

## ARMY CHAPLAINS AS SEEN FROM THE RANKS

(By JOSEPH A. MURPHY, in the *American Ecclesiastical Review*.)

Very recently a friend whom I had not seen for some years walked into my study. He had just returned from England. Leaving his home here, he had enlisted at the outbreak of the war in 1914, in the Royal Hussars, a British regiment. During his three years of campaigning he was wounded twice. The second wound in the foot kept him in the hospital for nine months.

During this time he had ample opportunity to meditate on his experiences at the Front and in the barracks. As I was naturally interested in the work of our clergy with the army I asked him his impressions, for, although not a Catholic, the young soldier is of a reflecting mind. To him religion means something; at all events it took on a meaning for him during the camp life among the "Tommys." He gave me his impressions, which I repeat here as I took them down while still fresh in my memory. I thought them interesting, and the readers of the *Ecclesiastical Review* may find them so too: for, though the chaplain's story is familiar enough, the chaplain as he is seen from the ranks is not so well known. What my friend said was, if I may reproduce his own words as nearly as I can, as follows:—

The regiment in which I found myself was overwhelmingly Church of England, according to the official records. These records, however, do not mean very much. Everything is put down as Church of England, which is not specifically otherwise. Christian or non-Christian, Jew, Mohammedan, or atheist—unless religious affiliation is acknowledged, the C. of E. scoops in everything.

Normally, Tommy is not a very religious animal. The Church of England looms large in his eyes, as an institution much resembling the King or the British Museum. It always has been, is, and ever will be, the "world without end, amen." To belong to this English institution is a pledge of respectability, and an assurance of loyalty. But, when the Church makes any demand, on either Tommy's person or his time, he is liable to use words of little reverence in order to express his overflowing feelings. Church parade is equivalent to drill, and hence is cordially hated. Even the proximity of danger and death cannot make Tommy become demonstratively religious. I believe that at bottom he is religious, and that he gives many a sober thought, in the secrecy of his own soul, to the things of the other life. But the fact remains that Tommy, even in war times, holds any external revelation of religious feeling to be a sign of weakness.

I think that one can safely argue from living with Tommy in the trenches, that the end of the war will see a great religious awakening in the various countries engaged. Men are learning to think less of this present life. Men by the thousands are gladly throwing away their lives in the service of ideals. Ideals are emphasised as worth more than life. Death for the cause is not now the extraordinary, but the ordinary measure of devotion.

All this means that men are less atheistic than we were formerly led to believe. After all, there is no sense in an atheist dying for anything. If there is no Beyond, the only thing in logic is to make the most of this life, and take all the ease and comfort and enjoyment that life can afford. The hard life of the trenches, the bitter suffering, and death itself, could have no place in the scheme of life of an irreligious man. It is essentially a religious ideal, that of dying for justice and right. A man who believes that suffering and death for justice will bring their reward in the life to come,—he can find logic in his life in the trenches. But for the man who believes that death

ends all, the trenches are the most hopeless sort of a place. I suppose that is why radicals and freethinkers are so opposed to war.

But you asked me about chaplains. The chaplain of our regiment was a Church of England man. He was big, athletic, handsome, strong. He could write various letters after his name in token of degrees he held from Oxford; but these did not hurt him in any way that I could see. He was always simple and friendly in his speech, with no airs or "swank" about him. He tried his best, and did whatever he could for the men. He found many real opportunities to be of service to them.

Of course Tommy did not trust him at first. Among soldiers there is always an inherent distrust of the parson. They think that a chaplain is one of another race—neither man nor spirit, but holding down a job that demands something of both. And in the army he is something of an anomaly. He ranks as an officer, while his work is largely with the privates. He must associate with both officers and men. To devote himself exclusively to either privates, or officers, means speedy damnation in the eyes of the slighted caste.

Our chaplain was above all of the "hail-fellow-well-met" sort. He seemed to have no trouble in keeping in the good graces of the officers, yet he did a surprisingly large amount of mixing with the men. He arranged their sports for them. He provided them with literature and entertainments. And, whenever he could, he slipped in a little professedly religious work. If there were any casualties, he wrote the news to the relatives of the stricken soldiers at home. Thus he was instrumental in giving consolation to many an afflicted soul. He visited all the wounded within, reach, and cheered them with a ready fund of stories, or spoke to them on more serious themes, in a way that was kind and gentle and friendly. The boys held him in high favor. He, in turn, stuck by the crowd loyally, and was not afraid to risk his neck in the front trenches.

He never went over the top with us. Personally, I was glad he didn't. A parson is not a fighting man. His duty is to help the wounded, and they pour back into the trenches fast enough to keep him busy. He could, of course, go over, if he wanted. No one would think of preventing him. But it would be uselessly risking a valuable life, and our chaplain never took any unnecessary chances. Mind, he was a brave man. He never shirked a duty because it brought him into danger. I saw him, time and again, go out into No Man's Land, with a volunteer or two, to rescue the wounded under the cover of darkness. Sometimes he would bring in three or four on his shoulders, one after the other, and then go back to look for more. I often thought of the Good Shepherd who went out for the lost sheep.

But I do not think that he offered much that was substantial in the way of religious consolation. He was brave and cheery and kind. He kept up the spirits and the morale of the regiment. He talked earnestly, once in a while, and read chapters of the New Testament to the men. But, somehow or other, this did not seem to be enough. We were all provided with small Testaments, ourselves, and many of the men had the custom of reading a chapter, now and then. We would have done so, even though we had no chaplain. I often thought that the dominie wandered about, wishing that he could do something, yet not knowing just what he could do.

He certainly had not the hold on us that the chaplain of a neighboring Irish regiment had on his men. We occupied adjoining posts and barracks for a considerable period, and so I came to know the men and the chaplain pretty well, and to be in on their regimental gossip. The regiment was, of course, almost entirely Roman Catholic, and the chaplain was a priest of that Church. He was a man, not unlike

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