

12-17-2010

## God of Our Fathers: Catholic Chaplains in the Confederate Armies

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# God of Our Fathers: Catholic Chaplains in the Confederate Armies

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
History

By

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B.A. University of New Orleans 2006

December 2010

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## **Abstract**

The Civil War contained many examples of courage and commitment to duty that were inspired by religion. In recent years much has been written on this subject of religion and the Civil War but virtually all of it is written about Protestant chaplains and this has created a gap in the record. This thesis covers the role played by Catholic chaplains in Confederate army regiments from Louisiana. It explores their life, ministry, military role, and impact on the regiments. To cover this in depth the Catholic chaplains selected were those who left published records.

**Keywords:** Catholic, Chaplains, Confederacy, Civil War, Louisiana

## Introduction

During the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States of America went to war with itself over issues of freedom and union. As often happens in wars, religious institutions picked sides and chose to serve armies in battle.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century America, faith played a major role in the lives of individuals and defined the culture, of families and local communities. Civil War era churches were important institutions through which gender and racial roles were shaped, and they served as the main source of moral and ethical norms. Civil War-era religion was by no means confined by the walls of churches but conditioned the daily lives of northerners and southerners. With war, church leaders in both the North and South assumed primary roles in maintaining a commitment to the war effort.

In his review of Stephen Woodworth's *While God is Marching On*, a book on the religious life of Civil War Soldiers, David K. Hilliard wrote: "While countless books have illuminated the role of religion in antebellum and post bellum, America too few have analyzed its importance during the war itself."<sup>1</sup> Hilliard could have added that of the few who have analyzed the role of religion during the Civil War, most have focused

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<sup>1</sup> David K. Hilliard. "Review of *While God is Marching On*," *Publishers Weekly Magazine* (New York PWxyz LLC 2001)8.

on Protestant Christianity. Studies of Catholic Confederate soldiers and those who served them on the battlefield are practically non-existent. This work will attempt to partially remedy this void.

Catholics were a significant minority in the Confederacy numbering 1,266,000 out of a total population of 12,548,335 or 9.5 percent of the total white population in the 1860 census.<sup>2</sup> Southern Catholics joined Southern Protestants in believing that they had a religious sanction for secession. Pope Pius IX was a conservative theologian who perceived danger for his church in the North if the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement towards secularism and attacks on ascribed authority. Pius IX saw such intellectual trends as too liberal. Southern Catholics shared the Pope's view of northern culture as a threat to the continued existence of Catholic Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Southern Protestant Churches felt much the same.

For many Confederate soldiers, the greatest sustainer of morale in the Civil War was their faith. It was a refuge in a time of the most intense physical and mental stress

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<sup>2</sup> E. Remaeu. "The Progress of the Church in the United States," *The Catholic World*, Vol #1-No1 April 1865. (New York, Lawrence Kehoe 1865) 9.

<sup>3</sup> Eamond Duffy, *Saints & Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 224.

most of them had ever experienced. With seventy five percent of the able-bodied white male population from seventeen to fifty years of age enlisted or conscripted into the war effort, the Southern army was a people-in-arms, risking life, limb and sanity in camp and field. Diaries, letters home, and contemporary accounts support the notion that religious life sustained Confederate soldiers on the battlefield as it had at home. The main agents of religion who touched the day-to-day lives of the soldiers of the Confederate Army were ministers serving in its chaplaincy. Men of the cloth ministered to both common soldiers and officers throughout the Civil War. Guarding and guiding the spiritual well-being of the fighters, the army chaplain was a voice of hope and spiritual certainty in an otherwise uncertain existence.

Although historians have looked at Protestant chaplaincy in the Civil War an overlooked area of Civil War military history is the role of Catholic chaplains in the Confederate army. Catholic soldiers were more numerous in the North's ranks, due to the recent arrival of immigrants from Ireland and southern Germany. However, Catholics were a large minority of the Southern army. The soldiers from Louisiana came from a traditional Catholic culture rooted in Spain and France, and they were almost exclusively served by Roman Catholic chaplains. Catholic chaplains worked tirelessly to serve the Louisiana regiments to which they were assigned and illustrate the often overlooked religious diversity of the Southern armies.

This paper examines the role of Confederate Catholic chaplains and their ministry to Confederate enlisted men. The importance of religion in the day-to-day life of the Confederate generals is common knowledge. However, few historians have studied the ministry of priests to the enlisted men. This study looks at four Catholic chaplains from Louisiana, using their experience to point out the often overlooked role of Catholic Chaplains in the Civil War.

