HOLY CROSS COMMUNITIES IN THE CIVIL WAR

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When Edward Sorin came to write the entry for 1861 in his *Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac*, the event which posterity would identify with that year, the beginning of the American Civil War, was not foremost in his thoughts. For some nine pages he covered in great detail his conflict with the Bishop of Chicago and how this erratic and ungrateful prelate had expelled the congregation from his diocese after thirty members had given their services gratis for five years and incurred a debt of eight thousand dollars in behalf of their ministry, a debt which the bishop left it to the community to liquidate. It took Sorin another nine pages to recount how he had been deceived and harassed by Brother Amédée, the former treasurer at the University of Notre Dame, who had left for Montreal with a number of important papers that posed a financial threat to Sorin and the congregation in the United States.[1]

It was only when he had gotten these vexing matters off his chest that Sorin turned to the matter of the war that had broken out between the northern and southern states in the spring of that year and its impact on the American Holy Cross community.

> Contrary to all the anticipations of thinking men, war broke out at the beginning of spring by the attack on Fort Sumter near Charleston, and before the end of the year more than a million men had taken up arms, each in defense of his rights. For more than fifteen years the South had been complaining of the North, and every year the Union seemed to be threatened in the Congress. People were accustomed to those threats, which had come to be but little regarded.
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> The South was in earnest, had taken action, and had prepared. The first cannon fired in South Carolina took the people of the North entirely by surprise. In some months two

[1]Edward Sorin, *The Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 255-274.

hundred thousand soldiers were in the field, and by the end of autumn about six hundred thousand had abandoned everything to defend their country.

Of this number, one third were Catholics. Notre Dame du Lac at once thought of providing those Catholic soldiers with the helps of their holy religion. Fr. Paul Gillen was the first sent to Washington, the headquarters of the grand army, towards the end of June. He did much good there. In succession, three other Fathers were likewise deputed and accepted by the Government as chaplains, namely, Fathers J. Dillon, P. Cooney and W. Corby.

The Sisters were also called by the Government to take care of the wounded. In autumn, twenty-two Sisters of Holy Cross took charge of several military hospitals at Cairo, Paducah, and Mound City. In this latter hospital there were about one thousand beds. [2]

These four paragraphs describe the beginning of a ministry that would eventually engage more religious of Holy Cross, men and women, than anything the congregation had hitherto attempted, in France, Bengal, Canada or the United States.

Father Paul Gillen, whom Sorin identifies as the first priest sent to Washington to serve as a chaplain, was born in Ireland, probably in County Kerry, in 1810 and entered the novitiate at Notre Dame in December 1856, when he was forty-six years old. On July 2nd of the following year he professed vows.[3] He seems to have already been a priest in the diocese of Vincennes, Indiana, when he entered the community.[4] Gillen began to minister to the Catholics in the Army of the Potomac before he held any official position since his military service record in the National Archives has him mustered into the army only in 1862, the year after Sorin sent

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[2]Ibid., 276-277.

[3]Matricule générale of the Congregation of Holy Cross (here- after M.g.), #1125.

[4]H.J. Allerding, *The Diocese of Fort Wayne, 1857-September 22-1907, A Book of Historical Reference, 1669-1907* (Fort Wayne, IN: Archer Printing Co., 1907), 110. See also William Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, edited by Lawrence Frederick Kohl (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992 [1893]), 308.

him to Washington.[5]

This is not surprising as the officers of a regiment usually selected the chaplain. Since most of the officers were not Catholics, there were few Catholic priests chosen for the position. James Dillon and William Corby, who were sent east later in 1861, fared better in this regard. Dillon had been named chaplain of the 63rd New York Volunteer Infantry, one of three regiments in Thomas Francis Meagher's Irish Brigade, a unit made up almost exclusively of Irish Catholic soldiers and numbering three thousand men. Finding the work too much for him, Dillon asked Sorin to send Corby to help him and the latter became chaplain of the 88th New York Volunteer Infantry, another regiment in the Irish Brigade before the end of 1861.[6] Fr. Peter Paul Cooney served an Indiana regiment in the western theater of the war.

