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# Father William Doyle, S.J.

(1873-1917)



## PREPARATORY NOTE

*[The matter for this sketch has been taken, with the author's permission, entirely from Professor Alfred O'Rahilly's "Father William Doyle, S.J." (Longman's, Fourth impression, 1922).]*

THERE IS THIS DIFFERENCE between the worldling and the saint, that in the latter, the man is always greater than his work; or perhaps it would be truer to say that the man himself is his work. His external activity, so far from being his real achievement, is seldom even a just measure or indication of it. His true success and greatness is achieved in the secrecy of his soul; it is the erecting of that temple, built without sound of hammer, the formation, through painful effort, of Christ within him. And as their external life may give only a very inadequate notion of their struggles and success, we have the reason why so many saints and holy people have formed such poor subjects of biography.

But in two respects the life of Father William Doyle, S.J., has an immediate human interest for us. In the first place he has left a large mass of written documents—spiritual notes, journals, letters, resolutions, in which he recorded the stages of his painful and gradual spiritual advancement. By means of these papers, which were never meant for publication, and most of them were never intended for any eye but his own, we can watch him at work, as we can watch an artist in his studio. The blurred, generous aspirations of his early life toward sanctity, which acquire clearness of outline and direction only after years of effort, the frequent resolutions, the little failures, the human weakness, the generosity of soul,

not always prudent, the merciless treatment of self, the growing love for Christ, the absorbing zeal for souls—they are all laid bare in these private journals. These intimate records of his struggles, difficulties, failures and successes constitute an invaluable document for the study of the psychology of the saints, and an immense incentive to the personal spiritual effort of earnest Catholics. They show us that most rare and instructive sight—sanctity in the making.

There is another feature which gives to Father Doyle's life an interest not often found in religious biography. His last two years were spent as a chaplain to Irish regiments at the Front. This was a call and an opportunity to translate into external tangible acts the heroic intensity of his inner spiritual life. We have thus in the activity of these two terrible years a measure of what he had made himself through his own efforts and through God's grace. To those who think, despite the warning of Francis Thompson, that saints are made of weak tea and carpet slippers, the record of his life as chaplain will offer material for earnest thought: to Catholics of all shades of fervour it will come as a splendid *apologia*, very necessary in a world which has lost sight of the supernatural, of that great and precious thing, a man passionately and entirely devoted to God's service.\*

William Joseph Gabriel Doyle was born at Melrose, Dalkey, Co. Dublin, 3rd March, 1873. His father was an official of the High Court of Justice in Ireland. Willie was the youngest of seven children, of whom four gave themselves completely to the service of God. He was a delicate child, but lively, impulsive and enterprising. Of course, he played at being a soldier, and his leaden army was always an Irish army, whose opponents, invariably defeated in all engagements, were English. But even at a very early age he had discovered another enemy with whom he was to wage a lifelong, truceless war—as we judge from a story which shows him shaking his fist at his own reflection in a mirror, and crying out, "You villain! you wretch! I'll starve

\* The present writer subscribes to the protestation made by Professor O'Rahilly in the Preface of his book, that all that is written here about Father Doyle has no other force or credit than such as is grounded on human authority; and that no expression or statement is intended to assume the approbation or anticipate the decision of the Church.

you; not another sweet will you get; not another cake will you get!" Other little remembered incidents reveal different aspects of the same deeply spiritual nature—his thoughtful consideration for the maids at home, his visit with food and medicine to a *clientèle* of poor and sick, whom he looked after, his unselfishness towards his brothers and sisters. Such memories are interesting in the light of his later development; for these acts are not little things for the thoughtlessness of childhood.

After six years spent at Ratcliffe College there was the question of his future; but it was taken for granted that he was to be a priest. He decided to enter Clonliffe College,

### Vocation and Early Religious Life

Dublin, to begin his studies for the priesthood, and this he announced to his brother, already a Jesuit novice, when he visited him. To his brother's delicate inquiries as to a vocation to the religious state, he answered immediately that he had none, and stopped any further questioning by adding: "But in any case I would not come to this hole of a place." As a matter of fact, he told his father on the following Christmas Day that he had decided to become a Jesuit. "I remember," he wrote afterwards, "how I played my joy and happiness into the piano after thus giving myself openly to Jesus."

On 31st March, 1891, he entered St. Stanislaus' College, Tullabeg, to become a novice of the Society of Jesus. From that day the real work of his life may be said to have begun. The lofty and austere ideal of religious perfection that was placed before him appealed at once to his generous, spiritual temper, and a little document, one of the few records of his two years' noviceship, shows us how he responded.

A.M.D.G. ac B.V.M.

My Martyrdom for Mary's sake.