The chaplains selected for this thesis are the best documented cases from Louisiana and provide a lens for the illumination of the often overlooked role Catholic chaplains played in the Civil War. They serve to illuminate the Civil War era in three ways: by illustrating the religious diversity of the Confederate Armies, and through their ability to perform the sacraments, the elaborate and central role played by priests in ensuring that Catholics would go into battle by focusing on the services provided to Catholic servicemen; The paper will also investigate specifically the unique requirements needed for the performance of Catholic sacraments on the battlefield.

### **Civil War Chaplains**

When the American Civil War began, social, political, and even religious organizations took sides. To provide for the spiritual needs of the troops in its army, on

May 3, 1861,<sup>4</sup> the Confederate Congress passed a bill stating: “There shall be appointed by the President Chaplains to serve the armies of the Confederate States during the existing war.”<sup>5</sup> The legislation specified that chaplains were to be “appointed by the president” and assigned by him to “such regiments as he deemed necessary.”<sup>6</sup>

Compared with the Union, the government in Richmond made only a modest effort to supply chaplains to every unit of the army. As a result of this neglect, many Confederate army chaplains were unordained men with religious convictions that linked them to the Cause. These convictions, rather than religious instruction, often drove them to become army chaplains. State units, exercising a religious local option, began to look for men willing to join them and serve as chaplains.<sup>7</sup> Confederate President Jefferson Davis yielded his supervisory role to the will of the men of regiments and commissioned chaplains elected by the men.

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<sup>4</sup> “Congress of the Confederate States” *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, May 5, 1861.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Matthews, *Public Laws of The Confederate States of America*. (Richmond: R. M. Smith, Printer to Congress, May 31, 1864) 256.

<sup>6</sup> Matthews, *Statutes at Large of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States* 99.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, William J. *Christ in the Camp*. (New York: GAM Publications 1998) 14.

Chaplains were for the most part educated men often a good deal older than the average soldiers in their armed congregations. Those who answered their religious calling and military duty initially received a salary of \$1,020 per year, which was soon reduced to \$600 or equal to the base pay of an enlisted man in the Confederate army.<sup>8</sup> Although the salary was later increased to \$960, few Confederate chaplains were ever fully supported by the Confederate authorities, military or civilian. At the beginning of the war, Southern chaplains were not legally permitted to access rations for themselves or their mounts but that law was changed in August, 1861, when they were allowed a private's rations,<sup>9</sup> and a law of January 22, 1864, permitted them to draw forage for one horse.<sup>10</sup> The Confederate government was more concerned with the problems of fighting men and assumed that the parishioners would support their chaplains.

Due to the disinterest of Confederate leadership, only 1,308 chaplains served 1009 regiments of the Confederate army during the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> Although Confederate Army

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<sup>8</sup> William Jones, *Christ in the Camp*. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Matthews, ed, *Statutes at Large of the Permanent Government of the Confederate States* 210.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley Brinsfield Jr, *The Spirit Divided: Memories of Civil War Chaplains: The Confederacy*, (Macon: Mercer University Press 2005)42.

regulations did not require that these men be ordained in any denomination, most regiments looked for a chaplain who had been ordained by an established denomination. Each Confederate chaplain had to obtain the approval of the regimental commander before beginning to work with the regiment. This pragmatic practice aided men without credentials who desired to be chaplains in the Confederate Army. They first would conduct religious services for a specific regiment to demonstrate that they were able to perform their duties to the satisfaction of the men of a regiment. It was then left to the officers and enlisted men to decide for themselves if they wanted to accept the services of a particular preacher and then to send a request to the colonel to grant a special commission to the man in question to serve as their regiment's chaplain.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of this democratic, if somewhat haphazard system, many Southern chaplains lacked adequate training and credentials. Chaplains in the Confederate ranks were also not officers, but considered to be common soldiers in non-combat service they were from time to time extended honorary officer status.<sup>13</sup> As Father Gache put it in a letter to a friend about a fellow chaplain who had assumed he held the rank of major,

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<sup>12</sup> Pamela Robinson-Durso, "Chaplains in the Confederate Army." *Journal of Church and State*, Autumn 1991. 747-764.

<sup>13</sup> "Bills of the Confederate Congress" *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 21, 1861.

