the town to the Federal forces. The following morning the men in blue sought a priest to hear their confession and celebrate Mass for them. Father Lynch answered the call and found the soldiers under the command of Colonel Lyman Jackson, a noted Catholic officer. Thus one day the Dominican was fraternizing with the men of the South and the next day looking after the spiritual needs of those of the North.

From the very beginning of the unfortunate struggle between the States it was no uncommon thing for a man to be the technical enemy of his own brother; to find one loyal to the Stars and Stripes, the other believing in the justice of the cause that raised aloft the Stars and Bars. So, too, within the Dominican Order in the United States there were not wanting those who felt that the Union must be preserved; who believed in the righteousness of the principles enunciated by the immortal



**Rev. James P.  
Heaney, O. P.**

Lincoln. The spirit of these Fathers was exemplified in the person of Father C. L. Egan, O. P., who served as chaplain in the Army of the Potomac.

While stationed at St. Dominic's Church, Washington, D. C., Father Egan was asked by the War Department in August, 1863, to make a journey in the cause of religion to the camp of General Meade in Virginia. The earnest entreaties of the Catholic officers and men of the Fifth Corps; a realization of the incalculable good the services of a priest might bring to the fighting forces; a desire to share the hardships and privations of the soldiers for the sake of the cause so dear to his heart prompted the Dominican to extend his stay for ten days. Upon the completion of this task Father Egan was preparing to return home when Colonel Patrick Guiney, commanding the Ninth Massachusetts Volunteers, and many of the other officers and men of the regiment requested him to remain with them as their chaplain. Aware of the urgent need of priests among the soldiers and experiencing a righteous pride in this demonstration of the practical faith of the Catholic men under arms, Father Egan gladly consented to remain their chaplain on condition that he first obtain permission of his superior.

With a hopeful heart the priest returned to Washington and laid the matter before the Vicar Provincial, who was none other than the venerable apostle, Father M. A. O'Brien, O. P. The love of this saintly Dominican perhaps went out with equal force to the people of both sides. Readily, therefore, did this consoling undertaking to which Father Egan wished to dedicate himself win his official approval. No time was lost in communicating the good news to Colonel Kuiney, and we can readily imagine what joy it must have brought to him and the Catholic men under his care.

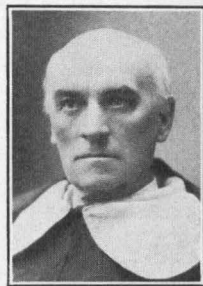
It was not long before the commission as chaplain of the Ninth Massachusetts Volunteers reached Father Egan from Governor Andrews of that state. Procuring vestments and other necessities for divine service, Chaplain Egan joined his regiment in the vicinity of Warrenton, Va. Almost immediately, the Dominican's untiring labors for the spiritual welfare of his men were to begin amid the roar of cannon and the bursting of shells.

In November, '63, the Ninth Massachusetts, preceded by Gregg's cavalry, was on the march toward the Rapidan River.

The mounted troops had moved only a short distance when they were engaged in a sharp fight in the course of which many fell. The wounded were gathered together in a church, and far into the night the chaplain was occupied in ministering to the injured and dying. On this occasion a kind-hearted surgeon held a lighted candle by whose dim rays Father Egan read the prayers of the ritual for the administration of Extreme Unction.

Shortly after this encounter the contingent advanced to Mine Run to engage the Confederate troops in this strongly entrenched position. At about three o'clock in the afternoon the order was given to charge the enemy's line. Knowing full well the grave danger his men were about to face, Father Egan requested permission to form the regiment in a solid square so that he might address them. His request was granted and the men were drawn up. Their chaplain made known to them their danger and entreated them to prepare for it by kneeling down and making a sincere Act of Contrition for their sins with the intention of going to confession if their lives were spared. As the men of the Ninth Massachusetts fell on their knees, other Catholic soldiers broke ranks and joined them, and in a few minutes the Dominican had the largest congregation he had ever beheld. After pronouncing the words of general absolution given in such emergencies, the soldier-priest spoke to the men of the justice of the cause in which they were fighting and encouraged them to be true to the confidence placed in them by their officers.