"DARLING MOTHER MARY, in preparation for the glorious martyrdom which I feel assured thou art going to obtain for me, I, thy most unworthy child, on this the first day of thy month, solemnly commence my life of slow martyrdom by

earnest hard work and constant self-denial. With my blood I promise thee to keep this resolution; do thou, sweet Mother, assist me, and obtain for me the one favour I wish and long for: to die a Jesuit Martyr.

May 1st, 1893.

May God's Will, not mine, be done! Amen."

In view of the intense spiritual activity of his later life, as revealed in his private papers, we cannot see in this declaration merely a flash of boyish enthusiasm. His whole future career is illuminated by it. The desire for martyrdom haunted him to the end. But side-by-side with this desire went a conviction which we can trace as it grows in clearness and strength throughout his life, that his special path of sanctity was to be by the road of ruthless and unintermittent austerity. There are short periods in his life when he seems to have lost sight of the austere vision of his noviceship days; but the type and degree of sanctity which he worked out in himself, with God's assistance, is clearly sketched in the paper quoted.

From the seclusion of the novitiate he went to take up the position of Prefect at Clongowes Wood College. The four years spent in this employment did much to test and form his character. It was a position which made incessant demands on his time and temper and attention, which plunged him in an atmosphere of noise and games; filled his day with such unspiritual work as mending cricket-bats, blowing footballs, patrolling galleries, administering punishment, arranging paper-chases, rehearsing plays, and the hundred odd jobs that are in the day's programme for those who have to control, amuse and train a hundred small boys. We know scarcely anything of his inner life; but his energetic devotion, his firmness, his control of himself, his breezy good humour, made a deep impression on many of his boys—as some of them testified many years later.

In his philosophical and theological studies he showed diligence rather than brilliance. He was ordained priest at Milltown Park, Dublin, on 28th July, 1907. From a record

which he wrote at the time we know the spirit in which he received the priesthood; it was with "the resolution to go *straight for holiness*."

In 1907, Father Doyle went to Tronchiennes, near Ghent, to go through what is known in his Order as the Third Year, or the Tertianship, a very distinctive and important stage in the spiritual formation of a Jesuit. Before he is finally permitted to enter on the missionary life for which he has been so long preparing, the newly-ordained priest is told off to make another year's noviceship. Matured in years—he is generally over 33 years of age—his technical studies completed, with mind and character formed by his long and varied course, he is sent once again into solitude in order that he may get back again the generous fervour and enthusiasm of his first years in religion.

### The Third Year

It was in this spirit that Father Doyle entered on his Third Year, which marked most decidedly a turning point in his life. From this period he began to keep the regular and copious spiritual notes and diary by which we are enabled to watch his progress in sanctity. The year in Tronchiennes was an *Annus Mirabilis* for him. When it was finished he wrote: "I feel a greater desire to do all I can to please God and to become holy; a greater attraction for prayer, more desire for mortification and increased facility in performing acts of self-denial. I know the work of my sanctification is only begun, the hard work and the real work remains to be done. . . . The desire to be a saint has been growing in my heart all during this year, especially the last couple of months. God has given me this desire; He will not refuse the grace if only I am faithful in the future."

The real grip of the *Exercises* came to him with unforgettable force and clearness; and the brief stern commands of St. Ignatius, *vince teipsum* (conquer thyself), and *agere contra* (to go against self), seemed to be addressed in a peculiar way to him. His spiritual perfection was now to be the great work of his life, not a thing to be done at odd moments and on the margin of his professional duties. He came to realise that all his external activity was to be but the material and the instruments with which he was to work

out the peculiar spiritual design which God intended to realise in him. He went through the *Exercises* of the long retreat with immense fidelity and earnestness, making long reports of the illuminations which came to him, and studying the movements of grace in his soul. One of the most definite and immediate of the resolutions made was that of volunteering for the Congo Mission. His request was refused, but he did not give up hope. He returned to Ireland in the summer of 1908.

From this date till 1916, when he went to the Front as chaplain, he was engaged in purely apostolic work, save for one year which he spent as a teacher in Belvedere College, Dublin. His time was spent in giving missions and retreats. He had a very attractive disposition and character. He was a cheery, courteous, virile personality, an inveterate practical joker, possessing in about equal proportions a sense of humour and a very determined will. Add to this his untiring energy and his blazing zeal for God's glory and the salvation of souls. It seemed impossible to resist a character so gentlemanly, so breezy, so radiantly enthusiastic. No man was ever less of a Chadband, no man more free from that nauseous manner of speech and demeanour, supposed to characterise clergymen of certain denominations, and which has been well summed up in the word "unctimonious."