“Confederate chaplains are chaplains and nothing else and they enjoy no legal title to any rank whatsoever.”<sup>14</sup>

The typical shortage of chaplains elsewhere in the southern ranks makes the abundance of chaplains serving units from Louisiana unique in the Confederate Army. According to the 1860 census, Louisiana had a population of 200,000 Catholics in a state of 666,431 people. These 30% of the state identified as Catholic were served by 107 Priests.<sup>15</sup> Due to its history as a colony of France and Spain, Louisiana was culturally dominated by the Catholic Church and by far the most Catholic State in the south. Culturally, the Catholic Church held great sway over the state. Some strains still remained from the previous decade when the Know Nothing Party was at its height in what W. Darrell Overdyke described Louisiana as a "veritable hotbed" of nativism.<sup>16</sup>

Catholics may be more war conditioned than other Christian denominations by virtue of a long tradition of military service by the clergy and a hierarchal command structure. Most of the Confederate regiments from the State of Louisiana had chaplains who performed well and ministered to their units' spiritual and temporal needs. Most of

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<sup>14</sup> Cornelius M. Buckley SJ. *Frenchman, Chaplain, Rebel: The Civil War Letters of Pere Louis-Hippolyte Gache*. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006) 61.

<sup>15</sup> E. Remaeu. "The Progress of the Church in the United States" 9.

<sup>16</sup> W. Darrell Overdyke, "History of the American Party in Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 16 1933 8.

these chaplains were Catholic priests or Presbyterians, the two dominate Christian groups in the state at that time. All Catholic chaplains from Louisiana had decent war records; their parishioners had few complaints about their conduct. Father Darius Hubert, a Jesuit priest who was chaplain with the First Louisiana, won praise for his war record: “A perfect man, always with his Regt. We cannot express what was thought of him”<sup>17</sup>

In Louisiana the Catholic Church made a great effort to provide chaplains who would win the respect of their soldier worshipers. In Louisiana, the Catholic diocese was governed by New Orleans Archbishop Jean-Marie Odin, a legendary Jesuit missionary bishop from Texas and a stickler for authority. Archbishop Odin took an active role in encouraging Louisiana priests to join up as chaplains.<sup>18</sup>

A large number of priests who volunteered were from the Jesuit order, and many of them were from the same institution, St Charles College in Thibodaux, Louisiana. The college had been founded by the Jesuits in 1836 as a sister institution to Sacred Heart Academy to serve the planter class of Louisiana. Nine of its eleven member staff became

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<sup>17</sup> Andrews B. Both, *Records of Louisiana Confederate Soldiers and Louisiana Commands.* (Spartanburg, SC: Company publishers, 1984) 372-373.

<sup>18</sup> Willard E. Wight, ed, “A Letter From the Archbishop of New Orleans, 1862,” (*Louisiana History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1962), 130.

chaplains in the Confederate army, and by the fall of 1863 the college was barely able to meet its educational mission.<sup>19</sup>

### **Duties**

Catholic Confederate chaplains had multiple duties: conducting mass, conducting baptism and funeral rites, removing the dead and wounded from the battlefield, and consoling soldiers. *Services often were ecumenical with Catholic and Protestant chaplains exchanging duties when the needed chaplain was unavailable. Additional duties included evening prayer meetings, prayers at dress parades and officiating at weddings. Chaplains also formed temperance societies and social clubs for the men.*

The position of regimental chaplain naturally put a priest close at hand to help the men cope with the rigors of battle. Chaplains often would follow behind their units as they marched into battle. When wounded soldiers fell, it was the chaplain's responsibility to bring them back to safety; if they found soldiers who were dying, they would stay and pray with them and perform the last rites. Chaplains were generally regarded as non-combatants by the opposing forces and as a result usually enjoyed some degree of protection. However, due to their duties with fallen soldiers, the chaplains were

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<sup>19</sup> David Edmonds, *Yankee Autumn in Acadia*. (Lafayette: The Acadiana Press, 1979)118-119.

often in harm's way. While no one in either army would deliberately shoot a member of the clergy, a stray round or shell knows no rank or social status.

Army chaplains were also assigned to field hospitals and often acted as attendants to the wounded, thus offering help with rudimentary nursing skills. This part of the ministry was not always confined to their own soldiers. Chaplains occasionally went back and forth across the battle line to minister to the wounded. One remarkable example of a Louisiana Catholic chaplain was Father James Sheeran of the 14th Louisiana Regiment, assigned to General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. His journal revealed many of the details of life as a Catholic chaplain during the war: "Across the road from our hospital, was one full of Yankees. As usual having attended to the wants of our own men I visited the wounded of the enemy and offered my service." When Father Sheeran saw the condition of the Yankee hospital, he became infuriated at its lack of efficiency. He "enquired if they had no surgeon of their own or any person to dress their wounds. They told me that they had several surgeons over there (pointing to the adjacent building), but they paid no attention to them, did not even come to see them."