Gillen, however, roamed among the many units in the Army of the Potomac searching out the Catholic soldiers. Corby described his approach thus:

> Having secured a strong horse he purchased also an old-fashioned, flat-bottomed rockaway in Washington, D.C. From this vehicle he had the front seat removed and from the back seat he drove his faithful horse "Sarsfield". In this rockaway were transported a few army blankets for sleeping purposes, a small amount of provisions, a chapel tent - constructed according to his own architectural plan - and a folding altar. In this conveyance he lived. He travelled in it by day and slept in at at night. By turning the "north end," as he called it, to the storm, after the fashion of the Buffalo in the West, he could stand against the chilling winds with great security....
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> His work in the army consisted in going from regiment to regiment, and wherever he found a few dozen Catholics, there he "pitched his tent," staid a day or two, heard all their confessions, celebrated holy Mass, and communicated those ready to receive.[7]

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[5]Edward A. Miller, Jr. to James T. Connelly, Feb. 22, 1993, in Paul E. Gillen personnel file, Indiana Province Archives, Notre Dame, IN (hereafter IPA). See also Corby, 307-311.

[6]Corby, xiv.

[7]Corby, 308-309.

A general order forbidding any "citizen" to come and remain within army limits eventually made it impossible for Gillen to continue his free lance chaplaincy and he accepted a commission with the Corcoran Legion, an Irish unit.

All told, there were seven Holy Cross priests who served as chaplains with the Union Army during the war. Two of them died after only a few months in the service from illnesses contracted in connection with their duties: Julian Bourget, a Frenchman, who arrived in the United States just as the war was beginning, died of malaria in 1862 at the Mound City, Illinois, military hospital where he was chaplain; Zepherin Lévêque, a Canadian, died of exhaustion in an army camp in New Jersey in February 1862. James Dillon died in 1868 of tuberculosis, a consequence of the rigors of army life. Best known of the seven is William Corby who is depicted by a statue on the Gettysburg battlefield giving absolution to the men of the Irish Brigade just before they went into action.[8]

The Sister-Nurses

Strange as it may seem, it was the women of Holy Cross who were caught up in the war in the greatest numbers. On the evening of October 21, 1861, a horseman galloped onto the grounds at Notre Dame with a message for Father Sorin from Governor Oliver P. Morton of Indiana. Nurses were desperately needed in the military hospitals and the governor asked Sorin to send Sisters to care for the wounded. Sorin immediately asked for volunteers and the next day Sister Mary of St. Angela and six others departed for Cairo at the southern tip of Illinois, five

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[8]Arthur J. Hope, *Notre Dame: One Hundred Years* (Notre Dame, IN: University Press, 1948), 124-126, 132.

hundred miles from Notre Dame. There they reported to General U.S. Grant, who assigned them to the military hospital in Paducah, Kentucky. The Sisters boarded a river boat straight away and arrived in Paducah that same night.[9]

The success of the Sisters as nurses at the Paducah hospital brought them to the attention of Simon Cameron, Secretary of War in the Lincoln Administration. Cameron asked Mother Angela, who served as the directress of all the Marianites assigned to the military hospitals, to take over the nursing at a government hospital in Louisville. After a bloody battle at Belmont, Kentucky, in November 1861, Angela was asked to provide Sister-nurses to care for the wounded at a hospital which the government had hurriedly opened in Mound City, Illinois. In February 1862, after the battles at Forts Henry and Donelson, fourteen hundred wounded arrived at this hospital in the space of three days.[10]

These military hospitals near the front lines were often hastily organized, poorly supplied and located in buildings which had been put up to serve as warehouses and factories. The doctors were frequently overwhelmed by the sheer number of sick and wounded whom they had to treat. In any event, the surgeons' skills were quite limited, although they would improve considerably because of the experience gained during the war years. Sanitation, insofar as any thought was given to it, was primitive.

When Sister Augusta Anderson and two others Sisters arrived at the military hospital in

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[9]Anna Shannon McAllister, *Flame in the Wilderness*, (Notre Dame, IN: Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1944), 168-171. The Sisters' council had already decided on October 15, 1861, to send Sisters to serve as nurses. *Chronicles of St. Mary's Convent*, I, 206: Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, St. Mary's, Notre Dame, IN (hereafter ASHC).

[10]Ibid., 172-187-188.

Cairo in December 1861, they were horrified to find that

> every room on the first floor was strewn with human legs and arms. As the wounded were brought in from the battlefield, they were laid anywhere and amputations took place. Some of the wards resembled a slaughter house, the walls were so spattered with blood.