His work as a missionary and giver of retreats to all classes of persons: nuns, brothers, school children, sodalities, etc., gave him full scope for the exercise of his zeal. At public missions he was indefatigable, even outside the long hours that preaching and confessions demanded. He would go round to the tenements in cities, beating up unwilling and careless Catholics; he would be at the quays at midnight to meet incoming ships; in the early hours of the morning he would waylay factory hands coming off their night work or going to the work of the day. The danger inherent in such work, of giving oneself so completely to the external activity so as to suffer in the interior spirit and to overlook the chief motive power in the process of salvation, the grace of God and prayer—this danger was never serious for Father Doyle. He

attached more importance to the efficacy of prayer than to that of preaching or visiting.

When he came to give a mission he always interested the children—the convents—in the work by asking for their prayers; he counted on these to supply the "Ammunition for the Missions." He would ask prayers for special cases, e.g., "A little prayer for a big fish of forty years (absence from the Sacraments) whom I hope to land to-morrow." "I think," he said at another time, "that there are too many *workers* in most religious houses, but not half enough *toilers on their knees.*"

He himself was both a worker and a toiler; and after an energetic day of missionary activity, he would dock three or four hours off his sleep to toil on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament. And to prayer and sleeplessness he often added the severe bodily penance of the discipline, hair-cloth or iron chain—true to the spirit of the great missionaries of his Order, St. Francis Xavier, St. John Francis Regis and many others. Here is an entry in his private journal, made during a severe mission in Glasgow: "I made the 'Holy Hour' prostrate on the marble flags, and by moving from time to time I continued to get the full benefit of the cold. Then, for two hours, I made the Stations of the Cross, standing, kneeling and prostrate, taking fourteen strokes of the discipline at each Station. For the rest of the night I remained kneeling before the Tabernacle, at intervals with arms outstretched till I could bear the agony of this no longer."

Revelations such as this have been a scandal and a stumbling-block to many excellent Catholics. The best answer to the charges of imprudence which have been made against Father Doyle is that such practices never interfered with his work. In his letters of direction he shows a massive common sense, and is very severe on extravagances or excesses. Apparently he knew well his own powers of endurance, and did not dream of forcing others—or permitting them—to go the road that he went. Not merely did he suffer no ill-effects from his penances, but he was convinced that they brought down the blessing of God on his work. Those who worked with him say that he seemed to hold the hearts of men in his hand; that the flood-gates of grace and mercy seemed to be

opened for him. His missions and retreats were landmarks in parishes and convents, and vivid memories of his zeal and holiness and charm were left behind him in all the places in which he worked.

This success was bought with the price which saints have to pay. His growing insight into his own unworthiness, his greater perception of the immense and mysterious spiritual forces which he would be instrumental in moving and directing, and also the intense nervous strain involved in his missions, filled him often with fear and dread to such an extent that it was only by exerting to the full his strong will that he could prevent himself from cancelling some of his engagements. At the opening of a mission it was often torture to him to have to mount the pulpit. Here is his account of one such experience. "For three-quarters of an hour I preached in agony, with the perspiration rolling from every pore. I was not afraid of breaking down before the congregation—that would have been relief—but the physical effort to utter each word was a torture, and the longing, time after time more intense, to come down from the pulpit was almost irresistible. They told me I preached well that night, yet I was quite unnerved, and only God knows what I went through."

The work of spiritual direction—the intense cultivation of souls—is, of its nature, hidden, and might easily pass unnoticed in an estimate of a man's activity. But it came to assume very large proportions in Father Doyle's life—so large that some who knew him very well consider that it was in this hidden field he did his greatest and most permanent work. In his rounds as a missionary and giver of retreats he came across lonely souls who, convinced of the call of God to a more generous and perfect service, yet felt themselves powerless to advance without the assistance of a director; for it seems to be the ordinary economy of God in His dealings with choicer souls that they should be led to perfection by the help of others. Father Doyle was not the man to refuse advice to such people in a work which made a special appeal to him; and so it came about that almost imperceptibly he found that he had

### The Spiritual Director

entered into an apostolate, very consoling, no doubt, but certainly very laborious. Most of his direction was carried on by letter, and his correspondence grew enormously, and ate seriously into his already well-filled day. There were not wanting candid friends who told him bluntly that this interminable letter writing was pure waste of time, and that his attention to individuals was calculated merely to encourage spiritual deceit. And even at times he himself indulged in a very human grumble as he looked at a pile of unanswered letters; but from what he saw he was too completely convinced of the good he was doing to souls to allow himself to drop a work so conducive to God's glory, and for which he left himself to be specially qualified.

"Father Doyle always treats one as a lady," a nun once declared of him; and no doubt courtesy and politeness have their value in spiritual relationships. But it was his more solid and more spiritual gifts that gave people a confidence in him, and convinced them that here was a man who was qualified to help them in the business of their perfection. He was a wise and discriminating director who took the deepest interest in each individual who asked his guidance; he could be strong and decided, and knew how to mix a little acidity with his prescriptions when he felt that it would be good. To a nun who was asking him to suggest for her some acts of mortification at meals, he once said: "I recommend you, my dear sister, to put a little mustard on your tongue." His irrepressible sense of humour shows itself frequently. He had a number of ejaculations printed on a little pink leaflet, and these he used to call "Father William's pink pills for pale saints," and send to his correspondents with elaborate "directions for use."

