

The American Civil War and the National Shrine

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At 4:30 a.m. on April 12, 1861, a 10-inch mortar shell exploded over Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina; at that moment, the American Civil War began. Over the course of the next four years, 620,000 American lives were lost. This loss was without equal in American history and would only be surpassed by the 639,122 lives lost in the other American wars from the Revolution to Iraq-Afghanistan. Four days after the surrender at Appomattox, General George Meade wrote to his wife and lamented the great toll the war had taken, “My God, what misery this dreadful war has produced and how it comes home to the doors of almost every one!” (April 13, 1865).

By 1920, the Civil War had receded into the American consciousness as the nation was recovering from World War I. At the laying of the foundation stone on September 23, it seemed “most appropriate that this great edifice ... should also take on the character of a National Memorial to our Soldiers and Sailors” (Sept 23, 1920 Dedication Program). In a tribute to all who served and died over the last 59 years, “from the Civil War to the present day,” Catholic war veterans from each of the wars participated in the ceremonies and in the placing of the foundation stone. Representing the veterans of the Civil War was John A. Storm of the 55th Pennsylvania Infantry and the 1st U.S. Artillery, “an ardent Catholic, and a devout lover of Mary and the Shrine,” who lived at Harewood Soldiers’ Home.

As the walls of this new national church began to rise, opportunities to honor the contributions of generations of Catholic men and women began to take shape. “Ever since the Civil War, many pious souls had expressed the hope that some day a splendid church would arise ... [and] be our common monument of gratitude to Mary Immaculate.” (Sept 23, 1920)

In 1924, the Ladies Auxiliary to the Ancient Order of Hibernians (LAAOH) dedicated the *Nuns of the Battlefield* monument opposite the Cathedral of Saint Matthew in Washington, D.C., an undertaking they began in 1914. Of the 600 sisters

from the twelve religious orders (Sisters of Saint Joseph, Carmelites, Dominican Order, Ursulines, Sisters of the Holy Cross, Sisters of the Poor of Saint Francis, Sisters of Mercy, Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, Daughters of Charity, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and Congregation of Divine Providence) who voluntarily served in the Civil War nursing soldiers of both sides, more than half were born in Ireland.

The LAAOH continued its tribute to the “Nuns of the Battlefield” with its donation of the Chapel of Saint Brigid (patron saint of the Auxiliary) to the National Shrine in 1927. Other liturgical gifts and appointments were donated in the years that followed. In 1928, the “Kilmallock Chalice” and paten was fashioned by The Gorham Company (New York) after the early 17th-century chalice of the Dominican Priory in Limerick, Ireland. The inscription on the chalice reads, *Presented to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception / ... for use at the Altar of Saint Brigid / ... as an enduring memorial to the noble service /... by the Nuns of the Battlefield. / Anno 1928.*



The most precious of the gifts however, was made of wood. Through special arrangements, wood from the pews of Saint Francis Xavier Church was used to carve two missals stands in a medieval Irish motif. The church, dedicated on July 31, 1853, by Bishop (Saint) John Neumann, was used ten years later as a field hospital during the three-day battle of Gettysburg (July 1-3, 1863). The pews served as cots for the wounded and dying of both armies.



The missal stands serve as tangible reminders of the suffering of the siege of Gettysburg and honors the memory of all who served and sacrificed throughout this period in American history.

The human value of these “pieces of wood” is best understood in an account given by two of the sisters who worked in the hospital, Sr. Marie Louise Caulfield, D.C. and Sr. Matilda Coskery, D.C. “The Catholic church [of Saint Francis Xavier] ... was now filled with wounded, mutilated men. They lay on the pew seats, under the pews, in every aisle, with scarcely room to pass between them—in the sanctuary and in the gallery.” The sisters sought to aid the wounded and dying men with all that was at hand or available to them. On one occasion, a soldier saw one of the sisters give a Miraculous Medal (Medal of the Immaculate Conception, received in a vision by Saint Catherine Labouré, a Daughter of Charity, Paris, 1820) to a Catholic soldier. One of the other soldiers later said to her, “Sister, you gave something to that man awhile ago and ... he has not groaned since, please, give me such as you gave him.” This devotion, which eased the suffering of the soldiers at Gettysburg, is sustained in the Chapel of the Miraculous Medal in the Basilica of the National Shrine.

In keeping with the theme of Charity on the west side of the National Shrine, the mosaic tympanum on the west porch depicts the Sisters and Daughters of Charity tending to the wounded and the dying in a Civil War field hospital. The appropriateness of



this location is by design. The west porch overlooks the grounds where the Harewood field hospital stood from 1862 to 1866 on what was then the William W. Corcoran Farm near the Soldiers’ Home. The Harewood hospital was the last Civil



Looking south towards the Capitol.

War hospital in Washington to close.

Of the many tributes to those who served during the Civil War, one of the most compelling was that which President Abraham Lincoln wrote in his diary after visiting one of the Washington D.C. hospitals in 1862. “Of all the forms of charity and benevolence seen in crowded wards of the hospitals, those of some Catholic Sisters were among the most efficient. I never knew whence they came or what the name of their order. More lovely than anything I have ever seen in art ... are the pictures that remain of those modest Sisters going on their errands of mercy among the suffering and the dying. Gentle and womanly, yet with the courage of soldiers leading a forlorn hope, to sustain them in contact with such horrors.”

The Basilica of the National Shrine is often referred to as “America’s Church.” The obvious needs no explanation but it is the hidden treasures, the history, and the memories of the lives of the faithful framed within the marble and granite of this structure that gives truth to this epithet.

The commemoration of the Civil War Sesquicentennial opened on April 12, 2011 with a Presidential Proclamation and will continue to April 9, 2015. Plan a visit to the Basilica of the National Shrine as part of your Sesquicentennial observances and offer a prayer for those men and women who served and sacrificed then and those who serve our nation today. The chalice, missal stands mentioned in this article, along with other Civil War memorabilia of the National Shrine will be on display in Memorial Hall through June, 2012.☛