



SOLDIER PRIESTS OF FRANCE

THEY SERVE AS OTHER MEN SERVE, AND THEY SERVE ALSO AS MINISTERS OF GOD WHEN OCCASION CALLS

By Sterling Hellig, in Detroit Free Press. A well known managing-editor writes me: "Remember that, from time to time, articles which reflect the soul of France make a very strong appeal to American readers."

So here goes. Many have marveled at the heroic courage of French soldiers. There may be several explanations; but a principal one is certainly as follows: The French Republic put a gun in the hands of every young priest, brother and church-student. Between 20,000 and 30,000 are at the War. They are not chaplains. They are simple soldiers, by universal military service law, without choice, in the name of equality. They look like soldiers; they are soldiers; but a form crawls among the wounded on the battlefield, at dusk, and murmurs: "I am a priest. Receive absolution. Be at peace."

And there you are. Men feel differently about these matters, in war. A young missionary called back to the army from Pamiers put it in a single word in a letter to my next door neighbors: "You heard that I had been appointed officer-adjoint to the colonel? As such, inevitably, I would have no freedom. Well, the officers themselves went to the colonel. 'The Abbe belongs to us,' they said. 'We want him to be with us under fire, to risk our lives gaily in all security, because we know that a priest is beside us, ready at first call.'"

The military service law for priests, of course, was not passed (in 1906) with any such object, but purely in the name of equality of all citizens; and Deputy Groussan, in parliament, has just disclosed, in this sense, that of 25,000 priests who have been "fighting" 2,500 have been killed; while of 600 Jesuits who returned to France from practical exile to take their places in the army, 120 have fallen; and so on for Christian brothers and other suppressed communities. But this other, secondary, result which is so striking comes, you might say, unexpected. You take a man of God and put a gun into his hand. If he refuses he is a deserter and is treated as such. Their bishops told them to obey the law of equality. In return their companions, the poilus, began to obey another law—the law of human nature.

In his section, from the start, the priest-soldier came to be the soul of the bunch. The chiefs noticed more confidence and "go" in companies where he happened to be. He seemed to centralize the moral force of the men around him, "as if it were an emanation from his person," according to an early report. "We priests simply can't fear death," says he of Pamiers. "The men see that we have an advantage; and it is contagious."

Quite different from the careless attitude of peace: instinctively, the men give them, or tacitly invite them to assume, their logical position. "I love this life," wrote the Abbe M—, become sub-lieutenant, "and I seem, for the first time, to be fully a man!" (The Abbe was killed in September, 1916.)

"Oh, the tightening of the heart before the combat, when you see all those eyes resting on you in mixed fear and friendship, seeming to say: 'We look to you. We know that many of us will be killed.' (He himself fell ten days later.) There is a courageous resignation, without sadness, very beautiful. I would not give this short period for all the rest of my life! It is such a joy, in the constant presence of death, to see souls lift themselves, approach to God, and to feel, as such as one can feel, that most of those who fell were in a state of grace, raised to the highest moral level which they could attain, united by their humble resignation to the Divine sacrifice! I would support the worst of miseries to always feel this thing."

Now you begin to perceive—what came, you might say, almost as a revelation to the French—the military importance of 20,000 or 30,000 young priests, brothers, etc., amid the troops, dressed and armed exactly like themselves and having, legally, but simple soldiers' situation, while retaining in fact (and known to all) their priestly powers and armor.

At the Grand cafe the waiter, Adolphe, came back on a week's permission from the front. A changed man, bronzed, trained down, hard, all the restaurant fat gone, calm, poised, sober, cheery but thoughtful, straight-shouldered, a strong man who knows his word. He used to be the joker of the Grand cafe, and up to every trick,

He told quite simply how he won his Cross of War.

"We were eleven in the trench," said Adolphe. "All our officers had been killed except the sergeant, who was a priest; and we were waiting for the signal to leap over and charge. The sergeant said: 'Now, boys, you know I am a priest. Say your act of contrition and I will give you absolution.' So we knelt and did it; and he did it; and we all jumped out together. We went eleven and came back four, and the priest was not among us."

