

# DOMINICANA

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Vol. XXVIII

SUMMER, 1943

No. 2

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## THE SOLDIER-PRIEST

*JOHN WAY, O.P.*

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**S**OLDIERS ARE ON THE MARCH. The battle lines have been drawn. Tomorrow is the day for the big drive. The heavy weapons have been moved to the front line and all is quiet. As the dawn approaches and the moment of attack nears, each of the combatants realizes the possible sacrifice he may be called upon to make for his country—death. As he thinks of all the things that have happened and may yet happen, the soldier-lad is stirred from his gloom by the movement of a fellow-soldier. Yes, it is his fellow-soldier, but more properly it is God's soldier, the soldier-priest.

In every war the ambassador of Christ has joined his brethren in arms on the field of battle. As the soldier-priest he has performed heroically the task of spiritual shepherd to those who are perilously placed on the brink of eternity. When shells burst, cannon thunder and shrapnel flies, the soldier-priest is a symbol of strength to the fighting men about him. Though he bears no arms himself, he is largely responsible for the most potent of weapons in the line of battle—morale among the fighting men.

In his role of chaplain, the soldier-priest can truly act as another Christ. Many stories originated in the first World War concerning the soldier-priest. His deeds of heroism were many. The famous Father Duffy of the Fighting 69th, a statue of whom has been placed in Times Square, received no less than four decorations for heroism in action. Of his experiences at the front, he writes: "Religion in the trenches has no aid from peeling organ or stained glass windows, but it is a real and vital thing at that. The ancestors of most of us

kept their religious life burning brightly as they stole to the proscribed Mass in a secluded glen, or told their beads by a turf fire; and I find that religion thrives today in a trench with the diapason of bursting shells for an organ. I had a word or two for every man and they were glad to get it . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Father Duffy was a typical soldier-priest in the last war. There were many more like him. In his book he relates a story of Father George Carpentier, O.P., who also was decorated for bravery and was especially known for his zeal and endurance: "Lieutenant Ogle took out a patrol one dark night and found in his party one soldier without a rifle, for which he rebuked him in a savage whisper. Later on he discovered that it was Father Carpentier who had accompanied the patrol—he says to render spiritual first aid if anyone was wounded."<sup>2</sup>

In a letter from the front during the last war, these words were written by a Catholic chaplain, Father Francis A. Kelly: "I am taking a few minutes of the time now at hand to write you a few of my observations here. In spite of the hardships which they are compelled to suffer, the men are game through and through, steadied always by a perfect realization of the importance and the sacredness of the duty they are called upon to perform. One could not ask for a more inspiring sight than to see these young lads assisting at Mass and approaching the Sacraments before entering the battle line . . . it does not break their nerve, it does not render them one whit less brave; on the contrary, it strengthens them and fortifies them and sends them forth realizing that they are ready to meet all that may come their way. The more I see them and the more I observe them, the more I am convinced that only those who are unprepared to meet their God are cowards in the battle line. We know no such thing, because our men are ever ready to answer the call of Him who holds sway over life and death. There is no shirking, there is no lagging, no hanging back. Once fortified with the sacraments they march forth with perfect resignation and with a peace which only the grace of God can give, filling the hearts and souls . . . the peace which marks the passing of our lads in the battlefield is something which shall remain with me as an inspiration throughout all my days. The least thing you do for them is so much appreciated. A comforting word, a prayer uttered in their ears, a blessing bestowed upon them, and they beam, fairly beam with the light of the grace of God. One knows that if they have been brave warriors here, they shall receive

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<sup>1</sup> Duffy, *Father Duffy's Story*, p. 66. New York, 1919.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

the crown of eternal victory hereafter."<sup>3</sup>

And as in the first World War, so in this global conflict the Catholic chaplains are showing heroic devotion to the men in arms. From the wind-swept islands of Alaska to the sultry shores of Guadalcanal, the soldier-priests are "scattering God's gifts with a royal hand." Consecrated to the work of Christ, sanctified in His service, they do not even hesitate to make the supreme sacrifice in the hour of darkness.

The first American chaplain killed in World War II was Father Aloysius H. Schmitt. He was aboard the U. S. S. Oklahoma during the attack on the United States Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces on December 7, 1941. The vessel capsized. He was trapped along with other members of the crew in a compartment where only a small porthole provided outlet for escape. Father Schmitt, according to the citation of the Secretary of the Navy, with unselfish disregard for his own plight, assisted his shipmates through the opening. When they were trying to rescue him, his body became wedged in the narrow opening. Realizing that other men had come into the compartment looking for a way out, he insisted that he be pushed back into the ship so that they might leave. Calmly urging them on with a pronouncement of his blessings, in a gesture of magnificent courage and sacrifice, he remained behind while they crawled to safety. Father Schmitt's heroic act is one among many others within the ranks of the soldier-priests. Lieutenant John Washington was another who is reported to have made the great sacrifice. Father Washington was aboard a United Nations ship when it was torpedoed. Giving his lifebelt to a frantic young soldier, he went down with the ship.