Undaunted, the three nuns pinned up their skirts and set to work. While soldiers carried away the amputated limbs, the Sisters washed the walls and floors until the hospital was comparatively clean, in spite of the thick, muddy water of the Ohio River.[11]

The unsanitary conditions gave rise in turn to epidemics of typhoid, small pox and other diseases which affected not only the wounded but also family members who came to visit them in the hospitals as well as the doctors and nurses. Two Sisters died at the Mound City hospital.[12] In addition to their nursing duties, the Sisters buried the dead or sent them home for burial, kept records, notified the next of kin and tried to return children to their families when they were orphaned as a result of their mothers having died while tending to a stricken husband.[13]

In January 1862, the Marianites had taken charge of the nursing duties at the military hospital in Cairo. By April, a contingent of Sisters was working at Jefferson Barracks Hospital in St. Louis. In June, several Marianites began serving as nurses aboard the U.S.S. Red Rover, a hospital ship which plied the Mississippi carrying the sick and wounded to the military hospitals. As the first nurses aboard a hospital ship in the U.S. Navy, these nuns were the fore-

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[11]*Chronicles of St. Mary's Convent*, I, 219.

[12]Sorin, 280.

[13]M. Campion Kuhn, "The One Woman: Mother M. Augusta, First Amrican Superior General," paper presented at the annual Conference on the History of the Congregations of Holy Cross (hereafter CHCHC), 1987, 6-7.

runners of the Navy Nurses' Corps.[14] In July, the Sisters took charge of nursing at The Overton, a hotel turned into a hospital in Memphis. By the end of 1862, the Sisters had closed their school in Washington in order to staff St. Aloysius Military Hospital in the capital until that facility was closed as the end of October 1863. As the number of hospitals confided to the Holy Cross Sisters by the Federal Government increased, more and more nuns were sent from Notre Dame and St. Mary's and the burden of work for those who remained behind became all the heavier. All told, eighty Sisters, about half of all the professed Marianites in the northern states, had seen service in the military hospitals by the end of the war in 1865.[15] "The oft told tales of hospital life" were a feature of convent life for years to come.[16]

New Orleans

While Holy Cross religious in the North went off to the front to perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy for the men serving in the army, the Holy Cross religious in Louisiana found themselves in quite a different situation and no less at the mercy of the winds of war. On the morning of April 25, 1862, Sister Mary of Calvary, accompanied by one of the little orphan girls, left the confines of St. Mary's Asylum in New Orleans to make her round of the shops and markets in search of provisions for the orphans and the Holy Cross community. Since the outbreak of war between the southern and northern states in April of the previous year, food and

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[14]Emmet F. Pearson, "The Historic Hospitals of Cairo," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, April 1984, 26-28.

[15]McAllister, 176-215. See also the file "St. Aloysius Hospital, Washington, D.C." in the box "Civil War: Sisters' Services," ASHC.

[16]Maria Assunta Werner, "The Sisters of the Holy Cross During the Spanish-American War, 1898-1899," CHCHC, 1986, 1.

clothing had become scarce in the city. The shopkeepers had been generous and St. Mary's had been given pumpkins, cabbages, beans and other vegetables at the charity market but the community had gone without fresh meat and butter for months. The absence of coffee was especially felt since the Sisters had contracted with the Confederate Government to make knapsacks and flannel shirts for the army and often had to spend the night sewing. A beverage concocted from rye, chicory and bread was a poor substitute, according to the house chronicler, because "instead of producing the stimulating effects of coffee, (it) only caused heaviness and sleep."[17] When the lack of lamp oil and candles threatened to interrupt the sewing and the income which it brought in, an overworked army horse conveniently dropped dead on the street almost at the convent door and the Sisters quickly skinned the carcass and carried away the fat to make soap and candles.[18]

As Sister Mary of Calvary and her young companion moved through the streets of the Vieux Carré, the crowds were larger than usual and considerably more agitated. On the previous day, Union gunboats had run past the two forts on the Mississippi River below New Orleans that were supposed to defend the city. An attack was expected at any time and the newspapers had announced that if the city were in danger of falling, twelve canon shots would be fired. The two foragers were going about their business when suddenly the signal was given. They managed

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[17]*Chronicles of Academy of Holy Angels*, Vol. 1, 136-137, Archives of the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, New Orleans (hereafter AMHCNO),

[18]Unless otherwise noted, the narrative of events in Louisiana during the Civil War follows the account in the Marianite Sisters' annals. While substantially the same, there are differences in the details recounted in the French and English editions of these annals. See *Annales de la Congrégation des Soeurs Marianites de Sainte-Croix, 1841-1941* (Montreal: Fides, 1948), 177-183, and *Annals of the Congregation of the Marianite Sisters of Holy Cross, 1841-1941* (n.p.: 1951), 119-122.

to board a passing street car but people were pouring out of houses and buildings so quickly that the car made slow progress. At Canal Street they disembarked and began to search through the shops for whatever food they could find.

