

The Irish Brigade

The poet W.B. Yeats spoke of a fellow Irishman: "Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy."

This week we celebrated St. Patrick's Day. I was grateful to receive the St. Patrick Award from the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick of Baltimore at a festive luncheon last Saturday. Then on Sunday, the honor of Honorary Grand Marshal of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the largest annual parade in Baltimore. Still when I think of St. Patrick's Day and the joy it continues to bring to so many of us, the tragedy of the Civil War comes to mind for reasons to follow.

Twelve years ago I was invited to dedicate a monument to the Irish Brigade, the Fighting Sixty-Ninth, on the battlefield of Antietam. There, on September 17, 1862, the bloodiest battle of the war took place, 26,050 Americans falling in that field of battle in twelve hours. The Irish Brigade, singularly courageous, helped win the day for the North.

The day before the dedication I received from a thoughtful priest - then a doctoral student of history at the Catholic University of America - the Xerox copy of a letter dated October 9, 1862, written by Lt. Bernard O'Neill to the father of the late Pvt. Thomas Connors.

Dear Sir,

I have just received your letter of the 6th instant. Your brave and gallant son Thomas was buried among the other brave men of the 69th who fell in the battle. Of course, if you wished to bring his remains to New York, I am not aware of anything to prevent your doing so. But exhuming the body would disturb the remains, the sacred remains of his comrades who fought and fell beside him and whose remains lie beside him in a piece of ground which I believe has been consecrated by our beloved Chaplain, the Revd. Father Willet.

All last winter his comrades in Company C were edified by his regular attendance at Mass every morning, and also by his so often approaching the Most Holy Sacrament. He was also at Confession on the morning of battle. So you must not mourn his fate

as I trust he now stands in the presence of God interceding for his old comrades of the Irish Brigade who were not so fortunate as he was, to be called by the Almighty when he had everything prepared for the great and inevitable journey.

I believe Capt. Whitty saw him fall, and as the Captain is now in New York, he will be able to let you know all about Thomas, and I am sure will assist you. ... I, myself, assisted in carrying him from the place where he fell to the grave. I also assisted in burying him. The scapulars, beads, and Agnus Dei which were round his neck were buried with him. ...

If there is anything more you wish to know about him, I will give you the information with pleasure, and if you intend exhuming the body, I will describe to you minutely the place where he is buried. But it would be difficult to find him after the lapse of so long a time, to identify him from his comrades. And besides, what better grave could a brave soldier have than on the field where he fell and where he contributed to gain the victory.

That battle took place in the western part of this Archdiocese, where Catholic churches (most in honor of St. Patrick) grew along with the immigrant Irish population around the same time as the Civil War. Many arrived in the Port of Baltimore, second only to New York in 19th Century immigration, and headed west in search of railroad and mining work.

I can't help but think how many young Baltimore Thomas Connors disembarked from Ireland in Baltimore and headed north for the walk to our present Basilica where they would find other newcomers even from their own town, not so distant - a practice recounted for me this past weekend, which thankfully continues to be passed down among Irish families to this day.

How many would join one or the other side of the battle and give their lives for their new homeland but never to be noted in The Catholic Review 150 years later, pitting brother against brother, father against son, cousin against cousin, friend against friend?

And what of the faith that prompted that young Irish American Private?

Stories like that of Thomas Connors dot the landscape of history and apply to every war and young women and men from every ethnic background.

Are our families – families of every rich ethnic heritage, are our schools forming our offspring “to gain the victory” of faith?