

Fr Willie Doyle S.J.
Pioneer and war hero



PATRICK KENNY highlights aspects of the heroic life of Fr Willie Doyle, SJ

In May 1893, an unknown Irish Jesuit novice wrote the following "contract" in his private diary:

"Darling Mother Mary, in preparation for the glorious martyrdom which I feel assured you are going to obtain for me, I, your most unworthy child, on this the first day of your month, solemnly commence my life of slow martyrdom by earnest hard work and constant self-denial. With my blood I promise you to keep this resolution, do you, sweet Mother, assist me and obtain for me the one favour I wish and long for: To die a Jesuit Martyr."

For 24 years the young novice kept his promise to live a life of hard work and self-denial, and his wish was fulfilled: Fr Willie Doyle SJ, born in Dalkey on the southside of Dublin, died as a "martyr of charity", struck by a German shell when he ran into no-man's land to rescue two wounded soldiers on August 16, 1917.

Fr Doyle's frequent letters home to his father are a valuable first hand account of what life was like in World War I. What shines out from his correspondence is his cheerful acceptance of his circumstances: *"I wonder is there a happier man in France than I am. Just now Jesus is giving me great joy in tribulation, though conditions of living are about as uncomfortable as even St. Teresa could wish - perpetual rain, oceans of mud, damp, cold and a plague of rats... Sometimes I kneel down with outstretched*

arms and pray God, if it is a part of His divine plan, to rain down fresh privations and sufferings. But I stopped when the mud wall of my little hut fell in upon me: that was too much of a good joke!"

Fr Doyle was absolutely loved by the soldiers he served in the war, Catholic and Protestant alike, precisely because he did not take advantage of the concessions and luxuries that were available to him, preferring to share in all of the sufferings of the troops. Major General Hickie claimed that *"he appeared to know no fatigue - he never knew fear"*. He was often to be found in the place of greatest danger, precisely because this was the place of greatest need. He was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery at the battle of the Somme, and was nominated for the Victoria Cross but this was refused, primarily because he was a Jesuit priest.

But his heroism in the war was only the culmination of a quarter of a century of intense spiritual and apostolic activity as a Jesuit. Fr Doyle had been reasonably well known as a popular retreat master and preacher before his departure as a military chaplain in 1915. In this field he was rather ahead of his time by encouraging retreats for ordinary working men. He was known for the powerful impact of his words and his presence on those who were alienated from the Church. According to his private diary, he never once met a someone who was estranged from the sacraments who refused his

invitations to return.

Fr Doyle was a popular author and promoter of vocations. A booklet he wrote on vocations 4 years before his death had sold 90,000 copies during his lifetime. He was also much sought out as a spiritual director. In addition to all of this, he was an effective fundraiser for the missions, particularly for a campaign to assist abandoned African babies.

Fr Doyle was also a committed Pioneer and served on the central council. Fr James Cullen SJ wanted him as his successor to lead the Pioneers, though the fateful German shell of August 1917 ended those plans. On hearing of Fr Doyle's death, Fr Cullen wrote: "*Poor Father Willie Doyle's glorious death came as a great grief to me. Poor fellow; he was ready always; and so he is gone with hands full of work to his long rest on the Sacred Heart*". Fr Doyle was wearing his Pioneer pin on his military uniform when he was killed; this was subsequently removed from his body and has been preserved for posterity.

But Fr Doyle's war exploits and multiple apostolic endeavours are only part of the story. In his room in Dublin were his personal papers, with a note asking that they be destroyed if he died. His superiors did not consent to this destruction, and the papers were given to his friend, Professor Alfred O'Rahilly who was at that time writing a biography of Fr Doyle.

When O'Rahilly's biography, including extensive extracts from Fr Doyle's private notes and diaries, was first published in 1920, it caused something of a stir.

The diaries, with fascinating daily details, reveal a life of intense prayer and great personal austerity. While he was gentle with others, he himself lived a very hard life. But many of his austerities focused on the sacrifice of doing one's duty well and on "offering up" little things, and it is consoling to see a priest who was so accepting of the horrors of the trenches struggle, and occasionally fail, to do seemingly small things like give up butter on his bread at breakfast time. Perhaps it was on the foundation of these constant daily sacrifices that his great sacrifice in the war was built.

His diaries and writings have been a source of fascination and inspiration for many over the past 100 years, including such diverse figures as Mother Teresa and Brendan Behan,

There was once intense interest in Fr Willie's beatification, and such interest is growing again as a new generation discovers his fascinating life and personality. Now that Fr John Sullivan, with whom he was ordained on 28 July 1907, has deservedly been beatified, attention will rightly turn towards his canonisation as a saint. But in addition to this, perhaps it is now time to once again consider the beatification of Fr Doyle, a faithful faithful Pioneer and hero of the First World War?

Dr. Patrick Kenny lives in Dublin and runs www.fatherdoyle.com, a website and blog about Fr Willie Doyle's life and spirituality.



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THE MUNSTER GATHERING AND SPIRITUALITY DAY

Rekindling the Pioneer Flame

Fitzgerald's Woodlands House Hotel,
Adare, County Limerick

SUNDAY, 1 OCTOBER 2017

10.30: Registration. Tea / Coffee

Morning Session

11.00: Welcome and Opening Address on the theme of Our Gathering

12.10: Hanna Costello shares her story

12.30: Lunch

Afternoon Session

1.30 - 2.30: Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament

2.30 - 3.45: Group discussion on the way forward for Pioneers in Munster

Break to prepare for Mass

4.00: Celebration of the Eucharist

Bishop of Limerick, Most Rev Brendan Leahy

€30

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