In Camp Street the merchants were closing and barricading their shops, throwing provisions out on the street to keep the mob from breaking into the stores. In a meat market, Mary of Calvary managed to get a shoulder of salted pork. When she came out on the street again, she ran into the president of the New Orleans Car Company, who called to her that the last street car that could take her back to the convent was about to leave and that if she missed it, she would never get home. Hoisting the pork on his own shoulder, he hurried her onto the car.

As the street car moved out, a frightening spectacle met the eye. Citizens had set fire to their homes so that the invading army could not have them and all the way from Camp Street to the convent a vault of fire framed the road. Back at St. Mary's Asylum, Mary of Calvary found the community gathered in the chapel praying for her safe return but fearing that they would never see her again.

For the next eight days, New Orleans was in turmoil. Although the city was at the mercy of the Union fleet, the mayor refused to surrender and the Federal commander threatened a bombardment. The Sisters were preparing to be evacuated with the orphans when some Europeans resident in New Orleans acted as intermediaries and arranged for an orderly surrender. On May 3, 1862, the city was occupied by Federal troops under the command of General Benjamin Butler. The Holy Cross religious put themselves under the protection of the French flag.[19]

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[19]*Annales...des Soeurs Marianites*, 177-178.

Once established in New Orleans, the occupation forces found themselves in the midst of a hostile populace and the tension threatened to erupt into skirmishes between soldiers and civilians. Since all the banks had been seized, Confederate paper money became almost worthless. Sister Mary of Calvary's begging brought in gifts of cash but there was littlethat she could buy with it and the Asylum was running out of food. Father Patrick Sheil, Moreau's vicar for the governance of both the men and the women of Holy Cross in Louisiana, sent the intrepid Mary of Calvary, who relied on her status as a French citizen, to General Butler with ten thousand francs to request that it might be exchanged for U.S. currency. The general declined to make the transaction but he gave her a five-hundred-dollar bill and an order for the commissary to deliver the equivalent in provisions on that very day.

When word got around that a nun had asked for charity from the enemy, there were hostile comments printed in the newspapers. A month later, with the community's larder almost empty again, Mary of Calvary appealed once more to the general and received the same provisions as before. By then it was becoming clear that the occupation would not soon end and the archbishop advised other religious communities and institutions to appeal to General Butler's generosity. None who asked were turned down and the Federal Government continued to grant supplies to charitable institutions until the end of the war in 1865.[20]

The Sisters had opened two schools in Louisiana outside of New Orleans in the years just before the war, one at Opelousas, fifty miles west of Baton Rouge, and the other at Plaquemine, some ten miles below Baton Rouge on the Mississippi River. As the fighting spread across Louisiana after the fall of New Orleans, the superior sought to recall the Sisters from these two

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[20]Ibid., 178-182.

houses to the relative safety of the city. Plaquemine was under siege and Father Sheil could not get a pass through the lines because he would not swear an oath of allegiance to the Federal Government. But two Marianites were allowed to travel up river on a Union steamer to pack up and bring back the Sisters at Plaquemine. Two days later, the community was shocked when Sheil received word that the steamer on its return trip had sunk and that all aboard had perished. A Week later, all the Sisters from Plaquemine plus the two emissaries arrived safely in New Orleans. Unable to board the steamer for its return trip because it was carrying so many wounded, they had made their way to the city over back roads, having hitched a ride on a hay wagon.[21]

The Home Front

Despite the presence of students from both North and South at Notre Dame during the war years, the school remained remarkably tranquil. Father Sorin had forbidden both faculty and students from discussing the war in terms favorable to one side or the other. Disputes that broke out and turned violent were punished. Those who wished to take up arms were allowed to leave but the campus was to remain above the fray.[22] Sorin regarded it as a testimony

> ...which it is consoling to record, that those young men who at Notre Dame du Lac represented the various shades of the politics of their families and of their States, lived in harmony even whilst their fathers and their brothers were slashing one another some hundreds of miles away.[23]

A crisis threatened when the U.S. Congress passed the First Conscription Act of March

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[21]Ibid., 181-182. *Annals...of the Marianite Sisters*, 120-121.

[22]Corby, xiv.

[23]Sorin, 290-291.

