

A BLACKFRIAR IN NORTHERN BLUE

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NOT THE least glorious pages of American military history have been written by Catholic chaplains. From the War of Independence to the recent Korean conflict, the Church has always sent its priests to the battlefields to bring the grace of Christ and the consolations of the Faith to America's fighting men. This is the little-known story of a priest-hero of the War of Secession, Father Constantine Louis Egan of the Order of Friars Preachers, Chaplain in the Army of the Potomac.

In the summer of 1863 Father Egan was serving the spiritual needs of the parishioners of St. Dominic's, Washington, D. C. These were troubled times for his flock. The War Between the States had been running its frightful course for almost two and a half years. The city of Washington itself was in peril of attack from the armies of the Confederacy just across the Potomac River. News from the battlefield brought ever-increasing casualty lists, some of which announced that a son of the parish had fallen on a southern battlefield. In the face of all these wartime tensions and griefs Father Egan serenely walked, bringing to his people the assurance of God's love and protection.

WITH THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC

In God's Providence, however, the fruits of Father Egan's priestly ministrations were not to be limited to the people of St. Dominic's. Toward the end of August a message came to him from the War Department. General George Gordon Meade had requested that a Catholic priest be sent to his command near the banks of the Rappahannock River in Virginia to care for two Catholic soldiers who were to be executed for desertion. After securing the necessary permission from his superior, Father Egan left the next day for the camp of the Army of the Potomac. There he heard the confessions of the condemned men, said Mass and gave them Holy Communion on the morning of their execution. Through his priestliness and charity the two soldiers were

able to face death with courage and serenity, confident of God's mercy.

After performing the funeral service at their graves, Father Egan was invited by Colonel Patrick Guiney of the Ninth Massachusetts Volunteers to visit his regiment. The Ninth, formed at the outset of the war, was composed entirely of Irishmen. They had been without the services of a priest for several months, and were most eager to receive the sacraments. When Father Egan learned of the situation, he promised the Colonel that he would remain with the regiment a week. During this time he heard confessions every evening and offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass each morning. The news of his presence spread throughout the army, and soon the men of the Ninth were joined at the confessional line and altar by soldiers from other Union contingents.

At the end of the week he made preparations for the return to St. Dominic's, but the men of the Ninth Volunteers had other plans. Colonel Guiney, his officers, and men, along with soldiers of other regiments went in a body to Father Egan and begged him to remain with them. In the whole Army of the Potomac there was only one other Catholic chaplain. It was evident then that there was need for Father Egan here; men daily exposed to death on the battle-field should not be deprived of the strength of the sacraments. In the face of such arguments Father Egan could find no response. He agreed to become their chaplain if permission was granted to him by his religious superiors. A few days later in Washington he received the necessary permission from his Provincial along with the following letter of confirmation.¹

St. Dominic's Church
Washington, D. C.
September 13, 1863

From motives of Christian charity to the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac, I freely grant permission to the Rev. Constantine L. Egan of our Order to accept the Chaplaincy of the Ninth Massachusetts Regiment.

M. A. O'Brien
Vicar Provincial of the
Province of St. Joseph

Shortly after this, he received a letter from Colonel Guiney containing his commission from Governor Andrews of Massa-

¹ *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, by Very Rev. W. Corby, C.S.C., Scholastic Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1894. p. 316.

chusetts. Constantine L. Egan, O.P., was a fullfledged member of the Army of the Potomac; the Blackfriar had donned northern blue.

BAPTISM OF FIRE

Battle is a horrifying experience. The thunder of artillery, the rattle of musketry, the screaming whine of flying lead, the sight of mangled bodies, the cries of the wounded, the stench of unburied dead—all these things test the courage of the bravest man. On October 14, 1863 Father Egan passed through his baptism of fire. His regiment had advanced from Warrenton, Virginia to Bristow Station where it was met by a force of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. A sharp battle followed in which the Confederates were repulsed, leaving their dead and wounded on the field. The heat of battle proved the courage of Father Egan, measured the depth of his spirituality, of his trust in God. Despite personal danger from shot and shell, wherever the battle was the thickest, Father Egan was present, giving aid to the wounded and the sacraments of Christ to the dying. When another engagement was fought on November 7 at Rappahannock Station and Kelly's Ford, the story was the same—Christ walked on the battlefields of Virginia in the person of His priest.

MISSIONS TO THE BOYS IN BLUE

During this campaign in Virginia, he received a request from the Fourteenth Infantry, regular army, asking him to minister to their spiritual needs. But the nature of the campaign, the sudden moves of the army, and the rumor of a general drive on Richmond made such a visit temporarily out of the question. About December 3, 1863, however, the army's move to winter quarters and the lull in the fighting made possible missionary work. Father Egan describes his labors among the Catholic soldiers in the following words:

During the winter I gave missions through the whole corps, pitching my little chapel tent in each brigade, having a soldier with me from my own regiment to take care of my horse, cook our rations, and, of course, to do our washing in as good a style as a big, rough, Irish soldier could perform an art to which he was unaccustomed. . . . My tent was pitched where the greater number of our troops were camped, each day hearing confessions, celebrating Mass the following morning, and administering Communion to those at confession the day previous.²

² *Ibid.*, pp. 323-324.

This apostolate continued until March 1864 when he returned to his own regiment. The Army of the Potomac was astir. Word had been received that General U. S. Grant, the hero of Vicksburg, had been placed in command of all the Northern armies. A hard campaign was in sight, but spirits were high. In Grant, the North had found a general who would take Richmond and end the war. But Father Egan knew the road to Richmond would be a blood-stained one, and the price of victory costly. Back with the men of the Ninth, he began to prepare them spiritually for the coming struggle.