So Chaplain Sheeran marched directly to find the surgeons responsible for the Yankee wounded and told them "of the painful condition of the wounded and requested them as a matter of humanity not to neglect them so." The Union medical staff informed

him that “they had no bandages to dress the wounds, no instruments to operate with, and that they were fatigued from the labors of the night.”<sup>20</sup>

Understanding the situation, Sheeran remarked that “it would be some consolation to their wounded if they would but visit them and wash the wound of those who were bathed in their own blood.” He failed to achieve any action from the medical personnel, so he asked the “men paroled to attend to the wounded, asked why they did not wait on their companions, many of whom were suffering for a drink of water.” He was informed by the newly paroled Confederate soldiers in the hospital that “they had no one to direct them, that their surgeons seemed to take no interest in the men.”<sup>21</sup>

Tired of the excuses, Sheeran “ordered them to go to the rifle pits filled with the dead bodies of their companions and they would find hundreds of knapsacks filled with shirts, handkerchiefs and other articles that would make excellent bandages.” His orders were carried out, and after the soldiers returned “with their arms full of excellent bandage material,” Sheeran directed the parolees to “go and tell your surgeons that you have bandages enough now.” Sheeran recorded in his diary: “In about two hours I returned

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<sup>20</sup> James B. Sheeran, *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1960), 44-45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, P44-45.

and was pleased to find the surgeons and nurses all at work attending to their wounded.’<sup>22</sup>

In addition to religious duties, the priests accepted the more secular tasks that took advantage of their education. Teaching literacy and reading and writing letters home for the illiterate kept them busy. They served as *unit bankers, ambulance drivers, defense counselors, recruiters,* and mailman.

Chaplains did not have formal rank or even a standard uniform, which made them approachable to the common soldier. Field commanders used chaplains as couriers for the many field dispatches and communiqués needed during field service.

The relationship between commanders and chaplains wasn't always a friendly one. In 1892 Father Joseph Flynn, a friend of Chaplain Sheeran, wrote his account of a dispute that involved General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. The general has strong views on limiting the authority of chaplains in his command. “Going to his Father Sheeran’s tent one day, General Jackson sternly rebuked the priest for disobeying his orders, and reproached him for doing what he would not tolerate in any officer in his command. ‘Father Sheeran,’ said the general, ‘you ask more favors and take more privileges than any officer in the army.’ Father Sheeran replied to General Jackson: ‘I want you to understand that as a priest of God I outrank every officer in your command. I even

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<sup>22</sup> Sheeran, *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 44-45.

outrank you, and when it is a question of duty I shall go wherever called.’ The General looked with undistinguished astonishment on the bold priest and without reply left his tent.”<sup>23</sup>

Occasionally in battle, a chaplain might pick up the rifled musket of a fallen soldier and fire it at enemy forces. This practice was not approved by the Confederate army. At times chaplains would command forces in the field. One example of such behavior followed the Battle of Gettysburg when Father Sheeran actually formed and commanded a convoy defense force of troops he threw together from “Our ambulance drivers....as well as our stragglers.” The men he had around him “were for stampeding,” but Father Sheeran mounted his horse and then “ordered them to move forward as quickly as possible....” Before infantry officers arrived to take over, Sheeran wrote, that’s he “took command of the stragglers and formed them in a line....”<sup>24</sup>

Chaplains in the Confederate Army were expected to wear a variation of officers' uniforms or black civilian clothing. Often they ended up wearing a combination of the two. Catholic chaplains came from a tradition of wearing special vestments during worship, and they brought this practice with them into the army. They also wore the traditional clerical collars and vests.