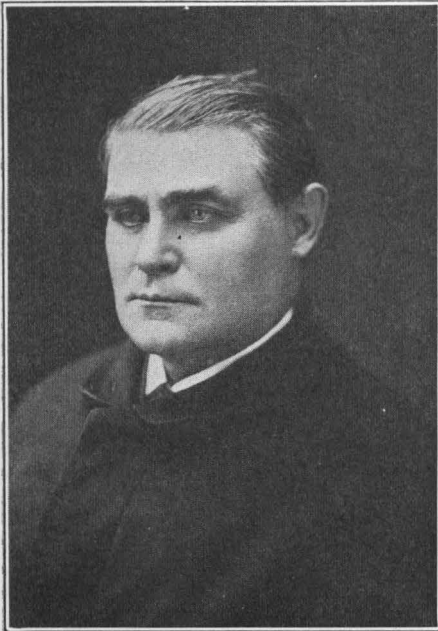
The large number of Catholics in the Army and the scarcity of chaplains to see to their needs brought more than one heart-rending plea to Father Egan. About this time one came from the Fourteenth United States Infantry, which Chaplain Egan was soon able to visit. Reading of the activities of this untiring priest in behalf of the men of his own outfit and the other contingents he was able to visit, one cannot but admire his spirit of service and self-sacrifice. No sooner had his regiment settled down in winter quarters in '64, than he began a series of missions among the neighboring troops that must have cost him much in the way of energy and patience. Doubtless his whole



**Rev. John H.  
Lynch, O. P.**

soul was in this, his own chosen work, and the untold good he wrought is known only to the Master and the individual soldier to whom his coming was, perhaps, an answer to a murmured prayer.

We need not say that the Fourteenth Infantry of regulars was the first to claim his ministrations, and here he found a



**Rev. C. L. Egan, O. P.**  
**Union Chaplain**

goodly number of Catholics. When this task was completed, single-handed he set to work with renewed endeavor to look after the spiritual welfare of the men of the Fifth Army Corps, composed of fifteen regiments. Undaunted at the completion of this man's sized job, Father Egan moved on in the month of February to Culpepper, Va., to visit the First Army Corps, commanded by Major-General Newton, and several brigades of cavalry under the leadership of Generals Custer, Merritt and McKenzie. Among these troops, just as among those of the Fourteenth Infantry and the Fifth

Corps, the Dominican pitched his tent and set about hearing confessions each day, celebrating Mass the following morning and administering Holy Communion. What manly fervor he must have witnessed; how many strayed souls he must have sought out and reconciled; what untold comfort and relief he must have brought to these men living in the face of death!

These constant and continual labors lasted about three months, and Father Egan was able to return to his regiment only in the month of March. April of '64, found him moving with his men toward the Rappahannock River. As soon as they en-

camped, Father Egan erected his chapel tent for the benefit of his own men and those of the Sixth Corps, which was in the vicinity. Until all the Catholics of this outfit had been attended to, the chaplain spent most of the day and a good part of the night hearing confessions and administering Holy Communion each morning at Mass.

Then came the sudden and unexpected attack of Confederate infantry under General Hill while the Northern force was on its way to the scene of the battle of the Wilderness. Hastily getting into position as best they could, the Union troops assumed the defensive, the heat of the fray centering about General Griffin's division, which embraced Father Egan's own regiment. In less than ten minutes his contingent lost, in killed and wounded, 150 officers and men. With what a sad heart the gentle priest must have learned of the death of his commanding officer and friend—the one to whom he owed his commission in the Army and his post in this particular regiment—Colonel (now General) Guiney!

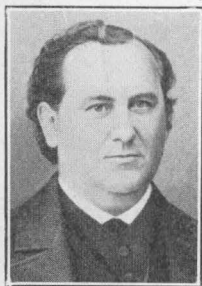
An old deserted farmhouse was speedily converted into a field hospital and into it Father Egan gathered as many of the men of his outfit as space permitted. God alone knows how much he suffered from the sad sight which lay before his eyes. With a heart brimming with emotion he whispered the comforting words of absolution over the mangled and bleeding forms of the companions with whom he had lived since donning the chaplain's uniform. Tearing himself away from this fearful spectacle as soon as he had attended to the spiritual wants and alleviated the bodily suffering of these, his own particular comrades, the Dominican extended the scope of his merciful mission to the other Catholic soldiers of his corps.

