

Jesuit Army Chaplains, 1855-1945

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As we enter 2018, we move into the fourth and final year of centenary commemorations for the First World War. Over the last three years, prompted by the centenary events, the Jesuits in Britain Archives have reflected on the role of Jesuit army chaplains, but not solely in the First World War. Jesuits have served as military chaplains in successive conflicts, and the Archives have records of those who served in the Crimean and later wars.

The Crimean War

The Crimean War (1853-1856) was a hugely important turning point for Catholics in the military in that it was the first occasion on which the British Government appointed permanent Catholic chaplains to the army. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was clear that there was not enough spiritual provision for Catholic troops. Prior to the war, despite a significant number of Irish, and therefore presumably Catholic, men making up the British army, repeated calls from Catholic bishops and the laity for Parliament to provide full-time military Catholic chaplains had been ignored. At the outbreak of the war, the issue of inadequate spiritual

provision for Catholic servicemen was again raised, and from 1854, thanks in the most part to the Bishop of Southwark, Thomas Grant's tireless campaigning, Catholic chaplains slowly began to be recruited for service.

Among those chaplains were two Jesuits of the English Province (as it was then): Fr Joseph Woollett SJ (1818-1898) and Fr Gerrard Strickland SJ (1822-1856). You may have deduced from the dates of the latter that Fr Strickland was sadly not to return from the Crimea. In an account of Woollett and Strickland prepared for the *Letterae Annuae* we are told that:

Since the fall of Sebastopol, the English army had enjoyed the best of health, and the hospital work became light. The Frs felt free to offer their services to the chaplain in the French camp and they proposed that they... should visit the French hospitals which were full with cases of fever, scurvy and frost bite...The Frs saw the danger they incurred and could not expect to escape any more than the French clergy – but charity called them and they were happy to answer the call.

Fr Woollett caught the fever in March 1856 but after a severe illness recovered. Fr Strickland was taken ill two days after Woollett embarked for England but was not so fortunate; he died on 26 April. He was buried at Cathcart's Hill and the funeral was attended by the whole of his Regiment, and by men from every other Regiment in the Division.

Fr Woollett had left England in March 1855, about a year and a half into the conflict, with Fr Strickland arriving in the Crimea in August that year. They said Mass at an early hour every morning in their respective tents and, according to the account for the *Letterae Annuae*, would have had anywhere from one to ten communicants, while on Sundays there could be 30 to 80 when Mass was held in the open air. According to the regulations of the War Office, all officers and soldiers not otherwise engaged on duty on a Sunday had to be present on parade for the Divine Service of his own Faith – “half the infantry being Catholics it was a fine spectacle to see every Sunday two or three thousand troops at the adorable sacrifice.”

But it was in the camp hospitals that the priests would have spent most of their time, setting off in the morning and working there for most of the day, particularly during the spring and summer as fever and cholera attacked the troops, or after an attempt on the batteries of the town, to catch the dying and those in immediate danger. The round of hospitals was often made twice during the day.

Fr Woollett sums up his duties neatly by opening several of his letters from the Crimea, which can be found in *Letters and Notices* volume 22:¹ ‘Mass, Communion, hospital visited’,

¹ Crimea: Extracts from letters of Fr Joseph Woollett when chaplain during the Crimean War, pp. 88-101, 251-262

before going into greater detail about his day.

Although chaplains did not take part in the fighting, they, like the entire British Crimean expedition force, suffered terrible privations. Incompetence in the Army staff, medical services, and food and equipment supplies was manifested early in the campaign, while the harsh winters compounded the problems experienced by the British soldiers in the Crimea. Almost all the chaplains were affected at some time by exhaustion, ill health, and disease, thus impeding the effectiveness of the other chaplains. Their hard work did not go unnoticed, however, and as a result of the brave actions of the Catholic troops and chaplains alike, by the end of the war British Catholics were finally placed firmly on the side of the crown and government and their loyalty and commitment could no longer be doubted. A further significant development occurred on 5 November 1858, when a Royal Warrant meant that Catholics could be commissioned chaplains and together with other chaplains were allocated to one of four classes corresponding to military ranks: captain, major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel. By 1862, there were 18 commissioned Catholic chaplains and 63 assistant Catholic chaplains serving in the army. Recognition and equality for Catholic chaplains had finally been achieved.

There was, however, some scepticism within the Society, perhaps hardly surprising given the conditions Woolett and Strickland had had to work in. In a letter to Fr Edward Hood SJ

(1808-1886), 9 July 1858, Fr George Jenkins SJ (1799-1861) wrote:

'If the General be consistent, he will not allow any more of Ours to be army chaplains. But Pio Nono's advisors, Talbot & CO, may persuade him to order us all off to India, to be shot or carried off by Cholera, fever, &c.'