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<sup>23</sup> Sheeran, *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Pere Louis-Hippolyte Gauche, a Catholic priest serving as a chaplain in the 10th Louisiana Infantry, Army of Northern Virginia, constantly wore a cassock and biretta when going about his duties and full vestments when celebrating Mass. He wrote on November 22, 1861: “This was probably the first time the city of King William of Orange [Williamsburg, Virginia] ever witnessed a Catholic priest, fully vested in cassock, surplice and stole, walking in procession down its historic streets. Wonders never cease.”<sup>25</sup>

Father Sheeran noted in his diary on November 14, 1864, that some Protestants had asked him to “hold service” for them that Sunday. “I told them no, as I had no vestments, altar furniture or vessels.”<sup>26</sup>

A lack of material support for chaplains seems to have been a constant problem. Confederate Army commanders were hard pressed to make tents and rations available for the men under their command, let alone the chaplains. Dr. Hunter McGuire, Chief Surgeon of the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, recalled another incident between Father Sheeran and Stonewall Jackson. “At one time just before the fight at

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<sup>25</sup> Cornelius M. Buckley SJ, *Frenchman, Chaplain, Rebel: The Civil War Letters of Pere Louis-Hippolyte Gache* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 2007)48.

<sup>26</sup> Sheeran, *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 130.

Chancellorsville,” Dr. McGuire said, “we were ordered to send to the rear all surplus baggage. All tents were discarded. A Catholic priest belonging to one of the Louisiana brigades sent up his resignation because he was not permitted to have a tent, which he thought necessary to the proper performance of his office.”

“I said to General Jackson,” reported McGuire, “that I was very sorry to give up the Father; that he was one of the most useful chaplains in the service. He replied: ‘If that is the case he shall have a tent.’ And so far as I know this Roman Catholic priest was the only man in the corps who had one.”<sup>27</sup>

The key religious duty of Confederate chaplains of the Catholic faith was to perform the mass. In the Catholic tradition only a priest can perform church rituals, and since many of these rituals involve burial and absolution of moral offenses, it was vital that chaplains be provided to units consisting of a majority of Catholic soldiers.

Catholic chaplains focused their attention on hearing confessions, holding Holy Communion, administering Extreme Unction, directing retreats, and conducting instruction classes with little time devoted to preaching. That occasionally worked out to the chaplains’ advantage. Father Francois I. Turgis, who served four years with the

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<sup>27</sup> Maurice F. Shaw, *Stonewall Jackson’s surgeon Hunter Holmes McGuire : A Biography* . (Lynchburg, Virginia: H.E. Howard; 1993) 44.

Confederacy as a chaplain , feared that his assigned regiment would expect him to be a preacher . . . “God [give] me strength,” he wrote, “for I am not a good preacher.” He would go on to give pardon and absolution for forty-eight hours during the Battle of Shiloh when he found himself the only priest amid 20,000 Catholics.<sup>28</sup>

For those soldiers who believed that certain rites were required to gain admission to the afterlife, the absence of anyone, a cleric or qualified layperson, to provide these rites could cause anxiety when facing death. Going into battle and lacking a way to confess and receive absolution, the Civil War soldier might not have been inclined to stand firmly in the ranks and endure shellfire and musketry. Confession also allowed the average soldier to admit his sins and promise to make amends for them.

In many ways the chaplain’s presence served as a psychological barrier between the Confederate soldier and the harsh and dehumanizing conditions of the field service in war. The basic day to day life for the troops during the Civil War was difficult.<sup>29</sup> The food was universally reviled, and the living conditions were so bad that more men died as

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<sup>28</sup> Father Francois I. Turgis *Father Francois I. Turgis to Archbishop John Odin*, April 16, 1862, photostat of a manuscript., Chancery office, Archdiocese of New Orleans.

<sup>29</sup> Wiley, Bell Irvin. *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy*, (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1978) 59-62, 90-94

a result of disease than were killed in battle. The medical help at the time was not much more advanced than medieval bleeders, burners, and herbalists.<sup>30</sup>

Day to day life in any army consists of following orders. This regiment of mass discipline could be frustrating for anyone who came from a civilian life and was accustomed to personal freedom. Social deference and military protocol placed limits on complains and personal problems.

A private might fear approaching a colonel or general or any other officer with a complaint, but the chaplain was easily approachable. The enlisted men of the Confederate army frequently turned to their chaplains for support because they knew chaplains had a responsibility to help them. It was this mediating position that chaplains held that made them invaluable to both officer and enlisted man alike. Because they were charged with the men's spiritual well being, chaplains could be father figures and role models. By simply holding the position, the soldiers expected chaplains to be moral examples.

