

They Speak His Name With Tears:

Fr. William Doyle SJ and the Great War

Patrick Kenny

“A certain Roman Catholic chaplain...lies in a soldier’s grave in that sinister plain beyond Ypres. He went forward and back over the battle field with bullets whining about him, seeking out the dying and kneeling in the mud beside them to give them Absolution, walking with death with a smile on his face, watched by his men with reverence and a kind of awe until a shell burst near him and he was killed. His familiar figure was seen and welcomed by hundreds of Irishmen who lay in that bloody place. Each time he came back across the field he was begged to remain in comparative safety. Smilingly he shook his head and went again into the storm. He had been with his boys at Ginchy and through other times of stress, and he would not desert them in their agony. They remember him as a saint - they speak his name with tears”.

These words were written by the renowned war correspondent Percival Philips in the *Daily Express* of August 22, 1917. The beloved chaplain was Fr. William Doyle SJ, who was killed by a shell on August 16 1917 while attempting to assist two officers stranded in “no man’s land”.

Fr. Doyle’s heroism during the war is well known. Perhaps most books about the Irish involvement in the Great War note, with more or less substantial references, his role as chaplain in the 16th (Irish) Division. But Fr. Doyle was already relatively well known before he entered service as a chaplain in late 1915. This is evidenced by the fact that Alfred O’Rahilly, a professor of mathematical physics in Cork, set about the task of writing the biography not long after his death. This book, first published in 1921, achieved a fame that was surely far beyond O’Rahilly’s wildest imaginings. At least 5 different editions were published in English and it was translated into the major European languages. At one point the Italian edition was read aloud during meal times in the Jesuit General Curia in Rome.

The O’Rahilly biography tells the story of a zealous and joyful priest who grew up in the affluent environment of Dalkey, County Dublin. The young Willie Doyle was known to rise early in the morning to help the servants in the family home, and O’Rahilly records details of how he would bring food and money to the local poor. He would paint their houses and occasionally stay with the dying if they had nobody else to assist them.

He entered the Jesuits in 1891. His 16 years formation were interspersed with periods spent at home due to ill-health, including a nervous breakdown which afflicted him after a fire broke out in the novitiate where he was living. He also spent time teaching and working with students in both Belvedere College and Clongowes Wood College, where he was instrumental in founding both *The Clongownian* and the Clongowes Union. He was ordained a priest on July 28 1907, coincidentally in the same ceremony as Venerable John Sullivan SJ.

Most of his priesthood was spent on the Jesuit mission team, preaching missions in parishes and giving retreats to

religious communities around Ireland. In the words of Pope Francis, he often went to the “peripheries” to seek those distanced from the Church. He visited them at home, and was known to wait on the docks for sailors arriving into port late at night or to go out to meet factory workers on their way to work at dawn. He seemed to have particular gifts in touching disaffected or wounded souls. On one occasion a gentle word with a prostitute on the street in England resulted, some years later, in him being asked to assist her in prison prior to her execution for murder.

He was particularly devoted to helping ordinary workingmen. At a time when holiness was often seen as the preserve of priests and nuns, he was an innovator in his initiatives for working lay people. He worked hard to establish a retreat house for workers, but due to a number of mishaps (including a newly acquired retreat house being burned down by suffragettes!) he did not live long enough to see this project come to fruition. However, a retreat house for workers was opened after Fr. Doyle’s death in Rathfarnham Castle, and the initiative lives on in the form of the Lay Retreat Association.

As zealous as he may have been, it wasn’t his busy apostolic life that turned the O’Rahilly biography into a near “blockbuster”. Rather, it was O’Rahilly’s decision to publish excerpts from Fr. Doyle’s private notes and diaries that caused such a stir. These intimate documents revealed Fr. Doyle’s life of intense private prayer, mysticism and penance. In the words of the Jesuit historian and biographer Fr. James Brodrick, these private details caused the book to drop like a German shell in the midst of the Christian complacency of the early twentieth centuryⁱ.

Fr. Doyle’s private papers, which were never meant to be read by others, revealed accounts of entire nights spent in prayer, accompanied by what could be interpreted as mystical experiences and intense penances. This practice of physical mortification has, unfortunately, alienated some people from Fr. Doyle. But as O’Rahilly showed in elaborate detail in the later editions of his book, everything Fr. Doyle did in this regard has a precedent in the lives of the saints, including in the life St Ignatius himself. In this regard it is worth noting how other saints have subsequently approved of Fr. Doyle’s life. Mother Teresa read the O’Rahilly biography and personally adopted aspects of Fr. Doyle’s asceticismⁱⁱ, as did St Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Deiⁱⁱⁱ. The Jesuit St Alberto Hurtado is known to have been an admirer of his life and distributed literature about him in his native Chile^{iv}. Furthermore, Fr. Doyle had approval from his confessor for his spiritual practices, and the details of Fr. Doyle’s penances were a revelation precisely because nobody who knew him suspected that this exuberantly joyful and healthy priest was so physically hard on himself.