The voluminous correspondence in which he carried on his direction is very important for enabling us to judge his spiritual notions; they form a necessary complement to his private journals, and show the essentially sane and Catholic lines of his own interior life. From them a person might compile a sure and safe handbook of spiritual direction. The struggle against desolation and discouragement, the disregard of mere feelings as a guide to or indication of spiritual progress, the courage to arise after a fall and begin again with

unshaken vigour, generosity and abandonment to God's Will, as one of the great conditions of holiness, union with God, solitude of heart, mortification—constant but moderate—insistence on prayer, contempt for mediocrity, “the curse of every religious house,” regularity and method in spiritual duties; these are the lines on which he tried to lead souls to perfection, the sure path along which the saints have always walked. It is impossible to appreciate with any justice the amount of good which Father Doyle did in this secret apostolate, but we are amply justified, and that not merely from general *a priori* reasons, in thinking that it was very great; and it is certain that, had he survived the war, this work would have come to be the most absorbing in his life.

Father Doyle was one of those men who do not leave a work as they find it. Even as a Prefect in Clongowes Wood College he had founded and edited the College magazine;

**Enterprise** *Mikado* was a big event in the dramatic tradition of the school. But it was in his apostolic work that his enterprise and courage were to find their real manifestation. Though the routine work of his missions and retreats were quite enough to fill up a strenuous, unselfish life, and leave a very small margin for anything new, yet the number and variety of special works for special needs which he instituted and kept going, are astonishing, even in a man of his activity.

The space at our disposal allows us merely to mention some of these. There was the “Black Baby Crusade” in aid of pagan children abandoned by their parents, in which he made £200 by novel and humorous methods of propaganda. Again, finding no handy treatise on vocation to the priesthood or religion for those who consulted him, he wrote two pamphlets, *Vocations* and *Shall I be a Priest?*—both published by the IRISH MESSENGER OFFICE—which had a success which astonished him. He translated from the French the life of *Père Gin hac, S.J.*, which was published by Washbourne, and got a very good reception from English-speaking Catholics. He was immensely interested in the devotion of the “Holy Hour,” and spread it enthusiastically wherever he went. The League of Priestly Sanctity was also promoted by

him. He left behind him in his papers schemes and plans of books on spiritual direction for different classes of people, which justify us in thinking that had he been spared by the war he would have given much more attention to a field of charity which is second only to preaching and the administration of the Sacraments—the apostolate of the pen and press.

But there is one work connected with Father Doyle's name which deserves a more lengthy notice. “There is only one possible memorial to Father William Doyle, and that is a

### Retreats for Workers

house of retreats for workers in Ireland.” said the late Father Charles Plater, S.J., who, himself a pioneer in this direction, fastened at once on this side of Father Doyle's ministry as perhaps the most necessary and far-reaching. It was from the successful beginnings of his English *confrère* that Father Doyle got, if not the primary incentive, at least encouragement and necessary information for his scheme for establishing Workingmen's Retreats in Ireland.

A visit to the Continent in 1908 enabled him to see this potent instrument at work in France, Belgium and Holland, and he wrote a pamphlet, *Retreats for Workingmen: Why not in Ireland?* (IRISH MESSENGER OFFICE, July 1909), in which he put forward the lessons he had learned abroad, and urged the establishing of a like institution at home. Father Doyle saw here an indirect but very effective and practical attempt at a solution of the social question. Of course, there was a good deal of conservative inertia to overcome; the thing was unheard of, was dangerous, and therefore should not be attempted. But Father Doyle's breezy enthusiasm and energy were a powerful solvent of this opposition, and he found in his Superior, Father William Delany, S.J., a warm sympathiser and encourager. But he had already enlisted more powerful assistance, for he had vowed to Our Lady to abstain from meat on Saturdays in her honour on the understanding that she would interest herself in his project. If he did not live to see his idea realised, he made it possible by his efforts and enthusiasm, and he gave a practical demonstration of how easily and with what success, the work could

be done. In Foxford he persuaded sixty of the workers of the Providence Woollen Mills to come for a week-end retreat to the school building on Easter Sunday, 1915, to go through a short course of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The few days were filled by a varied round of spiritual duties, lectures, reading, the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, divided by periods for quiet reflection or for intimate talks with the director. The experiment was a complete success. "We had been accustomed to fiery sermons 'at missions,'" said one of the men, when giving his impressions of the retreat, "where God's justice is painted with so much eloquence, making one tremble at the uncertainty of salvation, but here the words of the saintly preacher sent us away with the impression, 'How easy it is after all to save my soul! God is good; He loves me, and what He asks is really so very little.'"