The regular conduct of the Catholic mass also provided comfort amid the uncertainty of war. Young soldiers hundreds of miles from home need some reminder of the role of faith and religious concerns in moral behavior. A reminder of their faith's

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<sup>30</sup> Barry S. Levy and Victor W. Sidel *War and Public Health* (New York, Oxford University Press 1997),29

expectation provided comfort to the average soldier. The certainty of Catholic beliefs often resulted in soldiers of other faiths attending mass. Father Sheeran recorded that on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1863 at 7 a.m. mass he had “nearly all the Protestants in camp were present.” The service on April 26<sup>th</sup>, a Sunday, was similarly crowded.<sup>31</sup> These events came during the winter months when soldiers were in quarters. An interfaith service held after Easter points to a need by the men to do something spiritual on a holy day, even if it was not the type of religious observance they were used to.

Another area in which the chaplains aided soldiers was coping with death. The American Civil War was a harvest of death on a truly staggering scale. A proper burial or at the minimum a basic ceremony was of paramount importance to help soldiers deal with the carnage. On many occasions, soldiers of both armies charged well-defended positions, assaults that were assured to fail. The charges at Fredericksburg and Gettysburg, for example, resulted in massive casualties. Such slaughter suggests both discipline and a firm belief in the rightness of one’s cause and faith in an existence beyond this life. Religious faith could help a man in battle and give him a reason to die a courageous death.

Coupled with ideas of honor, faith not only reinforced ideas of duty and sacrifice and helped bond soldiers in trying circumstances, but for Catholics, the sacraments of faith

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<sup>31</sup> Sheeran, *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 40.

gave the soldier a way to approach death with less fear. In this the chaplain was vital. Father Sheeran recorded in his diary that “I had learned by personal observation that no men fight more bravely than Catholics who approach the sacraments before battle, while on the contrary, there are none more cowardly (save those intensely worthless) than the Catholics whose conscience reproves him of mortal sin.”<sup>32</sup>

In time of war, the Catholic tradition of last rites may cause problems as men will fall on the battlefield without a priest nearby. In order to compensate for the absence of a priest to perform the Extreme Unction, Catholic chaplains would occasionally perform a universal form of this rite, general absolution, prior to the battle on all willing participants, regardless of prior religious background. This rite would give particular comfort and support to the soldiers of the Catholic faith facing death.

Generally, the Confederate chaplains would read the Extreme Unction over the body of a dead soldier after the battle was over. There are, however, examples of chaplains performing this ritual on the battlefield at risk to their life and limb. Father Darius Hubert, S.J., chaplain of the First Louisiana Volunteers, accompanied his men through every battle, ministering to their physical and spiritual needs as the battle raged. Chaplain Hubert was wounded in the arm at Gettysburg.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sheeran. *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 6.

<sup>33</sup> “A Confederate Chaplains’ Tale” *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, June 23, 1893.

Father Hubert also became an acting chaplain for the Confederate Navy, serving briefly as chaplain of the *CSS Merrimack*. After the battle of Hampton Roads and knowing that some members of the crew had been recruited from the CSA corps in which he served, Father Hubert asked permission to board the ship and carry out his duties. *CSS Merrimack* had sustained severe battle damage and was sinking, so Admiral Franklin Buchanan, fearing that he might have to scuttle the ship, denied permission. Father Hubert was not frightened by the prospect of death. “Let me aboard tonight,” he said. Soon he mounted the gang-plank and began ministering to the spiritual needs of the crew.

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Father Francois I. Turgis, chaplain of the Thirtieth Louisiana Infantry, received a head wound at the Battle of Shiloh, but he refused to leave the battlefield. The chaplain was cited for his heroism in this action by General P. G. T. Beauregard in his order of the day following the battle.<sup>35</sup> Father Turgis was again cited for heroism for action around Mobile Bay. General R. L. Gibson commented on Chaplain Turgis’ conduct during that

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<sup>34</sup> *The Woodstock Letters-A Record of Current Events and Historical Notes Connected with the Colleges and Missions of the Society of Jesus*. (Woodstock College, 1914), 170.

