

Civil War chaplain

The April 14 Catholic Review included an article on Catholic chaplains in the Civil War. It quoted General Benjamin Butler as saying, "I have never seen a Catholic chaplain who has not done his duty." Several were mentioned. Another priest who served in the Civil War was Redemptorist Father Aegidius Smulders, who ministered right here in Baltimore City and had a special significance to the black Catholic community.

After the death of the founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, no priest came forward to minister to the sisters. Their convent was at the very end of Park Street. The Oblate Sisters walked down Park Street to Saratoga, to attend services at St. Alphonsus. St. John Neumann, as pastor, noticed the sisters' continual trips to the church and decided to amend the situation. This good priest sent Redemptorists to the Oblates, whenever possible.

One such priest was Father Smulders, who had with him on many an occasion a young seminarian who served as an acolyte, Thaddeus Anwander. After his ordination, John Neumann suggested that the young priest get permission from the Archbishop to serve the Oblate Sisters. After much haggling, Father Anwander did get permission and the rest is history.

In addition to serving Mass, Father Smulders gave the Oblates their first retreat since their founder's death in 1843. However, he was transferred to Michigan in 1847 and was sent to New Orleans in 1860. It was during this time, while Father Smulders was in New Orleans, that the war broke out between the states. After the Battle of Bull Run, the Archbishop of New Orleans sent a petition to the priests of the diocese, signed by the officers of the Confederacy as well as by the Protestant chaplains, requesting a Catholic Chaplain for Louisiana's 8th Division of Volunteers. Of the six Redemptorists stationed in New Orleans, all volunteered.

On Sept. 1, 1861, the archbishop and rector appointed two priests, Smulders and Sheeran, who left that very day for Camp Pickens in Manassas, Va. Gen. Joseph Johnston, commander of the Confederate forces, gave each priest a pass to visit and minister in all the hospitals in Northern Virginia. Two years later, Gen. Robert E. Lee

took command and gave the priests a similar pass to all the hospitals and Army divisions in Northern Virginia.

Being attached to a regiment, the priests were to receive pay and rations. In addition, Lee supplied the priests with a soldier, an orderly who was to take care of the horses, serve Mass and to help in any way possible so as to free the priests for their religious duties. During his duty as chaplain, Father Smulders had several serious illnesses, including typhoid fever and dysentery.

In addition to visiting the hospitals, the Redemptorists served in the prison camps ministering to the Union soldiers, served on the battlegrounds in Petersburg and Richmond and the court house of Spotsylvania. Father Smulders, in a letter to his provincial, mentioned a mission he gave in Charleston, S.C., which lasted three weeks and was very well-attended. This was in the third year of the war and the church was in the range of the Yankee bombardment. The people showed no fear; however, one evening the bombing was so bad, Father Smulders had the congregation kneel and recite three Hail Marys. Then it happened; the shelling stopped. Water had gushed upon the island from which the enemy was firing and the shooting was stopped for several days.

Fathers Smulders and Sheeran were with Lee at the surrender in Appomattox. Both served as chaplains in the Confederate states for four years, and returned to New Orleans after the war. After four years of independence and freedom, both priests remained true to their Redemptorist rules.

In 1866, Father Smulders was one of three priests sent to establish a Redemptorist mission in St. Louis. In 1879, he started a mission in Detroit, where this good priest established a branch of the Redemptorists and built the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer. In 1898, Father Smulders returned to St. Louis, where he eventually died.

Known as an outstanding Confederate chaplain, this great man was also a Northern missionary. In the Redemptorist community, among other things, Father Smulders served as novice master, rector and superior. His heart was neither North nor South, but wherever God asked him to serve for the time being. He is buried in Liguori, Mo.

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