Father Doyle's object-lesson made it at once clear that the difficulties of the scheme did not come from the men; it showed also the immense potentialities of such a work. Every thoughtful Catholic will admit at once that the world is daily growing more irreligious; that the supernatural seems to be growing fainter and more intangible; that life within the past twenty years, has become in all classes of society more complicated, more seductive, faster and more furious, in the material and moral order; that the new spirit of the age has become a very corrosive and disturbing thing for Catholic belief and for Catholic morality. A time of greater spiritual trial is obviously a time for a more intense spiritual cultivation; and while this need in other classes of the community was readily recognised, and to some extent provided for, it was strange that the class that was largest in number and most unprotected against the new paganism or materialism was almost forgotten. Is the workingman untouched by the modern spirit? Is he armed against the seductions of Communism and Socialism? Is he able to defend himself against the virulent atheism and the immoral ethics that are preached to him with such conviction and plausibility from platform and newspaper? Father Doyle was the first Irish priest, I believe, to form a true estimate of the special needs and difficulties of the workers, and his scheme of retreats is the most potent and practical attempt yet suggested to keep the Irish workman a practical and

zealous Catholic. His project—now more imperiously needed than ever after the universal upheaval of the war—has become a fact within the past few months. A house for retreats is now functioning at Rathfarnham Castle, and those who are responsible for its foundation and management are not unmindful that it is due to the inspiration, efforts and prayers of Father Doyle.

But it must never be forgotten that with Father Doyle his interior spiritual life was everything; that the incessant missionary activity which filled his days was only the secondary and accidental thing in his life, merely the overflow of his interior spirit, the projection into deeds of the love of God which filled his heart. He carried with him always the strong determination to be a saint. "I feel within me," he wrote in 1909, "a constant desire or craving for holiness. Even walking along the streets I feel God tugging at my heart, and in a sweet, loving way urging, urging me to give myself up absolutely to Him and His service." The sight of *Quo Vadis?* on the film sends him home stunned, with the words "crucified for thee" ringing in his ears. God's designs for a chosen soul will not be revealed all at once; His hand must be forced by generosity and perseverance; it took years for Father Doyle's spiritual outlook to be clearly and distinctly focussed. He knew that the necessary preliminary to any considerable measure of sanctity must be a complete abandonment to God's Will; that the grain is not quickened except it die first in the earth. And so he set himself to cut and kill his own self-will, to make relentless war on all things he liked naturally, the almost unconscious manifestations of self-esteem, the human perversities, the individual preferences in food, in pastime, in comfort—the thousand and one little legitimate likings that even the best people gratify at once and automatically. Comfortable people who have forgotten—and replaced—the innocent tastes of childhood will smile at his constant struggle against his fondness for sugar, sweets, fruit and jam. These tastes remained with him when he had put off the things of a child, and he found in them a perennial field of mortification; and in this light there is some-

### His Interior Life

thing at once heroic and pathetic in the entry made in his note-book at the Front: "No blackberries. Gave away all chocolates. Gave away box of biscuits. No jam, breakfast, lunch, dinner."

It began to be clear to him that this constant and truceless war on human nature was to be for him not a mere initial stage in his life. "Other souls may travel by other roads; the

### The Austere Life

way of pain is mine." At Lourdes the word *Pénitence* sculptured on the grotto filled him with a joy that was also terrifying; at Lisieux, the home of the Little Flower, he felt compelled "to make it the rule of my life,

every day without exception, to seek in all things my greater mortification, to give all and refuse nothing." When during a short absence from the Front, a few months before his death, he made a visit to Amettes, the birth-place of St. Benedict Labre, the words written on the walls of the little chambre, *Dieu m'appelle à la vie austère*, came to him as a further invitation, too clear and too strong, to be disregarded.

This spirit of penance could not, in one of his generosity, be restricted to merely checking all his natural likings. When it had become clear to him that his road was to be the rough one of mortification, he set his face to it with characteristic courage and thoroughness: The use of the hair-cloth, of iron chains—which he sometimes heated—frequent disciplines, were part of his method of life. He often slept on boards; would rise at midnight and pray in the cold chapel with arms extended for long periods, and this sometimes when he was unwell or suffering from a cold. And he practised occasionally other forms of penance which are assuredly not for imitation, such as cutting the Sacred Name on his breast with a penknife, standing up to his neck in a pond at three o'clock on a winter's morning, rolling himself in furze bushes or in snow, scourging himself with a heavy chain or with thorny branches. And then there is the incident of undressing and walking up and down in a large bed of nettles until he was stung from head to heel.