<sup>35</sup> “An Account of the Bloody Battle of Shiloh,” *New Orleans Crescent*, March 5, 1868.

battle that: “The Reverend Father Turgis shared our dangers and hardships, and gave the consolation of religion whenever the occasion offered along the trenches and in the hospital.”<sup>36</sup>

A concept that evolved out of the carnage of the Civil War came the practice of soldiers writing a confession of faith in a letter. Soldiers were often prepared for this cultural ritual. In these missives, the soldier would express his willingness to die, but he would assure his family he had maintained his faith. It doubtlessly provided some comfort to the families of the dead. Soldiers often carried these letters with them into battle, containing their last words to families and loved ones in case they perished. Chaplains often took these notes from wounded and dying men in order to provide their families with some solace. Chaplains often wrote families about the tragic circumstances of their sons' death. For example, Father Pierre Dicharry, who was chaplain of the Fourth Louisiana, brought back to his parishioners in Natchitoches the personal effects of their deceased sons. One example was a picture of the priest, which had an inscription that read “Father Dicharry, who was with Placide Bossier when he was killed in battle. Phanon Prudhomme cut a lock of Placide's hair and gave it to Father with his prayer book

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<sup>36</sup> “Father Turgis honored” *New Orleans Morning Star*, March 8, 1868.

to take home.”<sup>37</sup> This simple act often became one of the contributions of the chaplain’s service to the Confederacy. It was a chaplain’s duty to give the family of the fallen soldier reassurance and words that gave their loss some meaning.

Several chaplains were taken prisoner by Union forces. Father Pierre F Dicharry of the Third Louisiana was held in prison after his capture. He was held for a sufficient amount of time that the cold, cramped, feces and vermin filled environment of prison eroded his health to a critical point. Shortly after he was discharged, he was forced by reasons of health to resign as chaplain to the Third Louisiana.<sup>38</sup> Union troops arrested Father Sheeran near Winchester, Virginia, on October 31, 1864, for crossing into Yankee lines in the confusion following the battle of Cedar Creek. The captors imprisoned Sheeran at Fort McHenry. Sheeran wrote letters to Major General Philip B. Sheridan, who had been raised a Catholic, and to Union Secretary of War Edwin Stanton,

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<sup>37</sup> Blaise C.D'Antoni, “*Abbe Pierre Felix Dicharry, Vicar General Diocese of Natchitoches 1854-1887*” mimeographed booklet, Loyola (La.) Univ. Lib. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Booth, *Records of Louisiana Confederate Soldiers and Louisiana Commands*” Spartanburg, SC: Company publishers, 1984. 624.

protesting his treatment and pointing out his status as a Chaplain. Sheeran eventually explained his case to General Sheridan and was released.<sup>39</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After the fall of the Confederacy in 1865 most of the priests returned to civilian life, but not to peace. They fought for the cause of Christ and beneath a different banner than their compatriots, and their struggle for souls would go on after the war. Much of the experience of war needed to be explained, and quite a few lost soldiers needed to be remembered. Catholic parishioners needed priests as they began to build their postwar lives. Most Catholic chaplains generally went back to serving a post war parish. However, in peace they often remained in the frontlines of human catastrophe; Father Sheeran is reported to have risked his life attending to victims of the 1867 yellow fever plague.<sup>40</sup>

The activities of Catholic chaplains in the Confederate States Army can be classified as a support role, but one that proved to be a vital factor in maintaining morale. The chaplains provided an important moral boost by offering the certainty of religion

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<sup>39</sup> Sheeran. *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 112, 155-156.

<sup>40</sup> Sheeran. *Confederate Chaplain: A War Journal*. 163.

They helped their fellow soldiers to think of a life beyond this one and to have a faith that transcended their belief in the Confederate cause.

To a great extent, Catholic chaplains were caretakers of the Confederate soldiers, providing much needed medical care and personal services. Their efforts saved lives and souls on and off the battlefield and due to the unique requirements of their faith, supplied comfort through their performances of sacraments. Concerned about the general welfare of all the people whom they served, they were humanitarians in the best sense of that word. They were men who served Catholics of the Confederate soldiers a small but important and seldom investigated segment of the Confederacy because they saw the men as parishioners, not warriors.