First World War

Despite these early misgivings, the English Jesuits continued to supply chaplains to meet the needs of servicemen, and they were called upon again when war broke out in 1914. As the First World War gained momentum, the numbers of Catholic chaplains grew to meet the needs of the influx of voluntary troops in 1915 and then conscripted men in 1916. The English Province catalogues list seven chaplains in 1915 (bearing in mind the catalogues were produced at the end of the previous year), but the numbers quickly rose to 32 in 1916, 48 in 1917, 70 in 1918, and 75 in 1919.

The Archives are particularly rich in resources for the First World War, and contain the papers of chaplains who were keen diarists, letter writers and artists. Fr Richard Garrold SJ (1874-1920) kept several diaries between 1917 and 1919, which he illustrated with delightfully naïve drawings as he travelled from the Western Front to East Africa, and then on to India, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Fr Leslie Walker (1877-1958) kept his diaries and artwork separately though they can be viewed together. An account of the Battle of Messines on



THE RUINED BASILICA OF OUR LADY
SKETCHED BY FR LESLIE WALKER SJ (REF. SJ/51/11/4)

6 June 1917, for example, is complemented by a sketch of the battlefield in one of his sketchbooks. Walker drew the battlefield “undeterred by shot and shell”, as well as the landscapes, churches and towns he passed through, memorialising the state of destruction that had befallen them, and not infrequently lampooning the officer class. Walker’s paintings and sketches provide an insight into a chaplain’s thoughts by a different media to the often strict format of a diary and bring to life the harsh realities of war in a far more tangible way. He captures seemingly small moments like the delivery of rations, and a real sense of sadness can be felt in his sketches of destroyed Catholic churches.

Fr John Luck SJ’s (1867-1950) letters provide a further unique insight into a chaplain’s experience. For the most part, Catholic chaplains lacked conventional correspondents such as a spouse or children, however over 200 letters written to his parents and five sisters survive, and 45 of those cover his years serving as a chaplain. Where Walker’s artwork is tinged with sarcasm, Luck’s letters are unfailingly upbeat, perhaps to keep his family from worrying, giving in depth descriptions of the camps and his accommodation in Salonika, where he was stationed with the 79th Brigade, and how he turned his dug-outs into spaces appropriate for saying Mass. In a letter to his sister dated 9 March 1916, Luck says he is having “the time of his life” in Greece.

The Archives also hold a complete set of the publication, *Chaplains’ Weekly*, which was started at Farm Street with the purpose of maintaining communication with the chaplains. Its

editor was Fr William Feran SJ (1869-1942) who also oversaw all the various needs of the chaplains during the war. His obituary talks of how he was tireless in meeting and seeing them off, "his squat figure, with its broad smile, shovel hat, and shabby inverness, was a familiar and welcome sight at Victoria and Waterloo."

In the first edition on 9th May 1915, Fr Feran wrote:

As Fr. Provincial finds it impossible to send lengthy letters to the individual chaplains, he has asked me to chromograph, week by week, items of news that may interest them and send a copy to each. This I propose doing each Sunday. The communication will not be, in any sense, official; and its length will depend on the amount of matter available. Parlour politics, as well as Racing and Betting news, will be excluded.

The *Chaplains' Weekly* was an outstanding success from the beginning. It contained snippets of news from within the province, including what was going on in the Jesuit schools and houses, movements of Jesuits around the province, reports of ill-health or death of Jesuits, as well as extracts from letters sent back from Chaplains serving abroad. The circulation of the *Chaplains' Weekly* was closely regulated, partly, it was felt, because the Provincial did not favour an unofficial news-sheet. Those who were not chaplains had to exert considerable ingenuity to come up with an excuse for the regular receipt of a copy. However each copy tended to be circulated widely, being read and re-read until it fell apart, so it had a far wider readership than purely Military Chaplains.

The *Chaplains' Weekly* contained reports from Chaplains:

13 June 1915 Fr. Devas has been at the "very front of the front". He heard the confession of Fr. Finn shortly before he was killed. For a fortnight he lived on biscuits, bully beef and tea; and then was laid low with dysentery... He was afraid he might have to be invalided home; but I hear, that he is back at work. One funeral he had to conduct crouched over the grave, as a sniper had caught sight of the burial party and was making things lively for them. At the end he had to bolt across an open space, with the bullets flying around. Unfortunately, he does not give the distance or the time, so that one cannot say whether he established a record.

It describes how Christmas 1916 was celebrated in a tent by Fr Robert Stuart:

Fr Stuart had Midnight Mass in a marquee. He has been acting as official interrogator of some prisoners taken, and learnt that they were quite fed up with trench life and were delighted to be made prisoners. He has had the experience of...a shell land[ing] within rather less than ten yards of him. If it had not been a 'dud', his letter, perhaps, would not have been written'

Occasionally the *Chaplains' Weekly* contained news of the death of a Jesuit Military Chaplain, such as the death of Fr. Robert Monteith on 27 November 1917 who was killed when

a shell exploded in his bivouac at Ribécourt. Another Jesuit Chaplain, Fr William Keary was with him and sent a detailed account of his death for inclusion in the *Chaplains' Weekly*. In all, 6 Jesuit Military Chaplains were killed during the First World War.