The siege of Bataan is one of the great epics of the present conflict. How a comparatively small number of forces heroically resisted the advance of the enemy on this island fortress, attests to their fortitude and stamina. Among the first to receive the Distinguished Service Cross during the siege was Captain John L. Curran, O.P., of the Chaplain Corps. Stationed at Fort Stotsenburg in the Philippines when the enemy attacked, Father Curran was the first priest to reach the fort hospital after the bombing, and after attending the injured he left for field duty with his outfit and finally landed in Bataan. Captain Florence MacDonald, who was among the last nurses to leave Corregidor before its fall and who was given the title "Woman of the Year" by the Women's National Institute, recently wrote Father

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, *American Catholics in the War*, pp. 277, 278, 280. Macmillan, New York, 1921.

Curran's Provincial, as follows: "When Father Curran left Fort Stotsenburg he was the picture of health: rosy cheeks, broad shoulders, fine looking. When I last saw him he had lost his rosy cheeks and about 50 pounds with them. He gave first aid to the injured, consolation to the dying, buried the dead and helped the litter bearers carry in the wounded."

The invasion of Africa adds another glorious chapter in the actions of the soldier-priest. This time Father Clement M. Falter, C.S.Sp., was to be called upon to offer his life in the line of battle. Describing his part in the invasion of North Africa, Father Francis Ballinger, a navy chaplain and observer of the invasion, recently said: "Father Falter spent some time before the Blessed Sacrament the night before we landed. He had celebrated Mass that evening. He seemed to have a premonition of what was to happen. He seemed to sense that this sacrifice was expected of him. We said "Au Revoir" and he left the ship with his group of men. The rest of the story I learned from some army officers who were on the beach. Just as the boat bearing Father Falter approached the beach, it was greeted with a shower of machine gunfire. Father Falter was killed instantly before he had ever set his foot on the beach. He had made the supreme sacrifice for his country and his men. He was an example to all of integrity, courage and patriotism."

Glowing tribute has been paid by an army officer, a veteran of the Burma campaign, to Rev. Jeremiah Kelleher, a missionary of St. Columban. Father Kelleher, who had labored in the Bhamo area among the Kachin tribesmen, volunteered to accompany his charges to the front when they rallied to the defense of their country against the Japanese invasion. He served in the trenches during the bitter battle of the Salween river preceding the fall of Rangoon, and ministered to British units in engagements near Mandalay and Lashio. Under merciless bombing and strafing by Japanese planes, the priest refused the opportunity to be evacuated and shared all the hardships of rear-guard actions covering the withdrawal of the British in India.

The heroic feats of the soldier-priest in this war as in past wars is a glorious legend. But of all his deeds, there is one in particular which will always stand out, his offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. From Egypt, Sgt. J. E. McGuire wrote this Christmas letter to his parents: "How I miss you on this day of days. As I sit here writing I can visualize all the wonderful Christmases we spent together; the happy moments I have had with you since I was old enough to remember. I have just attended Midnight Mass in a cathedral that I shall never forget. The ceiling was the starlit sky and

the floor was the desert sand. The altar was on an army truck, dimly lighted by two blessed candles and the missal was read with the aid of a flashlight held by one of the members of our unit, who was the altar boy. I went to confession before Mass and the confessional was the driver's seat of a truck. The communicant knelt on the running board and as I received the Sacrament and closed my eyes in meditation, I felt I was at the altar rail of Holy Trinity Church where I knew that both of you would be."

The soldier-priest is truly Christ's ambassador. At the reception of Holy Orders he was given the power to fulfill the offices of another Christ, to give to others the sacrifice and sacraments by which they live. Thus when he takes his place in the armed forces of his country, he brings with him the most potent of weapons for good, the sacerdotal character. The role of the ordained priest as a spiritual leader has been eloquently expressed in these words: "He is the ambassador of men as well as the ambassador of God; in his step can be heard the rumble of millions of feet in perfect unison with him. Where he goes, the whole Mystical Body of Christ goes along with him: into a narrow confessional box, into the quietly final atmosphere of a sick room, to an altar set up in a desert bristling with armies, to the deck of a ship buckling under a hail of bombs. His hand raised in blessing does not merely reach to the walls of his church, but to the walls of the world beyond."<sup>4</sup>

The heroic chaplain of this war and past wars will never be forgotten. The Divine Master, whose minister he is, said on one occasion: "Greater love no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The Catholic chaplain is always ready to make the supreme sacrifice. Love of God and love of country make the perfect soldier. When these two virtues are manifest in the trenches or at sea, then victory is inevitable. In the soldier-priest these two virtues are present for the inspiration of all. An observer of the Catholic chaplains in the last war wrote these words of appreciation: "Their gallant intrepidity before danger, their unselfishness before suffering, their resourceful dash and daring have made them models to their lay-comrades . . . as soldiers of Christ only the Recording Angel can chronicle their innumerable acts of virtue . . . thanks to these soldier-priests who have made themselves all things to all men, the empire of Satan has received an unlooked for and most unlooked-for check."<sup>5</sup>

The chaplain is God's gift to the fighting men. Ordained to bring

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<sup>4</sup> Farrell, *Companion to the Summa*, p. 376. Sheed & Ward, New York, 1942.

<sup>5</sup> *Ecclesiastical Review*, April, 1916.



God to men and men to God, his role is a great one. Morale is as important to an army as ammunition. And while the ambassador of Christ exercises his ministry among the troops, there should never be any concern about morale. Strengthened in the Faith the soldier will go forth to the field of battle ready to give his all that peace and freedom will once more reign. With his chaplain nearby, spurring him on, he cannot fail to obtain the palm of victory.