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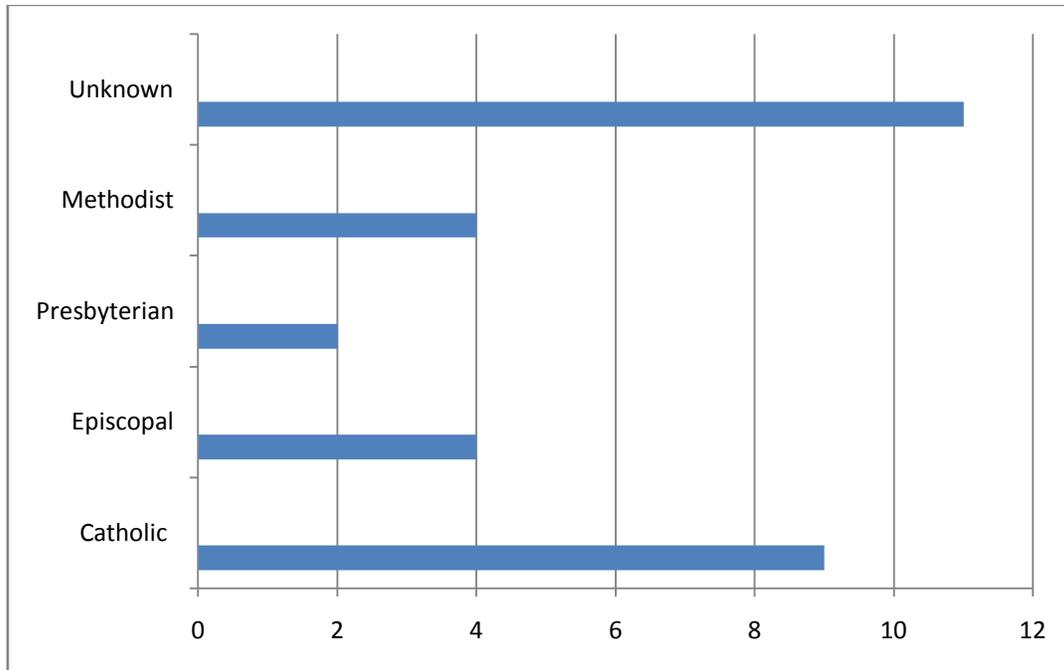
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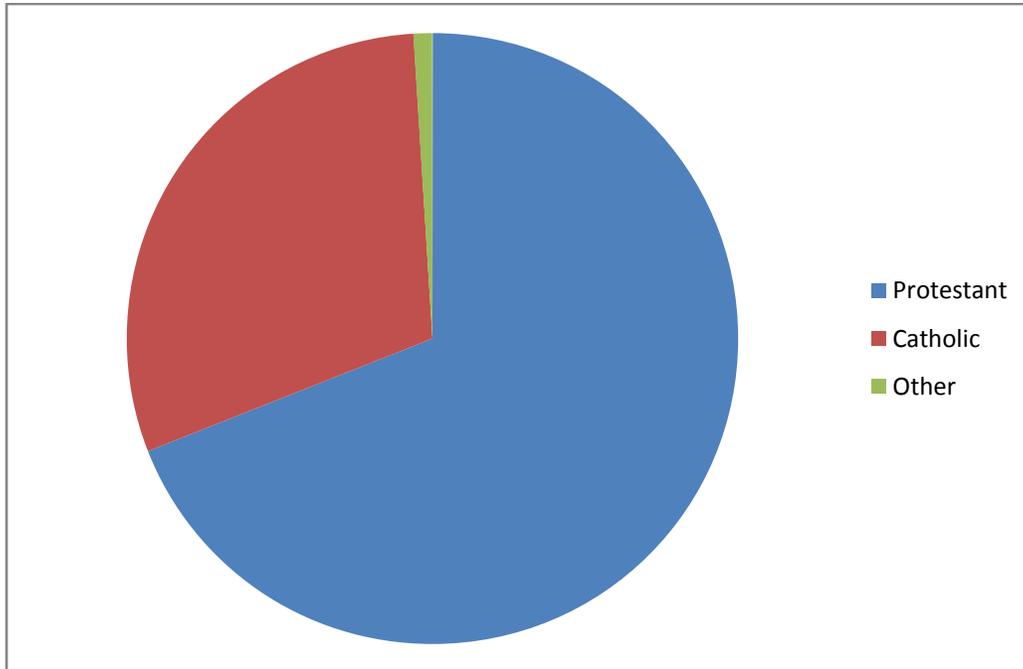
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Graph 1: Louisiana Chaplains by Religious Affiliation



Romero, Sidney J. "Louisiana Clergy and the Confederate Army"  
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Graph 2: Catholic Population of Louisiana 1860



E. Remaeu. "The Progress of the Church in the United States" The Catholic World, Vol1-No1 April 1865. New York, Lawrence Kehoe1865.9

## **Vita**

Gary Wesley “Wes” McCall was born in Dallas Texas. He attained his BA in history from the University of New Orleans in 2006. In the fall of 2007 he began attending the University of New Orleans as a Graduate Student in the History departments military history program. In the fall 2010 he graduated with a Masters of Arts in History. Wes as he is known to his friends has lived in Louisiana for fifteen years and is an expert in American history, military matters, bladed weapons, and po-boys.