The *Chaplains' Weekly* was published until November 1919, when Fr Feran announced in its final issue:

'Fr Provincial has decided that the greatly reduced number of our chaplains and the anniversary of the armistice makes the present moment an opportune one for discontinuing these Notes. The Editor, therefore, with thanks to his correspondents, announces that he is demobilised as from to-day, presents the 203rd number, and makes his bow.'

Second World War

With the coming of the Second World War, the *Chaplains' Weekly* was again needed, for in total, 99 Jesuits from the British Province served as military chaplains between 1939 and 1945. The first new edition went out on 22 October 1939, with a plea from its new Editor, Father Richard Clarke SJ (1897-1969):

Fr R Clarke will be grateful for items of interest for insertion in Chaplain's Weekly which will normally be published at the week-end.

As before, the revived *Chaplains' Weekly* had Province News – how the boys at Stamford Hill School were settling into their

evacuation, and how some found being billeted on families difficult – and news about individual Jesuits as well as reports from the front by Chaplains:

8 February 1942, from Fr d'Adhémar: *We were settling down for the evening when a crowd of Jerry tanks came up on our flank, firing their heavy guns as they came while their artillery lengthened the range and so were we in between two fires. My batman jumped into the truck and shouted 'Jerry tanks coming up!' so I started up the engine as I saw crowds of vehicles bounding all over the desert at a fierce rate. We certainly broke all speed records in the mad rush...by all rights I should have been captured and when I reported back, the Brigadier was surprised to see me as he was certain that I was in the bag...*

Again, the Province Catalogues provide numbers for the Chaplains serving in the Second World War, with 14 listed in the 1940 volume, and peaking at 94 in 1944. Sadly, the personal papers of these chaplains are not quite so rich a resource as those of the First World War, but it is possible to catch a glimpse of their experiences.

Four of Fr Niall Corbett SJ's (1901-1972) wartime diaries survive in the Archives, spanning 1942 to 1945. Corbett was a chaplain in the RAF, and his diaries were written away from the Western Front, the first place we encounter him being Margil, Iraq on 6 February 1942, and then Baghdad, two days later. These are not like the in-depth journals of Fr Walker, but

engagement diaries filled in sporadically, presumably only when he considered something was worth noting or when he had the time, but fairly mundane in subject matter: “Zubair left for at 6 AM. Confession. Mass 6.45 10 there. Back c. 8 am. 2 Officers at Mass. Numbers not too good. Singing better...” Corbett’s diary does, however, illustrate how relentlessly busy he was, as the sections marked out for each day are often crammed with the minutiae of his days, detailing long and tedious journeys, Mass times and numbers of attendees, people he has spoken to and what he has done that day. We catch a rare glimpse of the man behind the diary on 20 September 1943: “Determined to take things easy to-day.”

Little is mentioned of Fr Vincent Gallagher SJ’s (1898-1962) experience in his obituary in *Letters and Notices*, probably because, as the obituary alludes, he seldom spoke of it. Gallagher was unlucky enough to have been a prisoner of war in both world wars. He had served in the army before becoming a Jesuit in the First World War and, at his own request, he was appointed military chaplain in January 1940. In June 1941 was wounded and taken prisoner a second time at Calais. Although he was not seriously injured, there was no news of him for some time, and the War Office reported him “Missing, presumed killed.” Gallagher spent the next four years as a prisoner of war in France, Germany, and finally Russia. He could have returned home in 1943 when there was an exchange of prisoners, but he chose to stay behind to let a married man go in his place. One item of

kriegsgefangenenpost (prisoner of war post) survives in the Archives, addressed to a Miss Morley, 5 March 1944:

I was sorry to have to disappoint so many people (you would be surprised at the number of letters I have since received on the subject) but someone had to stay behind to see to the welfare of the exiles & I was by no means the only one to stay. I have had my consolations in helping one since then who but for me would have died without the sacraments and I have several promising subjects under instruction. I am keeping very well & now that there are signs of better weather I should continue to do so.

In the 160 years covered in this article, the role of the Jesuit chaplain evolved from being somewhat of a luxury for Catholic troops to a right, which ensured that troops of all churches had their moral and spiritual needs met. It is perhaps easy to forget that these men would also have witnessed many of the horrors of war and been affected by the same harsh conditions, illnesses, and dangers that the soldiers faced. Thanks to the men who served as Jesuit chaplains and kept such detailed accounts of their experiences, and to those who recognised the value of those sources for posterity, the Archives are able to provide an invaluable insight into war from the unique perspectives of men who were there, not to fight, but to care for the people around them.

For Further Reading:

Oliver P. Rafferty SJ, "Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War." Letters and Notices, Vol. 101, no. 444, pp.323-336

Jack Mahoney SJ, "A War Memorial to Five Jesuit Army Chaplains Killed in Action in World War I", Letters and Notices, Vol. 102, no. 446, pp.29-37