I want not to expound, but merely quote. "The priest chases fear of death by his example and the absolution he can give," the boy from Pamiers puts it. "And forward the music, the heart is at peace! Rare are those who die without absolution, if not individual, at least collective, given to them all together, in common, before the combat."

In danger of death, you understand? So for Communion. In spite of the strict rule of fasting, soldiers are allowed to receive it after they have eaten. Before combat, in hesitation, this one detail of opportunity decides many.

Danger of death, danger of death. If all this clashes with your previous ideas of French men, or men in general, or other matters, remember that war is a great dissolver, human nature a big thing. No backstairs entrance to stern life is being preached. Who wants to sin in face of hourly death?

The boy from Pamiers was marching with his section to the trenches. A soldier, a peasant, edged in and marched beside him, saying: "I would like to take Communion tomorrow morning. One never knows what will happen here. Can't I make my confession now?" The priest said: "Go ahead." They walked together; the man, walking, said his prayers, and then, for his confession, just pronounced three letters—"R. A. S."—which is the telephone and wireless formula, in war, for rien a signaler, or "nothing particular to report." "What!" said the priest, "you mean that you've done nothing wrong, have nothing on your conscience?" "What could I do wrong here?" asked the soldier of France (who, remember, is in his own country, fighting off the invader). "I am too dog-tired, with marching, grubbing and battle. When I get a time to rest I sit and think about my wife and kids home on the farm, or else I sleep. That can't be wrong."

The priest said: "No, that can't be wrong," and gave him absolution, as they walked. Nights of sleeplessness in the trenches (according to Adolphe), when "the priest of Quimper" and two friends recited the Rosary aloud, the entire trench gave the short responses. "The priest of Quimper used to hear confessions all night long," says Adolphe. "He would start at one end of the trench and, forward, march, he'd clean 'em all up!" And this is Adolphe!

For more technical exactitude I quote the Abbe Joseph D—, of Blois, sub-lieutenant. "Above all, here (in War)," he says, "the priest is the minister of the sacraments of penance and Communion; penance, which reconciles the soul with God, and Communion, which makes heaven enter descend into the soul, and permits a man to look death in the face. That is why they want us here. The priest-soldier is the religious security of the battalion."

To apply this (as to courage) I must point out that the men are not all the time thinking each of his own personal religious state; but all gain confidence from what they see of these things, also in others—in particular their officers. "The day we quit the second line our captain went to Communion," says Adolphe, "and one who was a kind of leader in the bunch, not a hard character, you know, but, all the same, he was a butcher out at La Villette before the War, said, and we most of us agreed and no man called him down: 'He said, 'I'm not afraid to go under fire with a captain who went to Communion the same morning.'"

All of which, of course, is fully realized by the chiefs. As you can imagine, the priest-soldier's first idea is always to improve a church somewhere. Now, it is the habitual thing, when other facilities lack, for captains to offer their personal cave-dugouts for the purpose. And I know of Communion Masses or Requiem Masses for dead soldiers held in great half-ruined churches, where two generals and 150 officers of all grades sat in chairs of the principal nave, while 8,000 men crowded, standing, in the laterals, under the organs, behind the altar, everywhere.

It is no new thing. It began with the German invasion. My next-door neighbor, D—, not noted for piety before the War, told me as his first story how, in the cathedral of Rheims, during the night before the irresistible German advance which preceded their retreat of the Marne, 70 priests in their soldier-clothes stood or sat on the floor, hearing confessions of endless lines of soldiers all night long, preparing for battle.

The latest word of it is found in the blood stained diary of Madame Cheron's grandson, who was not out of the Marne, who went front for the class of 1917, still a student for the priesthood (slender, timid youth we

all knew well) and was killed on March 3 of this year.