"Up and moving" might well be given as the motto of the Army of the Potomac at this time. Grant, upon assuming command of the entire Northern forces, had but one objective in mind when he took over the personal supervision of operations in Virginia, and that was—the taking of Richmond. Father Egan was kept busy during these harrowing days because of the harassing efforts of Longstreet's corps to impede the progress of the Union contingents and the appalling loss of life at the battles of the Wilderness, Spottsylvania Court House and Cold Harbor. This battle of Cold Harbor, staged only six miles from the fortifications of Richmond, was the last in which the Massa-

chusetts Volunteers took part. Their term of service having expired, they prepared to return home to Boston.

General Griffin, realizing the valuable service their chaplain was performing and knowing full well the good he might continue to accomplish among his men, sent for Father Egan and asked him to remain in the army. It is hardly necessary to say that the Dominican gladly accepted this suggestion, and his application to President Lincoln for a commission, endorsed as well by General Grant as by General Griffin, was soon on its way to Washington.

While Father Egan, after his honorable discharge from the Massachusetts Volunteers, awaited in Washington the arrival of his new commission from the Federal Government, he was able to assume charge of the spiritual wants of the wounded soldiers in the general hospital adjacent to the capital.



**Rev. Peter C.  
Coll, O. P.**

When Father Egan eventually received his appointment from the War Department he reported for duty to General Griffin, with whose corps he remained until the close of the war. With untiring zeal he likewise took upon himself the care of the men of the Ninth Army Corps, the sick and wounded in the general field hospital, and other troops in the immediate neighborhood.

At this juncture General Grant placed the Fifth Corps under the command of dashing General Phil Sheridan, to whose ceaseless activity of body and indomitable fighting spirit was due in no small measure the final termination of the bitter struggle. When Grant learned of Sheridan's successful efforts against the extreme right of the Confederates at Five Forks he straightway gave orders for united action along the entire Northern front before Petersburg. After several breaks had been forced in the Southern line, Lee realized that the city was seriously threatened. He therefore decided to evacuate the town and endeavor to join the forces of Johnston in North Carolina.

Grant, profiting by former acts of tardiness, was now on the alert. While he left a contingent to hold Petersburg, he lost no time in pursuing Lee, constantly harassing the Confederate rear. During these tense days of strain and sharp fighting Father Egan



was kept busy tending the sick and dying. His labors were rendered more difficult because of the continual movement of the troops and the consequent lack of time permitted him for the full exercise of his sacred calling.

April 4, 1865, found Lee at Amelia Court House. Here a whole day was lost in gathering the provisions he expected to find awaiting him on his arrival. Next day Sheridan seized the railroad to Danville and thus forced the dispirited and poorly fed Southern forces to turn towards Lynchburg. But Sheridan and his cavalry were out to bag their quarry, and by the evening of April 8th succeeded in getting in front of Lee at Appomattox Court House. Clever strategy on the part of the Northern leaders had provided for the simultaneous appearance of reinforcements for Sheridan in the form of infantry under General Ord. These troops (which included Chaplain Egan's corps) secretly took up their position behind the cavalry. On the morning of the 9th of April, '65, General Lee ordered his men to attack the Union cavalry. As the Confederates advanced, Sheridan drew aside his mounted troops and revealed Ord's massed formation. This sudden revelation of additional strength was too much for the weary and disheartened men in gray, and Lee was forced to raise the white flag of surrender.

Father Egan had the happiness of witnessing the actual termination of the war, an event that was soon followed by the formal surrender of General Lee to General Grant at Appomattox.

One last act of mercy was yet to be performed by the soldier-priest before he terminated his official connection with the Army of the Potomac—the winning of a pardon for an unfortunate deserter under sentence of death. Perhaps his success in this endeavor was sent by a merciful God as a small token of reward for his long and faithful service with the men in uniform.