The O’Rahilly biography is the definitive account of Fr. Doyle’s inner life. But it seems to have been written with the aim of showing him to be a saint – emphasising his penance and spiritual prowess while perhaps downplaying certain aspects of his humanity and natural character.

Now, more than 90 years after O’Rahilly’s classic account of Fr. Doyle’s spiritual life, Carole Hope has written the definitive account of his service as a military chaplain. Her recently released (2013) book, *Worshipper and Worshipped*, runs to over 700 pages and contains almost all of Fr. Doyle’s letters and diaries from the Front, some of which were never previously published, even by O’Rahilly. In addition to being an invaluable first hand account of some of the battles fought by the 16th Irish Division, it is a deeply moving, and surprisingly witty, story that succeeds in humanising Fr. Doyle. It gives us some glimpse into the sparkling personality that won over almost everyone he met.

Fr. Doyle’s letters home to his father were carefully preserved, and typed up by his sister for circulation among his

wider family. These letters were, as he said on one occasion, written “*under all conditions and in all sorts of places, and sitting on a wet sandbag, with one’s feet in four inches of mud, are not ideal conditions for composition*”^v. Yet he persevered with the letters, even at the cost of his sleep, in order to bring solace to an elderly man in Dalkey who was evidently worried about his son. His deep love for his father is evident in every letter, addressing him on practically every occasion as “dearest Father”, and often signing off as “your loving son Willie”.

Fr. Doyle originally wanted to volunteer as a missionary in Africa, but was not accepted for this role by his superiors. He also wanted, like many trained in the robust spirituality of that time, to become a martyr - to shed his blood for God or in the service of others. The outbreak of the war presented him with an ideal opportunity to fulfill both of these desires. It also offered him the chance to minister to the workingmen he loved so much. It was an opportunity not to be missed.

Fr. Doyle first volunteered as chaplain in November 1914 and was accepted in November 1915, travelling to join the 8th Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers in Surrey at the end of that month. But despite his desire to volunteer, he found the departure hard. As he wrote in one letter, probably to his sister, “*only in heaven will you know how I have suffered all this week. It is all for Him and I do not regret it; but He filled my cup of bitterness this evening when I left my darling old Father. Thank God, at last I can say, I have given Him all; or rather He has taken all from me. May His sweet will be done*”^{vi}.

As chaplain, Fr. Doyle held the rank of captain and received 10 shillings per day allowance. But despite the relative comforts he could have availed of, he was always to be found with his men, suffering along with them. As one Protestant officer noted: “*Fr Doyle never rests. Night and day he is with us. He finds a dying or dead man, does all, comes back smiling, makes a little cross and goes out to bury him and then begins all over again.*”^{vii}

One specific form of suffering for Fr. Doyle, as for all of the soldiers, was the discomfort of trench life. As Pope Francis would put it, he truly smelled of his sheep. Rats and other vermin were a particular annoyance. One letter home told his father that he had had “*a good night’s rest in spite of the hard floor and the friendly attention of one sweet little rat, a darling, with a long tail, who would persist in burrowing his way under my makeshift of a pillow. I am not exaggerating when I say the rats share our beds...I have serious fear for the end of my nose*”^{viii}. But surely the greatest crime the rats ever perpetrated on poor Fr. Willie was to eat the pudding his sister sent to him for Christmas 1916!

Fr. Doyle’s care for others cost him dearly at times. On one occasion, the medical doctor with whom he worked (a certain Dr. Buchanan) was sick, and there was no dry or warm spot for him to sleep in the dugout. Fr. Doyle lay face down on the ground to allow the doctor to sleep on his back so that at least one of them could get some rest. Perhaps the tough asceticism he practiced throughout his life had prepared him for moments like this...