"Picking up wounded within 60 yards of German trenches," runs the last entry. "Blood and groans! How shall we have force to drag them all so far? Mysterious grace of God which surrounds me! The trips are long. In, stops to rest I pull out my crucifix; they want to kiss it. They squeeze my arm with their bloody hands. One boy is murmuring continually: 'Mamma, mamma.' Stupidly, I sobbed along the road. A priest hurried up, the Abbe C—, of Angers. 'You are carrying my brother,' he said. When we stopped in the woods the brothers talked. 'Adieu,' the wounded one saying, 'you will tell them—' When he died the Abbe C— continued giving absolutions. I went without giving absolutions. I went with his brother's body."

You wanted the soul of France. You've got it. 1917.

THE CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY

A new and very artistic form of certificate of membership is being issued by the Catholic Truth Society of Canada to Endowment and Life members. The certificate has been over to the church. Many of these new converts came today to invite me pay them a visit. They say they were engaged in constructing a theatre in which to perform plays for the idols but that now they intend to destroy it. Tomorrow I will pay them a visit and see that there are no more remnants of superstition in their homes.

My native curate, Father Yao, who is "holding the fort" in Taichowfu in my absence also sends me good news: "The Anglicans have convoked a council of their Chinese helpers and adherents, the number of whom is on the decrease as many are being converted to the true Faith. Deliberations were held on this state of affairs and a Chinese minister by the name of Sing has been despatched to Ningpo to make a report to headquarters." A few days later he writes: "Eighty-three boys and girls have entered our school in Taichowfu and forty adult converts have come for instruction. Last Sunday three Anglican deaconesses, who are engaged in propagating their sect in the city of Taichowfu, came to our church for the Stations of the Cross and Benediction."

Continue to pray and the harvest will be easy to reap. Yours faithfully, J. M. FRASER, Taichowfu, China.

P.S.—Please acknowledge in the RECORD a gift of \$50 from "An Overseas Friend." J. M. F.

ANNUAL MEETING

The twenty-eighth annual meeting of the Catholic Truth Society of Canada will be held in St. Michael's Hall, 67 Bond St., Toronto, on the evening of May 14th, 1917, at 8 o'clock.

The Archbishop of Toronto will be present. Priests and laity, from outside, as well as from the city, are cordially invited to be present. Reports will be made as to what has been done for the soldiers, in camp and those gone overseas. What has been sent to the Western missionaries; how leaflets and pamphlets are procured and distributed; the re-mailing of Catholic reading and what it means; how the revenue is obtained and how expended; what is being done for hotel guests; what is being done for non-English-speaking Canadians; what can be done with cancelled stamps; and other interesting information.

The date of the same day, in St. Michael's Cathedral, a Requiem Mass will be offered for the repose of the souls of deceased members. A large attendance at this Mass is requested.

GOVERNOR CATTS SCORED BY "BEE"

Bigotry and ignorance never die. No matter how often their heads be scotched, up they crop again like evil weeds in a flower garden. It is rather startling, however, to find the Governor of a great State as bigoted and ignorant and as idiotic as any street-corner crank whose mind has been turned by religious brooding.

Sidney J. Catts, Governor of Florida, is such a man. It sounds incredible, but he is actively working to prevent Catholics from teaching in the schools of that State or holding public office in Florida. And, more than that, this same Catts before his election made a pledge that if elected he would compel every Catholic priest to marry or get out of Florida. Bigotry closely borders on insanity when a Governor advocates such ridiculous impossibilities.

Surely, he must know that even if Florida be so unbalanced as to pass such a law, the Constitution of the United States would prevent the enforcement of any statutes barring Catholics from teaching in the schools, or holding office, or compelling Catholic priests to marry.

Catts would have the same right to deny marriage to Protestant clergymen as to compel Catholic priests to marry. If he had either lawful power, he could withhold any other right or privilege guaranteed under the Constitution.

Sidney J. Catts before his election as Governor was an itinerant minister of the Billy Sunday school, which explains to some extent the ridiculous propositions he now makes the chief planks of his administration. Florida should be ashamed of herself that her citizens could have been so unintelligent as to elect such a

man her Chief Executive. Better material for Governor can be found in her insane asylums.—Sacramento Bee.

WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

Dr. Austin O'Malley in America notes: "Take up the evening paper and you can read of the marriage of Gladys Murphy to M. Francis Burke, in the Second Baptist Church, by the Rev. Peter Doyle, and every one in the group, from parson to flower girl, had grandmothers that took their beads to bed with them."

LETTER FROM FATHER FRASER

THE FIELDS WHITE WITH THE HARVEST

Kadeo, Feb. 23, 1917. My dear friends,—On my arrival here from Sanliuading after making a journey of twenty miles in the pouring rain I was delighted to hear from the catechist of this place that a whole village has recently come over to the church. Many of these new converts came today to invite me pay them a visit. They say they were engaged in constructing a theatre in which to perform plays for the idols but that now they intend to destroy it. Tomorrow I will pay them a visit and see that there are no more remnants of superstition in their homes.

My native curate, Father Yao, who is "holding the fort" in Taichowfu in my absence also sends me good news: "The Anglicans have convoked a council of their Chinese helpers and adherents, the number of whom is on the decrease as many are being converted to the true Faith. Deliberations were held on this state of affairs and a Chinese minister by the name of Sing has been despatched to Ningpo to make a report to headquarters." A few days later he writes: "Eighty-three boys and girls have entered our school in Taichowfu and forty adult converts have come for instruction. Last Sunday three Anglican deaconesses, who are engaged in propagating their sect in the city of Taichowfu, came to our church for the Stations of the Cross and Benediction."

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DIED

SHEA—Suddenly at 211 Reid street, Peterboro, February 28, 1917, Mrs. William Shea. May her soul rest in peace.

RANKINS—At Rockland, on Monday, April 9th, Mrs. Thomas Rankins in her eightieth year. May her soul rest in peace.

Many a man gets a reputation for dignity when he really is suffering from a stiff neck.

NEW BOOKS

"The Will to Win." A call to American boys and girls by E. Boyd Barrett, S. J., Published by P. J. Kennedy and Sons, New York. Price 50 cts. "Grapes of Thorns." A novel by Mary T. Waggaman. Published by Benziger Brothers, New York. Price \$1.25. "Life and Letters of Rev. Mother Teresa Dase." Founded and Superior General of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in America. Edited by a Member of the Community. Published by McClelland, Goodchild and Stewart, Toronto. Price \$1.50.

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ASSISTANT TEACHER WANTED FOR C. S. S. Calabogie, one holding a second class professional certificate. Duties to commence immediately. Apply stating salary and experience to J. L. Lezere, Calabogie, Ont. 2012-4f. TEACHER WANTED FOR SCHOOL SECTION No. 2, Bathurst. Must have some experience. Salary \$500. Apply to Wm. Belch, Sec. Treas., Espanola Station, Ont. 2012-2.

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By Order of the Board, J. COOPER MASON, Actg.-General Manager.

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This is only one letter out of dozens we have received from pleased users of the Duplex within the last few weeks. You, too, will be pleased if you get one. Get one for yourself at the wholesale price of \$1.00. The price is going up to \$1.50 immediately. Get a Duplex and send it to your friend, brother or husband in the trenches. It will be more than welcome now that the warm weather is coming.

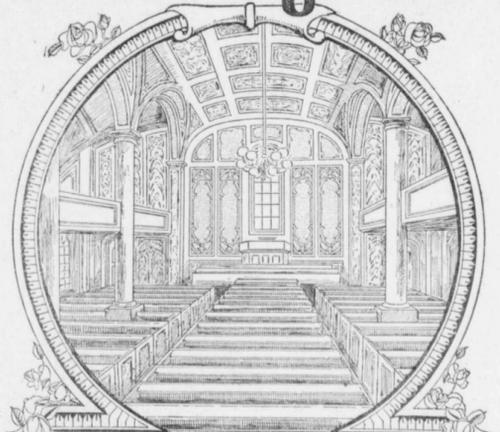
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