These are things on which the ordinary Catholic is not called upon to pass judgment. It is sufficient for us to remember that they were done under what Father Doyle believed to be a strong inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that

his health never suffered from such practices; that he never would approve of them in those under his direction, and finally that all of them may be paralleled in the lives of some of the greatest saints. His father, St. Ignatius, would have called these things holy follies; but he would not have been seriously displeased at them. Some excellent Catholics have been scandalised by these revelations, and have come to see in Father Doyle a man utterly lacking in balance, impulsive, fantastic, and self-willed. Such an opinion would be founded if these holy follies were the normal thing with him; but in view of our full and intimate knowledge of his spiritual life, we know that this was not the case. We can very easily believe that God was not displeased with a generous impulsiveness which may sometimes have outstripped the slow-footed common sense of everyday life.

Suffering was to be his road, but it was not to be his destination. With him, as with all Catholic ascetics, mortification is but a means to an end, not an end in itself. A fakir or dervish may torture himself for the mere sake of suffering: a Catholic inflicts punishment on his body in order to get closer to God, on the principle that the less of self

### Union with God

there is in one's life the more of God. Father Doyle's penances were thus offerings to God, they were acts of immolation, the carrying out of the great principle of his life to give himself entirely to God. He sought for constant union with God in prayer, for a perennial lively realisation of the presence of God with him everywhere and always. The importance he attached to ejaculatory prayer—brief upliftings of the heart to God in short fervent acts of love, etc.—is explained by the fact that he saw in these prayers a very close degree of union with God. And hence this practice grew with him steadily until he had reached the stage when he imposed on himself the obligation of making the enormous number of 100,000 aspirations every day. How he counted them, and, still more, how he performed them, will remain a mystery, but the fact is an indication of the extraordinary vitality, energy and method which he brought to bear on the business of his spiritual growth.

He was nothing if not business-like. The immense amount of private journals he wrote, in which he analysed and watched every movement of grace and nature in his soul, show us what a serious thing his holiness was to him. No methodical clerk ever kept his accounts with such care and minuteness. Growth in holiness is not a haphazard affair, a thing of fits and starts that may be dropped and taken up and dropped again as the mood may suggest. Father Doyle kept his *Book of Little Victories* and his *Book of Defeats* with the precision and brevity of an accountant. "How literally and carefully," Professor O'Rahilly well remarks, "he observed the Master's precept: 'Trade till I come' (Luke xix, 13). How ready he must have been when the great Auditor came and the account was closed! One cannot but handle with reverence these booklets, with their eloquent figures summing up years of faithful service and hidden struggle" (*Life of Father Doyle*, page 119).

But it must not be imagined that this severity of method robbed his spiritual life of ardour and passion. His personal love of Jesus Christ, to which all his penances and efforts were directed, was extraordinarily fervent, was with him an abiding passion. It manifested itself in rapturous outbursts of affection and in acts of intimate fondness, which we associate with other ages or other countries. Such outpourings of the heart as he committed to writing, such loving intimacies that he recorded, were never meant to be known to others, and as we come on them in cold print we experience a strange feeling of confusion which is a good indication of the extent to which Jansenism and worldliness have come to influence our religious sense. It would appear that the present age cannot understand that a man's love for Christ may express itself in the modes and forms which human love naturally employs; that it must not be tender or passionate or demonstrative. St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa, and a thousand others of the lovers of Jesus, would have found it difficult to understand this spirit; they would certainly not have recognised it as their own.

In November, 1914, Father Doyle volunteered as military chaplain, and was called up a year later and attached to the

8th Royal Irish Fusiliers, 16th Division. He spent two years in this new field of work, which was well calculated to test to the last ounce all that was good in him, both natural and supernatural. We have very full documents for his life—both external and internal—during these two years, from his private journals, which he kept so assiduously under almost impossible conditions, and from the numerous and lengthy letters which he wrote to his family and friends at home. They give a more vivid and a more real account of the awful conditions of life at the Front than, perhaps, any of the innumerable war-books written by professional writers.

The training life in camp, in a most unspiritual atmosphere, was cruelly grating on all his fine spiritual sensibilities, and he felt keenly the absence of the Blessed Sacrament, but he found consolation in the immense opportunities he got—and made—for real missionary work. He crossed to France in February, 1916, and entrained at once for the Front, for the section north of Loos, where he spent most of the time of his life as chaplain. The amount, and, to a large extent, the nature of his work, which did not much concern G.H.Q., depended on himself; and his own zeal and power of endurance were the measure and limit of his activity. No man gave himself more unsparingly to others than Father Doyle. He did not seem to know what fear and fatigue were. He tramped with his men, refusing the horse he might have had, carrying, in addition to his own pack, a mighty parcel containing all he needed for saying Mass. The delicacies which kind friends sent him from home were given away to others. In marches, billets, trenches, dug-outs, he was constantly with his men. His purely professional duties—Mass and the administration of the Sacraments—constituted but a fraction of his activity.