The duties of a chaplain involved administering the sacraments, especially hearing confessions and giving the last rites, burying the dead and writing to the families of deceased soldiers. Some of Fr. Doyle’s first hand descriptions of these activities are truly tragic. His letters indicate some of the trauma involved in burying the dead (or what was left of them) under enemy fire, and anointing the dying in their very last moments. One especially moving account, of many, shows how much the presence of the priest meant to these Irish soldiers:

“He opened his eyes as I knelt beside him: ‘Ah! Fr. Doyle, Fr. Doyle,’ he whispered faintly, and then motioned me to bend lower as if he had some message to give. As I did so, he put his two arms round my neck and kissed me. It was all the poor fellow could do to show his gratitude that he had not been left to die alone and that he would have the consolation of receiving the Last Sacraments before he went to God. Sitting a little way off I saw a hideous bleeding object, a man with his face smashed by a shell, with one if not both eyes torn out. He raised his head as I spoke. ‘Is that the priest? Thank God, I am all right now.’ I took his blood-covered hands in mine as I searched his face for some whole spot on which to anoint him. I think I know better now why Pilate said ‘Behold the Man’ when he showed our Lord to the people.^{ix}”

Like all chaplains, when he was in the trenches Fr. Doyle had to say Mass wherever he could. This was a priority for him, and due to the need to fast before receiving Communion, it could mean missing a meal and not being able to eat again for another 10 or 12 hours. His description of one Mass in October 1916 is deeply evocative:

“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. Surely that Mass for the Dead, in the midst of, and surrounded by the dead, was an experience not easily to be forgotten.^x”

But the horrors of suffering, death and war did not alter his cheerful disposition, or his life-long love of practical jokes and stories. Practically every letter contains a variety of interesting anecdotes and witticisms that suggest a joyful spirit in the midst of woe. One such example will suffice. On one occasion he was in Amettes in France. He describes part of the church these in these terms:

“At the bottom of the same church is a mortuary slab, which reads as follows: Erected by Monsieur X in honour of his dear wife Marie who lived 79 years, 4 months, 6 days. They were married 55 years, 9 months, 2 days, 7 hours. RIP”. There is nothing like being accurate, but possibly this unfortunate man wanted to record that he had so much of his Purgatory already done!^{xi}”

Fr. Doyle was present during several important battles, including the Battle of the Somme and the Battle of Messines during which nearly 1 million pounds of explosives were detonated under the German trenches. The explosion, which at that time was the largest ever created by man, could be heard as far away as London. His first hand accounts of what he experienced during these and other major battles – far too long to recount here – make for riveting reading. He was awarded the 16th (Irish) Division Parchment of Merit for bravery during a gas attack in April 1916, awarded the Military Cross for his bravery at the Somme, and nominated for both the Distinguished Service Order and Victoria Cross, neither of which were granted to him. There is some controversy surrounding the refusal of the Victoria Cross, with some suggestion that his Catholicism, and the fact that he was a Jesuit priest, were barriers his receiving this

award. Whatever the truth of this, it wouldn't bother Fr. Doyle. He was very blasé about his Military Cross, and his only interest in it was the fact that it would make his beloved father proud: *"I am sorry these rewards are given to chaplains, for surely he would be a poor specimen of the Lord's Anointed who would do his work for such a thing, but seeing that they are going I must say I am really glad because I know it will give pleasure to an 'old soldier' at home, who ought long ago to have had all the medals and distinctions ever conferred."*^{xii}

July 28th 1917 was the 10th anniversary of Fr. Doyle's ordination, and his entry in his private diary for that day was his last: *"I have again offered myself to Jesus as His Victim to do with me absolutely as He pleases. I will try to take all that happens, no matter from whom it comes, as sent to me by Jesus and will bear suffering, heat, cold, etc., with joy as part of my immolation, in reparation for the sins of priests. From this day I shall try bravely to bear all little pains in this spirit."*^{xiii} Less than three weeks later his offering of himself would be complete, even to the spilling of his blood.

Early August was an intensely busy time for Fr. Doyle. He had at this stage been appointed chaplain to the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, and had worked closely with Fr. Frank Browne SJ, who achieved posthumous fame for his photographic skills. On the August 3 Fr. Browne was transferred to the Irish Guards, and from this time onwards Fr. Doyle served his men as chaplain alone and without rest due to the failure of Fr. Browne's replacement to report for duty. The 16th Irish Division (of which the Dublin Fusiliers were part) fought at the front line without relief for days, the victims of gas attacks and constant shelling. The exhausted soldiers suffered tremendous losses.

The precise details surrounding Fr. Doyle's death are unclear. But at some time in the late afternoon of August 16 1917, a groups of soldiers led by 2nd Lieutenants Marlow and Green got into trouble beyond the front line, and Fr. Doyle ran to assist them. It seems that Fr. Doyle and the two officers were about to take shelter when they were hit by a German shell and killed. His body was never located.

