



CATHOLIC CHAPLAINS in THE GREAT WAR WW1



The absorption of The Munsters 1915 - Matania

Military responsibility for Army chaplains lay with the Army Chaplains Department established in 1796 and heavily biased towards the Church of England in administration and number. There was no comparable organisation within the Admiralty for Navy chaplains. During the Crimean War Bishop Thomas Grant of Southwark had acted on behalf of the Catholic Hierarchy in matters of army and naval catholic chaplaincy and his successors retained ecclesiastical control of military chaplains until 1903. But when Bishop Francis Bourne of Southwark was elevated to Westminster he took this responsibility with him. Naval chaplains had been supervised by the Bishop of Portsmouth but in 1900 Cardinal Vaughan was asked by Bishop Vertue to take on the responsibility. In 1906, the Vatican ratified the arrangements and Archbishop Bourne assumed sole ecclesiastical control of all catholic chaplains serving British forces. It was to Cardinal Bourne, therefore, that The War Office and Admiralty turned to on the outbreak of war in August 1914 when it became obvious that many more Catholic chaplains would be required.

At the commencement of hostilities the total establishment of the Army chaplains Department was only 17 Roman Catholic priests. The deployment age and health of Roman Catholic chaplains meant that only 7 accompanied the British expeditionary Force to France in August. By October another five chaplains had been sent to France whilst others were ordered to serve either at home stations or other overseas garrisons.



Fr Francis Woodlock SJ MC (OB)

The early battles and engagements of the war were far more mobile than the later set piece offensives and consequently chaplains found it difficult to minister to their scattered flocks. The thought of battle and the proximity of injury and death caused great anxiety among soldiers unable to avail themselves of spiritual consolation and the concentration of catholic units proved too much for the chaplains to minister affectively. In the initial BEF of five divisions, there were eight Irish infantry battalions and three cavalry regiments all predominantly Catholic. In addition Scottish and English battalions had large catholic minorities. The absence of Catholic chaplains was acutely felt. When 127 dead of the Royal Munster Fusiliers were laid to rest during the retreat from Mons in August 1914, a German catholic chaplain had to conduct the service. The Irish Rifles had not seen a priest nor attended Mass since they left for France.

By the end of 1914 the BEF had become two separate armies. Lord Kitchener Secretary of State for War had astounded everyone by predicting a much longer conflict and demanding the expansion of the army to 70 Divisions. His call for volunteers was eagerly answered and commensurate with this response was that of Catholic priests willing to serve as military chaplains. It was obvious that the chaplains Department, untouched by previous military reforms, would have to be restructured to meet new demands. Mgr Keatinge was appointed senior Roman Catholic chaplain. He was granted 4 chaplains per division one for each brigade and one for divisional troops .In addition, there was to be one chaplain for each Irish Battalion and adequate provision for hospitals and base camps.



Fr Dominic Devas OP (OB) conducting a trench burial

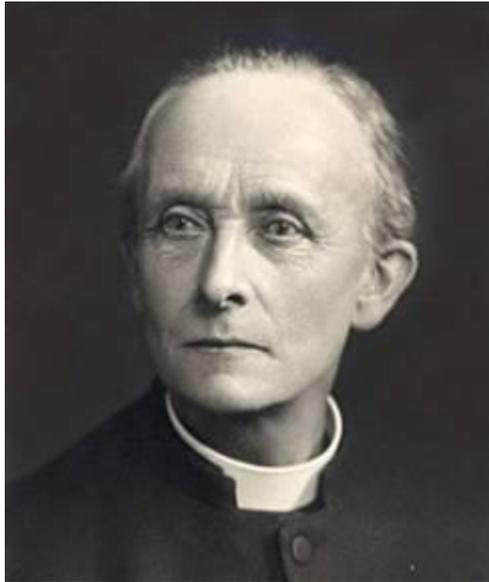
Throughout the war Roman Catholic chaplains became known for their determination to be with troops at all times and many exercised initiative which frequently placed them in the same danger as the fighting men. Those of other denominations soon recognised the bravery of catholic padres who accompanied their men into the firing line. In August and September 1914 many priests had volunteered for duty but there was no immediate urgency on the part of the War Office to increase the actual establishment of chaplains at the front. Catholic public opinion became enraged at the delay and the Irish bishops in particular clamoured for Irish chaplains for Irish regiments. Their bishops resolved that nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of Irish priests ministering to their wounded and dying countryman on the field of battle.

Kitchener ignored the bishops and resisted attempts to enlist Irish support: “they would only bring their priests with them and start wholesale proselytising”, he said. The Prime Minister Asquith’s wife, Margot aware of the consequences of ignoring Irish sympathy told Kitchener that he should give them their priests. By the end of the war the English and Irish provinces of the Jesuits had given nearly 80 men and no order or diocese had suffered greater casualties.

The naval situation was as bad if not worse. Dom Odo Blundell (OB) had acted as officiating chaplain at Cromarty, Invergordon and Kirkwall since 1905 and in 1908, off the Isle of Arran, had the distinction of being the first Roman Catholic priest to say Mass on a Royal Navy ship on a home station, since the days of King James II. It became the custom among some captains to evade an official ruling and allow mass to be celebrated on board but on the outbreak of war the Admiralty again re-issued the order preventing this. The large number of Catholic officers, seamen and stokers in the Navy made no difference to their Lordships.

