

## Reflection for Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021

### Father Willy Doyle SJ Ireland's Forgotten Saint

*Ever since I first discovered Fr Willy Doyle a few years ago I have been fascinated by his story of being an army chaplain in the first world war. It is a story of heroic sanctity, of a priest totally committed to his men in the trenches. My own great uncle fought in the Battle of Loos where Fr Willy ministered to the troops and I wonder if they ever came across each other, perhaps unlikely considering the many hundreds of thousands who fought and were killed. My great uncle was shot in the back while trying to rescue his friend, who had also been shot. I have visited the grave where he is buried in St Omer. He was only 19 years of age.*

Willie Doyle was born into a well-to-do, devout Catholic family on March 3, 1873. From this Christian home on the outskirts of Dublin, four of seven children entered some form of religious life. Having been educated in both Ireland and England, Willie entered the Society of Jesus (SJ).

After long years of study, he was ordained in 1907, and soon after was assigned to the Jesuit mission to parishes throughout the British Isles. From the start he excelled as preacher and confessor and crowds flocked to him. Only after his death was the secret of his success revealed—penance. After days spent leading retreats, hearing confessions, giving spiritual direction and above all saying Holy Mass, another dimension of Father Doyle appeared. He spent hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament, praying for the sanctity of priests, and also combined frequent use of penances, immersion in cold lakes, and nocturnal, barefoot pilgrimages in reparation. This may have all been hidden from view, but, importantly, was carried out with the knowing approval of Father Doyle's spiritual director and this, with his never-ending and countless spiritual aspirations, turned his waking hours into a litany of supplication to the Merciful God.

When war broke out in 1914, Father Doyle volunteered immediately. After hours spent in the confessional, he understood his fellow man; and he also knew that, with thousands on their way to meet death, someone had to be with them, because, for many, this was going to be the definitive hour, with all lost or gained, for all eternity. In other words he was concerned for the salvation of their souls

In 1915, with the Royal Irish Fusiliers, he landed in France. From then on, he marched every mile alongside the soldiers—forgoing all privileges that his officer rank afforded him. This was his “flock,” and he was their “shepherd.” By the end, these battle-hardened soldiers would come to love their Padre. It

was no surprise, as he suffered as much as they did. Through barbed wire, and in spite of bullets, shells, and gas, he sought out his men as they lay dying, often alone in muddied battle fields, bringing Viaticum and the last rites. Father Doyle was mentioned in dispatches and recommended for the United Kingdom's highest award for gallantry, the Victoria Cross, but he was passed over, deemed to have a triple disqualification: Irish, Catholic, and Jesuit. It was to make little difference as his eyes were on an altogether greater prize, the sanctity and the salvation of those placed in his care.

As if the dangers and privations of the Front were not enough, throughout it all Father Doyle continued with his own penances. When possible, in those flooded trenches the sounds of hell reverberating all around him, with a pyx containing the Eucharist around his neck, he spent hours on his knees adoring the Prince of Peace.

His letters home to his widowed father, both touching and inspiring, reveal the strain of it all, as on he marched through the bloodstained fields, with names later synonymous with suffering: Loos<sup>1</sup>, the Somme, Passchendaele and like his comrades, he was shot at, shelled, and gassed, narrowly missing being killed on numerous occasions, his only rest in the same rat-infested trenches. Despite his brother officers' pleas, he refused to leave the Front, determined to be with his flock throughout this living hell.

On August 16, 1917, during the seemingly never-ending Passchendaele offensive, Father Doyle was in the dreaded "No-Man's Land," desperately trying to drag a wounded comrade back to safety. In so doing, he was blown to pieces by a German shell. Unlike the many to whom he had given a Christian burial, his remains were hastily interred in a makeshift communal grave, while all around the battle raged on.

It was claimed later that on the Western Front alone as many as 40,000 military personnel converted to the Catholic faith, due in no small part to the exemplary service of Catholic chaplains—men such as Father Willie Doyle.

Today, largely unknown in Ireland, and neglected by the Jesuit Order he served in, at that desolate Flanders field the mortal remains of this forgotten hero await the only real recognition necessary: *'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'* Matthew 25:40

The confident embrace of God's will, even if this means suffering and difficulties, is the hallmark of holiness. Fr Doyle shows us his complete acceptance of God's will. Every time we say the Our Father, we express our

---

<sup>1</sup> My own great uncle was killed in the Battle of Loos at age 21

willingness that God's will be done on earth. Many of us think very little about what this means. So often we really mean that we want our will to be done; so often we can automatically assume that God's will coincides nicely with our own. But it doesn't always happen this way. Some of the most difficult moments in life occur when God's will fundamentally differs from our own. In such circumstances we must learn to trust in God, and remember that He is a loving Father who directs everything to our ultimate good, even if it means suffering in the short term. This may be hard to accept, but we see the truth of this again and again in the lives of the saints. We see the serenity of saints like St Thérèse despite her illness, we see the joy of St Francis or St Teresa or St John of the Cross as they embraced radical poverty, we see the cheerfulness of martyrs as they face death.

It is certainly easy to write and to theorise about the lives of the saints when all is going well, but it is surely more difficult to embrace God's will with complete joy and abandonment when we truly face great difficulties. Yet that is what sanctity ultimately means. While we should not pretend that it is easily acquired, ultimately there is a peace to be found in abandoning ourselves into God's loving hands. The challenge is to learn how to willingly find this abandonment and peace at all times of life, not just when we have run out of options and have no choice but to accept the finality of God's will.

Fr Willie Doyle's prayer is very similar to St Ignatius of Loyola's:

*Receive, O Lord, all my liberty. Take my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. Whatsoever I have or hold, You have given me; I give it all back to You and surrender it wholly to be governed by your will. Give me only your love and your grace, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.*

Deacon Kevin

(Adapted from an article by KV Turley in catholicismpure.org)