



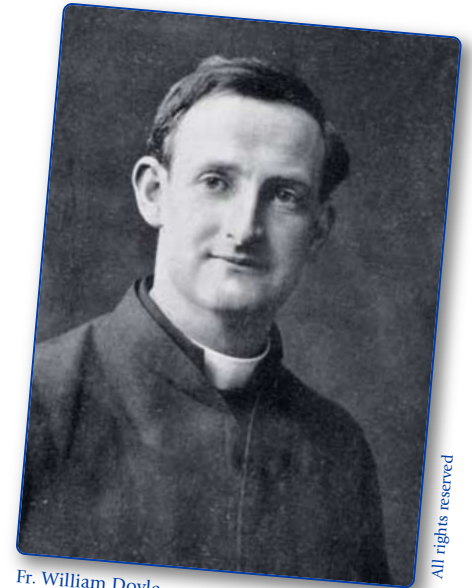
Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of May 13, 2013,
Feast of Our Lady of Fatima

Dear Friends,

IT is Sunday morning, August 12th (1917). We have just got back to camp after (for me at least) six days and seven continuous nights on the battle-field. There was no chance last night of a moment's rest, and you may imagine there was little sleep the previous nights either... Tired as I am, I cannot rest till I try to give you some account of what has happened, for I know you must be on the look-out for news of your boy, and also because my heart is bursting to tell you of God's love and protection, never so manifest as during this week. He has shielded me from almost countless dangers with more than the tender care of an earthly mother—what I have to say sounds in parts almost like a fairy tale—and if He has tried my endurance, once at least almost to breaking point, it was only to fill me with joy at the thought that I 'was deemed worthy to suffer (a little) for Him.' " The man who wrote these words was an Irish Jesuit, Father William Doyle, a military chaplain during the Great War.

William Doyle was born on March 3, 1873, in Dalkey, in County Dublin, the last of seven children. As a young boy, he gladly helped the cleaning woman by lighting the fire or polishing the shoes, and he provided the poor with necessities, while also caring for their souls. He tried to bring a drunk who was on his deathbed and refusing to see a priest, back onto the right path. Willy stayed by his side for long hours in prayer. Finally, shortly before breathing his last, the poor man awoke and asked for a priest. On March 31, 1891, the young man entered the Jesuit novitiate in Tullaberg. In the joy he experienced in giving himself to God, he leapt up the staircase four steps at a time, to the great astonishment of the Father who was accompanying him. He would later write to his parents: "Since then I have gone on from day to day and year to year, with the same cheerful spirits, making the best of difficulties and always trying to look at the bright side of things. True, from time to time, there have been trials and hard things to face... but through it all I can honestly say, I have never lost that deep interior peace and contentment which sweetens the bitter things and makes rough paths smooth." The zeal of his ardent heart is revealed in something he wrote to the Blessed Virgin during his novitiate; he asked her to prepare him for "slow martyrdom by earnest hard work and constant self-denial." In the second year of his novitiate, serious health problems jeopardized his vocation. After a long stay with his family, he was finally able to make his vows on August 15, 1893.



Fr. William Doyle

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"Agere contra"

Assigned to Clongowes Wood College in County Kildare, he spent four years working with about a hundred boys. A confrere drew this portrait of him: "Viewing his character as a whole, it seems to me that the fundamental quality in it was courage—courage of a fine and generous type. When confronted with difficulties, with danger or labour or pain, instead of hesitating or weakly compromising, he was rather braced to a new and more intense resolve to see the matter out. Give in, he would not. It was this courage, supported, no doubt, by a natural liveliness of disposition, that enabled him to preserve through life his gaiety of heart and to face his troubles as they came with a smiling countenance; it was this courage, too, that steeled him to hold fast to his purpose no matter what difficulties or obstacles might arise." Brother William wanted to become a priest, so that he might "go straight for holiness." He was ordained a priest on July 28, 1907. Shortly thereafter, he was sent to Ghent for the "Tertianship", an additional year of novitiate that Jesuits make after their ordination before they enter the apostolate. During this year, Father Doyle made the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. He was particularly struck by the "*agere contra*," the disposition of soul that Saint Ignatius described in these words: "Those who wish to give greater proof of their love, and to distinguish themselves in whatever concerns the service of the eternal King and the Lord of all, will not only offer themselves entirely for the work, but will act

against [in Latin 'agere contra'] their sensuality and carnal and worldly love, and make offerings of greater value and of more importance" offering to imitate the Lord, even in his poverty and mortifications (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 97). Father Doyle commented, "How much is comprised in the little words 'agere contra'! Therein is the real secret of sanctity, the hidden source from which the saints have drunk deep of the love of God and reached that height of glory they now enjoy." He was also struck by the docility to the Holy Spirit that Saint Ignatius recommended to the director with regard to the retreatant seeking his vocation: "The director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord" (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 15). Father Doyle wrote in a letter: "It is very dangerous to try to force all to reach perfection by the same road; such a one does not understand how manifold are the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

During the first years of his priesthood, he gave himself to various types of apostolate: retreats, preaching missions, serving as a chaplain in schools... He was tireless, demanding a great deal of himself, but full of mercy towards others. Not content to wait for people to come to church for Mass, he went into the street to invite them. In the evenings, he could be seen at the port, waiting for sailors to disembark, so that he could invite them to liturgical celebrations. One day in the street, he did not hesitate to encourage a prostitute to change her way of life. Several years later, this prostitute, imprisoned for homicide, would ask the prison authorities to send for Father Doyle, the only priest to whom she was willing to entrust herself to be reconciled with God.