In October 1914, Dom Odo described the difficulty of ministering to 40 or 50 ships which called into harbour, take on coal and then leave .In such a situation, there was no opportunity for the priest to visit the ships. However, his work was not entirely fruitless, for in the following month from HMS Colossus of the 1st Battle Squadron, Dom Odo reported that 1500 men had received Holy Communion after individual confessions. He also reported that there was still uncertainty and confusion regarding the Admiralty’s rule which forbade “dissenting” public services; some captains allowed and even requested Catholic chaplains to hold public services.

By 1916, six Roman Catholic chaplains were attached to the 1st Battle Squadron and chaplains including Dom Odo were present at the Battle of Jutland. In total, 40 catholic priests served as chaplains to the Royal Navy and of these two were killed in action. Naval chaplains like that army brethren served God and their flock in a most fitting and glorious way in terrible conditions.



Fr Sir William Heathcote SJ. (OB) Naval Chaplain

Overall, there is some general understanding that the war eroded the religious beliefs of a great number, challenged and overcame them for a fair number, and for some reaffirmed their faith, and for others, far fewer in number, brought them for the first time into a positive spiritual conviction. Conditions were so appalling that one man wrote “only the devout Christian can hear the still small voice above the cannon”. And yet men did pray. Matania’s painting of the Munsters on their way to Aubers Ridge in 1915 is a graphic illustration of the closeness of a chaplain and men in prayer before battle. One padre wrote that prayer was a natural impulsive cry for help. Men say their prayers before going into action. Some who come out safe never say them again until the next time they are in danger. Catholic officers recorded the piety, relief and thanksgiving among men before and after action and one wrote that the idea of death, sudden and violent, was impressed on one far better than by the most eloquent father giving a retreat. Durham pit men were prepared to wait for three hours for the confessional. The example did not go unobserved, it was written that being so often near to death, that there were 40,000 conversions to Catholicism on the Western front during the war.

The role of the catholic chaplain was a vital factor. For most, contact with their men was based on the particular social relationships of urban Catholicism. It was a relationship in which men wanted a priest nearby and appears to have none of the social acrimony which characterised relationships between other padres particularly Anglicans and their regiments. Men were happy to have a padre with them, they felt proud of his actions and missed him when he was not available. It was the willingness of most catholic chaplains to share the

privations and dangers of trench and battle that earned them and their religion respect not easily won.

The conviction among Catholic men and their chaplains that the personal attention of priest to man was the essential part of their relationship was very strong and was not hidden from view. It was a relationship based on the power of the Sacraments, cynically described by a non-catholic officer as “a tragic confidence of the ranks in the mechanical efficacy of pious observance”. It was acknowledged from the beginning of the War that non-Catholic chaplains had little spiritual consolation to offer a wounded or dying man. Anglicans could not acquire any miraculous aid from a parson on the battlefield, however brave or diligent that padre may be. One Anglican padre wrote that he had hovered in seemingly priestly impotence over miracles of cheerful patients lying on stretchers in dressing rooms. For him there was no magnetic incentive to endanger his life in the trenches.



Fr Francis Devas SJ, OBE, DSO (OB)

By the end of the war 649 catholic chaplains were still serving, 36 died. The motives for serving like those of other chaplains, probably varied from young men wanting to experience the excitement of war like their contemporaries, to older men wishing to serve God and be of

spiritual assistance to their fellow men in extra-ordinary circumstances. Whatever their motives, the length and extent of their service was considerable their bravery was exemplary and the quality of their ministry was inestimable.

This is but a small tribute to the following OB Chaplains;-

Royal Navy; Dom Odo Blundell OSB

Fr Sir William Heathcote Bt SJ

Army; Fr Henry Day SJ MC

Fr Arthur Day OBE

Fr Francis Charles Devas SJ OBE, DSO

Fr Raymond (Dominic) Devas OP

Fr Philip Devas OFM, OBE

Fr James Fleming SJ

Fr Bernard Howell CSsR

Fr Francis Lamb ODC

Fr Lawrence Lamb ODC

Fr James McCann SJ

Fr William Ross SJ

Mgr Charles Smith CBE, DSO

Fr Francis Woodlock SJ MC (volunteer member of Staff)

Fr Joseph Woodlock SJ

St John's Ambulance: Dom Placid Pritchard OSB, DAS 4/9/17

The following members of Beaumont Staff volunteered:-

Fr E C Collingridge SJ

Fr F Ketterer SJ

Fr A Tempest SJ

Fr W P Montague SJ DAS 13/10/18 aged 32

Fr B Blake SJ

Fr W Brand SJ

Fr N Campbell SJ

Fr T Carey SJ DAS 24/2/19 aged 41

Fr S Roberts SJ

Fr E Rockliff SJ

Fr F Woodlock SJ MC

“If you are Catholic, Irish and a Jesuit; Three good reasons for not awarding a VC.”