

The Priest at Gettysburg



This week marks the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, which took place from July 1 to July 3, 1863.

You know the story by now. The decisive confrontation of the Civil War. The end of Robert E. Lee's invasion of the North. The bloody turning point in our nation's bloodiest conflict.

Over 8,000 Americans died in three days.

And of course some of the soldiers who died at Gettysburg were Catholic. One Union brigade in particular, the 69th New York Infantry, contained a disproportionate number of Catholics owing to the fact that it was made up mostly of Irish immigrants. The famed "Irish Brigade" that saw action in many of the war's greatest battles would be sent into the fight at Gettysburg on July 2. It would sustain heavy casualties, including many killed.

But thanks to a Catholic priest, Father William Corby, CSC, many of those in the Irish Brigade who would die at Gettysburg would die in the state of grace. As the unit hurried to join the fight, Fr. Corby knew he didn't have time to hear individual confessions. So the Holy Cross priest climbed a boulder and bestowed general absolution on the kneeling soldiers.

For those who were about to "give the last full measure of devotion" for their adopted homeland, the outpouring of sacramental grace through the priestly ministry of Fr. Corby no doubt gave them a welcome measure of peace before they passed into eternity.

After the Civil War, Fr. Corby went on to become the president of the University of Notre Dame. In 1910, a statue was erected on the Gettysburg battlefield commemorating his absolving of the troops.

In later years an identical statue would be erected outside Corby Hall in South Bend, and in time-honored Notre Dame tradition (see Touchdown Jesus, First Down Moses) the statue was given a football-themed nickname. One look at the statue and it's obvious: Fair Catch Corby.

"War is hell," said the Catholic Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman. I don't think anyone has ever seen fit to contradict General Sherman on that statement. But as Fr. Corby showed, wherever war brings hell, the Church will be there too, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.