He rescued wounded men, lying helpless in exposed positions, crawled out into bullet-swept places to give the Last Sacraments to the dying, or busied himself in the advanced medical post where the wounded were brought in. It was a life of remorseless and ruthless activity and devotion, which soon gained the only recognition that Father Doyle sought for. He came in a short time to possess an unique ascendancy over his "boys"; they admired his bravery, they were

grateful for his services, and they could not be blind to the intense interior spirit of holiness which was at the root of all his zeal and energy. When he crawled into an already packed dug-out to take cover from a sudden bombardment, they would welcome him with the words, "Come in, Father, we're safe now anyhow." And any further anxiety or fear was dismissed summarily. "Isn't the priest of God with us? What more do you want?" The attitude of the men was well expressed by one of them another time. "Look, Father, there isn't a man who would not give the whole of the world, if he had it, for your little toë. That's the truth." After Confession and Communion they were as joyous as little children. "We're all right now, Father," they would tell him; "we're ready to meet the devil himself now." These rough men were as wax in his hands. He never had any difficulty in getting them to go to the Sacraments. When he accompanied them back from the trenches for one of their few periods of rest, he had processions and May devotions in honour of Our Lady; and hundreds would volunteer to watch during the night at Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

His letters—never of course, meant for publication—give little vignettes which enable us to form an idea of what his life as chaplain meant. We see him getting his baptism of fire during a race on a bicycle across a shell-swept piece of road as he was going to say Mass for the 8th Inniskillings; burying the dead at night in No-man's Land, and reading

### Life at the Front

the burial service with the light of an electric torch hidden in his hat; there is his first experience of a gas attack, where he had a providential escape; the appalling scene of a battleground a few days after the action; the heartrending experience of anointing the poor mangled bodies which scarcely presented sufficient untorn skin for the Holy Oils; Mass said in a dug-out so tightly packed with men that neither they nor the priest could genuflect, or in an ammunition store, so low that he had to celebrate on his knees. There was one probably unique setting for the Holy Sacrifice which must be described in his own words:

"By cutting a piece out of the side of the trench, I was just able to stand in front of my tiny altar, a biscuit-box supported on two German bayonets. God's angels, no doubt,

were hovering overhead, but so were the shells, hundreds of them, and I was a little afraid that when the earth shook with the crash of the guns, the chalice might be overturned. Round about me on every side was the biggest congregation I ever had; behind the altar, on either side, and in front, row after row, sometimes crowding one upon the other, but all quiet and silent, as if they were straining their ears to catch every syllable of that tremendous act of Sacrifice—but every man was dead. Some had lain there for a week and were foul and horrible to look at, with faces black and green. Others had only just fallen, and seemed rather sleeping than dead, but there they lay, for none had time to bury them, brave fellows, every one—friend and foe alike, while I held in my unworthy hands the God of Battles, their Creator and their Judge, and prayed Him to give rest to their souls."

Then there were scenes of quiet religious devotions, far from the thunder of the guns and the mud of the trenches—a Christmas Midnight Mass in a convent school at Locre, where a soldier "from Dolphin's Barn sang the *Adeste* beautifully, with just a touch of the sweet Dublin accent to remind us of 'home, sweet home,' the whole congregation joining in the chorus." May devotions while the men were in billets for a brief rest, when Father Doyle gave a mission to a most responsive congregation! a glorious fortnight spent at the Pas de Calais, in early spring, when the ceremonies of Easter Week were carried out with great devotion and impressiveness.

Such a round of ceaseless and heroic devotion might well have filled his life and left no time for other things. And the appalling horrors and hardships in which it was passed might well have dispensed him from any self-imposed mortification. In view of the demands made on him he might reasonably have given some small legitimate indulgence to his body. It is then with a shock, almost with a feeling of pity, that we come upon a passage like the following in his letters: "I have been living in the front trenches for the last week in a sea of mud, drenched to the skin with rain, and mercilessly peppered with all sorts and conditions of shells. Yet I realise that some strange purifying process is going on in my soul, and that this life is doing much for my sanctification. This much I can say: I hunger and thirst for holiness and for

humiliations and sufferings which are the short cut to holiness, though when these things do come I often pull a long face and try to avoid them."