1863, providing for successive drafts of able-bodied men into the Union Army in July 1863 and in March, July and December of 1864. With so many of the Sisters and priests away from the community houses in military service, Sorin believed that he was fully justified in requesting exemption from the draft for the Brothers of Holy Cross. Accordingly, he contacted one of his priest-chaplains, Joseph Carrier, who was with the Union forces besieging Vicksburg, Mississippi, and asked him to obtain the signatures of Generals Grant and Sherman on a petion asking that the Brothers be exempted. Carrier got the two Federal commanders to sign and carried the petition to Washington where he managed to present it to Both Secretary of War Stanton and President Lincoln. Stanton gave him a verbal promise that the Brothers would not be called for military service.[24]

Meanwhile, Sorin had been urged by Moreau not to allow the Brothers to be compelled to bear arms. Accordingly, he conceived a plan whereby the Brothers would be sent to the congregation's houses in Canada if it seemed likely that they would be drafted.[25] All went well until November 1864. Advised by Schuyler Colfax, the Speaker of the House of Representatives and member of Congress for the Indiana district which included Notre Dame, that it would be appropriate for the Holy Cross religious to show their appreciation by voting for the Republican Party in the elections of that year, Sorin dropped his customary opposition to members of the community voting and he and his council discretely spread the word to support the Republican ticket. However, when the votes had been counted, the Notre Dame precinct had given a majority to the Democrats. Angry at what he deemed ingratitude, Colfax had the

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[24]Hope, 133.

[25]Kuhn, 30.

Brothers' exemption withdrawn. Sorin then had to send Carrier back to Washington and to ask the wife of General Sherman, whose children were students at Notre Dame and St. Mary's, to use her personal influence with Stanton and Lincoln in order to get the exemption restored. By the end of December 1864, the Brothers were once again spared from the draft.[26] Although none of them went off to fight in the war, the ranks of the Holy Cross Brothers included many veterans in later years. Brother Leander (James) McLain joined the Congregation after the war, in 1872, having served under Sherman on the latter's march from Atlanta to the sea. For many years Brother Leander commanded the Grand Army of the Republic post established at Notre Dame.[27]

In Retrospect

The American Civil War divided the Holy Cross religious in the United States as well as the country. When the war broke out in 1861, the men and women of Holy Cross serving in the northern states were considerably more numerous than those serving in Louisiana, the only state in the Confederacy where Moreau's congregations were present. In 1861, the great majority of Holy Cross religious in America were foreign born. Nevertheless, most were probably sympathetic to that part of the country where they had lived before entering Holy Cross. The priests and Sisters who served with the Union Army probably came to espouse the cause of the Union as a result of their wartime service, if they had not been pro-Union before. Such documentation as exists, gives little indication that any of the Holy Cross religious in the United

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[26]Hope, 134.

[27]Kilian Beirne, *From Sea to Shining Sea: The Holy Cross Brothers in the United States* (Valatie, NY: Holy Cross Press, 1966), 217.

States had strong feelings, one way or the other, about slavery. Since there had been tension between the Louisiana foundations and those in Indiana before the war, the conflicts that arose after 1865 can hardly be ascribed to the Civil War. But the war may well have exacerbated the feelings of the individual religious, North and South.

In terms of the services rendered to the Catholic Church and to individuals, the Holy Cross contribution during the war years was considerable. Schools and orphanages were kept open and operating under very difficult conditions. The Sisters who served as nurses in the military hospitals earned a reputation for charity and devotion to the sick that stood the whole Catholic Church in the United States in good stead. Sorin kept a running count of the number of soldiers who accepted baptism at the hands of the Sisters and claimed that there were eighteen hundred by the end of 1863 who had been "prepared and regenerated..., not to speak of all those that went home edified and devoted for life to the Sisters of Holy Cross."[28] Moreover, the more than eighty Sisters from St. Mary's who served in the military hospitals during the war constituted the pool of trained nurses that allowed the Sisters to enter the field of health care in the latter third of the nineteenth century. Their legacy is today's Holy Cross Health System.

The seven priests who served as chaplains with the Union forces began a Holy Cross tradition of chaplaincy in the armed forces that continues down to the present in both Canada and the United States. As was his wont, Sorin saw the war and its horrors as providential; an opportunity for evangelization and for making converts.

> Never had circumstances been more favorable to the progress of the Catholic religion. In the presence of death man reflects. The devotedness of the missionary and of the good Sisters cannot escape his attention, especially when, in spite of himself, he contrasts it

[28]Sorin, 284-285.

with the coldness and the helplessness of Protestantism.[29]

[29]Ibid., 277.