ON THE ROAD TO RICHMOND

On May 4, 1864 the long, blue columns of the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan River and began to advance slowly and cautiously into the wilderness country of Virginia. On May 6 the Federal Army made contact with the main Confederate force under Lee a few miles west of the old battlefield at Chancellorsville. The terrain made the use of artillery impossible; the fight was with muskets, bayonets, and—when these were useless—hand to hand. For two days the conflict raged, and when silence fell upon the battlefield, eighteen thousand men in blue were either dead or wounded. The battle of the Wilderness ended in a draw.

Grant withdrew his shattered divisions, but instead of retreating pell-mell toward Washington, like his predecessors, he executed a brilliant flanking maneuver, and pointed the head of his columns toward Spottsylvania Court House, thus advancing further into the heart of the Confederacy. At Spottsylvania, Lee was waiting for him in force. Again heavy casualties, again the flanking movement, this time toward Cold Harbor, a point still nearer to Richmond. At Cold Harbor the story was the same—fight, flank, and advance. But the price of the advance was frightful. In three weeks time the Union Army had lost fifty-five thousand men in dead or wounded. The relentless Grant, however, pushed on to Richmond.

During these days of horror the ranks of the Ninth were thinned like leaves on a tree before an autumn wind. Moreover, the survivors of the fury were tired and exhausted from fighting, marching, and more fighting. Father Egan shared their danger and fatigue. He gives this description of his work in the Wilderness.

In the rear, a corps field hospital was established in an old deserted farm-house. Here the wounded were gathered. I got as many

of the wounded officers and men of my regiment into the old house as could find room, and the rest were put under the cover of tents. After attending to their spiritual wants and alleviating their bodily suffering as much as I could, my services were needed by other Catholics belonging to our corps. The ambulances came in droves bringing in the wounded all day and far into the night. Surgeons were busy at work amputating broken limbs; men were employed digging long trenches where we buried our dead. All this was fearful to see, and it was awful to hear the groans and screams of our wounded men, wrestling all night in their agony.³

A few days after the battle of Cold Harbor the war ended for the Ninth Massachusetts Volunteers—their three year period of enlistment had expired. But now Father Egan was without a regiment and official connection with the army, since he received his commission from the State of Massachusetts and not from the Federal Government. This made further work with Catholic soldiers almost impossible. At the suggestion, however, of General Griffin, his corps commander, he wrote President Lincoln, requesting a commission. In the meanwhile he travelled to Boston with the Ninth, visited St. Dominic's for a short stay, and then proceeded to the army general field hospital at City Point, Virginia, where he attended the Catholic soldiers wounded in the siege of Petersburg.⁴ It was at this time that he received his commission from the War Department, attaching him to General Griffin's Fifth Corps. From July, 1864 until the surrender at Appomattox, April 9, 1865, he divided his time between the men at the front and the wounded at City Point. When the fighting lessened in January he once again conducted missions until March at the various brigades. His military career ended on July 15, 1865 when he received his honorable discharge and returned to his people at St. Dominic's.⁵

NEITHER BLUE NOR GRAY

Father Egan was a true patriot. His patriotism, however, was not based upon emotion and passion, but rather upon true con-

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

⁴ Records at St. Dominic's indicate that at this time and during other periods of furlough he assisted his Dominican brethren in the administration of the parish.

⁵ After the war Father Egan was twice superior at St. Rose Priory, Springfield, Kentucky, and for a time served as pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, Zanesville, Ohio. While in his first term at Saint Rose (1866-1869) he constructed the present building, which now serves as a Studium of Philosophy for the Province.

viction. In his mind, the preservation of the Union was a sacred cause, a cause for which no energy and talent, not even life itself, should be spared. But for him there was more involved on the battlefields of Virginia than the defense of the Union, there was a question of immortal souls. Father Egan before all things was a priest, the instrument and channel of God's grace for all men. In the sight of such a vocation there was no distinction between Federal and Confederate, between blue and gray. The following incident which took place shortly before Appomattox illustrates this most strikingly.

Father Egan was riding behind the front lines near Lynchburg, Virginia, when he noticed a wounded Confederate soldier lying by the side of the road. He immediately dismounted and went to his aid, and after examining the wound, he found that it was fatal. He told the soldier he had not long to live and that he should use the time remaining to him in preparing for eternity. He asked the wounded man if he were ever baptized. When the soldier replied in the negative, a brief instruction on the necessity of baptism was given to him. The soldier asked for baptism, whereupon Father Egan took his canteen of water, poured water on the head of the dying man, and spoke the words of eternal life—"I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Defeat had met this Confederate soldier's cause, but through the priestly zeal of Father Egan, he had won the greatest victory man can achieve—eternal possession of God.⁶

Father Constantine L. Egan merits a place of honor in the history of our country. The preservation of the Union, the survival of our American heritage are in some measure due to his devotion to God and country. The ingredients of victory are more than a superiority in manpower and weapons; its essential element is that of the spirit. So it is that the success of the Federal Armies before Richmond cannot be attributed solely to a superiority in men and arms, but also to that spiritual strength which flowed from the priesthood of Father Egan. To Father Egan, and to all his brother priests who have served, and are now serving, beneath the standard of the Stars and Stripes, America owes a debt of gratitude.

⁶ Although Father Egan does not identify the place of the incident, his designation of the time, the description of the battle-line as regards the position of Sheridan's Cavalry and the supporting infantry of Ord and Griffin seem to indicate Lynchburg, one of the last battles in Lee's desperate attempt to avoid annihilation by Grant.