We are at once shown that in such awful conditions the internal warfare was going on as ruthlessly, as constantly, as when he was in the quiet of his room at Rathfarnham Castle—the warfare against his own will and likings, the struggle after perfect union with God. In all that happens, in his discomforts and dangers and escapes, he sees clearly the hand of God. When lying out with his men in shell holes, during a long and heavy bombardment, under pouring rain, while his men slept from sheer exhaustion, he notes: "I could not help thinking of Him who often had not where to lay His head, and it helped me to resemble Him a little." The shockingly mangled face of a poor soldier, wounded by a shell, draws from him the observation: "I think I know better now why Pilate said, 'Behold the Man,' when he showed Our Lord to the people." At odd moments, in his dug-out, with water dripping from the roof, he audits his spiritual accounts, renewing his resolutions to give all to God, to get in his hundred thousand ejaculations; entering systematically his little victories and his little defeats in their respective books. The thing is astonishing, even as a mere feat of physical endurance and natural determination, that this man, who was the comfort and mainstay of thousands by his joyous, whole-hearted devotion, could thus find time and energy to pursue his rough interior way in darkness, desolation and struggle.

The desire for martyrdom which had come to him in his noviceship, and which had urged him to offer himself for the Congo Mission, never quite left him, and was the chief motive that impelled him to volunteer as chaplain. "What decided me in the end,"

**The Martyr** he told a correspondent, "was a thought that flashed into my mind when in the chapel: the thought that if I get killed I shall die a martyr of charity, and so the longing of my heart will be gratified." Shortly before leaving the training camp for France, he wrote: "I want you to know what I went through by volunteering for the Front. God made me feel with absolute certainty—I suppose to increase the merit of the offering—that I shall be killed. The

struggle was hard, for I did not want to die; not, indeed, that I am afraid of death; but the thought that I could never again do more for God or suffer for Him in heaven made the sacrifice too bitter for words."

At the close of the fourth battle of Ypres, which lasted from the 31st July to 16th August, 1917, God accepted his sacrifice. The awful fortnight eclipsed in horror all that he had hitherto experienced: it was the fitting scene of his final display of zeal, bravery and suffering. The four Irish battalions which he attended were thrown into the heart of the awful inferno, torn with a most intense, unslacking bombardment, flung, unsupported, against impossible objectives, suffering enormous casualties, displaying a bravery and heroism that could achieve anything but the impossible. And their chaplain was not unworthy of his men. He shared their dangers night and day, overflowing with a joyous infectious courage, though his heart was wrung by the sufferings of "his own children." "My poor brave boys!" he bursts out in one of the last entries in his journal, "they are lying now out on the battlefield, some in a little grave dug and blessed by their chaplain, who loves them all as if they were his own children; others, stiff and stark, with staring eyes, hidden in a shell-hole, where they had crept to die; while, perhaps, in some far thatched cabin an anxious mother sits listening for the well-known step and voice which will never gladden her ears again."

The end came for himself on Thursday, 16th August, during the attack on the impregnable position around Frezenberg. A newspaper correspondent has given us a glimpse of Father Doyle on this day. "All through the worst hours," wrote Sir Philip Gibbs, "an Irish padre went about among the dead and dying, giving absolution to his boys. Once he came back to headquarters, but he would not take a bit of food or stay, though his friends urged him. He went back to the field to minister to those who were glad to see him bending over them in their last agony. Four men were killed by shell-fire as he knelt beside them, and he was not touched—not touched until his turn came." The exact circumstances of Father Doyle's death are known. After 3 p.m., as he was in the Régimental Aid Post, he heard that an officer of the Dublins was lying out in an exposed position

badly wounded. Father Doyle, with two others, went to rescue him: crawled out to the out-lying shell-crater where the officer lay, anointed him, and succeeded in dragging him within the lines. And then a shell dropped in the midst of the little group which had collected, killed Father Doyle and three officers instantly. Later on in the day his body was found by the retiring Dublins and buried under sods and stones behind the Frezenberg redoubt.

"Having loved his 'poor brave boys' in this world," says Professor O'Rahilly, "and eased their passage to the next, he loved them to the end. He did not desert them in their day of defeat without dishonour. And so, somewhere near the cross-roads of Frezenberg, where he lies buried with them, the chaplain and men of the 48th Brigade are waiting together for the great reveille" (*Life*, 335).

We must not regard Father William Doyle as one of those young careers that was ruthlessly cut short in its brilliant promise, as yet another of the hopes blighted by the war. No doubt had he returned from France he would have gone forward in holiness, approximating more and more, through God's grace and his own efforts, to that deep-seated peace, that grand simplicity which is the note of achieved and confirmed sanctity, growing more and more to the full stature of Christ. But he had lived long enough to do his work. For us Catholics, at least, the significance of his life is clear: we recognise in him a man who revealed to the world a type which the world thought to be extinct, and which even Catholics were beginning to forget, a man who, in a soft and comfortable age, had had the courage to treat his body hardly for the love of God, who had obeyed literally and generously the call of the Master to take up his cross daily, who had proved signally by his heroic life that the love of Christ is still potent to triumph over the spirit of the world with all its manifold seductions.

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