Fr. Doyle's death was a stunning loss to his men. A month after his death, fellow Jesuit chaplain Fr. John Delany met some of the 16th Division. In a letter to the Jesuit Provincial in Ireland he said that the soldiers *"were full of Father Doyle and his exploits. How grieved they are at their sad loss nobody can tell unless they speak to them personally. He seemed to have gripped them all, individually as well as collectively"*^{xiv}.

This praise, from those who knew the man personally, seems to have been universal. Fr. Frank Browne SJ praised his *"saintly example"*^{xv}; Major General Hickie praised his bravery and called him *"the most wonderful character I have ever known"*^{xvi} and Lieutenant Colonel Stirke called him *"one of the finest fellows I ever met"* who was *"genuinely loved by everyone"*^{xvii}. It seems no exaggeration to say that he was loved by all. Following his death he was highly praised by Ulster Protestant soldiers for the help and respect he showed them.

But perhaps the most touching testimony to Fr. Doyle's popularity amongst the soldiers was an entirely anonymous and unintended one. One night in January 1922, his father the then 89-year-old Hugh Doyle awoke to find a burglar in his house. The thief forced him to open various drawers in the house. Upon coming across a picture of Fr. Doyle, the burglar held it up and asked Hugh what his connection was to Fr. Doyle. Upon hearing that he was his father, the thief exclaimed, *"that was a holy priest...he saved many souls"*. Kissing the picture, he put it in his pocket and left the house empty handed!^{xviii}

Devotion to Fr. Doyle seems to have flourished in the 1920's and 1930's, and consideration was given to trying to have him canonised. His brother and fellow Jesuit, Fr. Charles Doyle, distributed small relics (fragments of his clothing) and prayer cards. This devotion was global in scope. Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne even approved the distribution of a prayer card with relics in his diocese. Numerous pamphlets were published about Fr. Doyle, and one 1931 booklet contained information on 6,426 "favours" that were alleged to have been granted through his intercession. These letters came from literally every corner of the globe, and from people in all walks of life. Irrespective of the nature of these apparent favours, the sheer number of letters received by the Jesuits a mere 14 years after Fr. Doyle's death is an impressive sign of how widespread devotion to Fr. Doyle then was.

Devotion to Fr. Doyle gradually waned from the 1940's onwards. The fact that he was a chaplain in the British army undoubtedly played a role. It is likely that changing spiritual tastes also played a part – Fr. Doyle's robust asceticism was never likely to appeal to everyone, especially from the mid twentieth century onwards.

Interest in Fr. Doyle has never died out. Families whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers were aided by him in the war never forgot him. An entirely new and younger generation has now met him through the internet or through reprints of Alfred O'Rahilly's biography. Carole Hope's definitive treatment of his war service has been joined by a variety of smaller booklets, including one published in 2014 by the Catholic Truth Society in London which quickly sold out and is now already in its second printing. Perhaps the approaching centenary of Fr. Doyle's death will see a renewed interest in exploring the possibility of his canonisation.

Dr. Patrick Kenny is a lecturer in the Dublin Institute of Technology and runs www.fatherdoyle.com, a website and daily blog on the life and writings of Fr. Doyle.

ⁱ Brodrick, James (1932) 'Father William Doyle SJ' in *The Irish Way*, Sheed, F. (ed). Sheed & Ward. London

ⁱⁱ Kolodiejchuk, Brian (2007) *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light. The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'*. Doubleday (New York).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rodriguez, Pedro (2010). *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition*. Scepter (London).

^{iv} Personal correspondence

^v Hope, Carole (2013) *Worshipper and Worshipped. Across the Divide – An Irish Padre of the Great War. Fr Willie Doyle Chaplain to the Forces 1915-1917*. p. 388. Reville Press (Brighton).

^{vi} O'Rahilly, Alfred (1925). *Fr William Doyle SJ: A Spiritual Study*. p. 387. Longmans Green & Co. (London)

^{vii} Hope, op. cit. p. 657

^{viii} Hope, op. cit. p. 226

^{ix} Hope, op. cit. p. 592

^x O'Rahilly, op. cit. p. 440.

^{xi} Hope, op. cit. p. 468.

^{xii} Hope, op. cit. p. 413

^{xiii} O'Rahilly, op. cit. p. 298

^{xiv} Morrissey, Thomas (2015) *From Easter Week to Flanders Field: The Diaries and Letters of John Delaney SJ 1916-1919*. p. 80 Messenger Publications (Dublin).

^{xv} Hope, op. cit. p. 689

^{xvi} O'Rahilly, op. cit. p. 544

^{xvii} O'Rahilly, op. cit. p. 545

^{xviii} O'Rahilly, op. cit. p. 547