Never again

Especially attentive to souls in search of a spiritual guide, Father Doyle devoted long hours to conversation or to a laborious, regular correspondence with them. This responsibility was so heavy that sometimes he was tempted to abandon it. He wrote to a correspondent: "Ask JESUS to help me with all the letters I have to write. A big temptation came to me some time back that this letter-writing was a huge waste of time and no good was done. I could not help feeling that the answer came from our blessed Lord Himself in the following extract: 'It may console you to know that your letter has been the means of saving me from at least one hundred mortal sins since. When these fierce temptations come upon me, I take it out and read it over, and somehow it helps me to fight the devil and say, "No, I will not offend God again." ' That has given me fresh courage."

From 1910 to 1915, Father Doyle was particularly involved in the ministry of giving retreats in religious houses, where his talents were greatly valued. But his care extended even more to retreats for workers. He felt that the popular missions, at the time well attended,

were not enough for these men who spent long days struggling under the burden of hard and thankless work. They too needed a few days of silence to listen to the word of God. Father Doyle, fully aware of the sometimes dramatic legitimate demands placed on workers and their situation, thought that, as necessary as the efforts made on the political and social level were, they were not enough. Man is comprised of body and soul—one cannot, without grave injustice, neglect one of the two components of human nature. It is up to civil society to enable temporal life, but only religion can provide souls the eternal remedy. Healing souls is the priest's most sacred duty. Father Doyle's retreatants were rarely "pillars of the church"—sometimes they were driven only by curiosity. Yet they were often touched by grace, and left the three days of retreat full of gratitude for so many benefits.

Having the promotion of vocations at heart, Father Doyle published two brochures (*Vocations and Shall I Be a Priest?*), which were very widely disseminated. Devoid of any literary pretensions, they were intended solely to help young people who, hindered by a lack of instruction, had not succeeded at discerning their call to religious life or the priesthood. Many of them did not even know what this call was, and many others assumed that such a path was not for them. "It is quite true to say," wrote Father Doyle, "that a vocation comes from above, but God's designs can be hindered or helped by His creatures, and He has ever made use of secondary agents in their execution. The formation of character and the direction of the steps of the young towards the Sanctuary is largely in the hands of parents and teachers; how many a happy priest and nun daily thank their Maker for the gift of a good mother, who first sowed the seeds of a vocation in their childish heart." Father Doyle also raised funds to help young men from poor families pay for their seminary studies; his zeal even extended to far-away missions, in whose work he participated through prayer and fundraising.

Read!

When he visited the grotto in Lourdes in November 1912, Father Doyle was struck by the Virgin's words to Saint Bernadette: "Penance, penance, penance." During a May 1917 pilgrimage to the house in Amettes in which Saint Benedict Joseph Labre was born, he heard a voice tell him: "Read what is written on the wall." He read, "God calls me to an austere life; I must prepare myself to follow the ways of God." A sudden insight made him understand how fruitful each act of sacrifice is. Nevertheless, rather than showing off his austerity, he made a point of submitting all his desires for penance to his confessor. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses the essence of penance:

"Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed.

At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of His grace. ... The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others. ... Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one's cross each day and following JESUS is the surest way of penance" (CCC, 1431, 1434, 1435).

In the sun

Prayer itself, due to the state of our fallen nature, is often a penance. Father Doyle wrote, "Don't forget that prayer is the hardest corporal penance... It is an unnatural thing, that is, a supernatural thing, and hence must be hard always; for prayer takes us out of our natural element." Yet "[i]t is always possible to pray," as the *Catechism* declares (CCC, 2743). But how should we pray? "As regards prayer, you should try to follow the attraction of the Holy Spirit, for all souls are not led by the same path. It would not be well to spend all the time in vocal prayer, there should be some meditation, thought or contemplation. Try 'basking in the sun of God's love', that is, quietly kneeling before the Tabernacle, as you would sit enjoying the warm sunshine, not trying to do anything, except love Him, but realizing that, during all the time you are at His feet, more especially when dry and cold, grace is dropping down upon your soul and you are growing fast in holiness." Father Doyle also wrote, "I think He would like you to pay more attention to little things, looking on nothing as small, if connected with His service and worship. Also try to remember that nothing is too small to offer to Him—that is, the tiniest act of self-conquest is of immense value in His eyes, and even lifting one's eyes as an act of love brings great grace." Father Doyle also attached great importance to ejaculatory prayers—short aspirations to God made in the course of the day, which are a powerful way to keep the feeling of the presence of God alive, and to grow in His love.

In November 1914, Father Doyle gladly volunteered to serve as military chaplain, and one year later, was assigned to the 8th Royal Irish Fusiliers, 16th Division. When he had volunteered, he had felt that God was offering him the grace of martyrdom, and he desired that this grace be united with an act of charity towards his neighbor. Confronted with the horrors of the battlefield, his consolation was to be able to offer his companions spiritual aid. He was always ready to take risks when it was a question of administering the sacraments to men in danger, even if it seemed reckless. "People cannot

make up their minds whether I am a hero or a fool—I vote for the second. But then they cannot understand what the salvation of even one soul means to a priest." Nothing could stop him when it came to bringing the sacraments to a soul about to appear before God.

The *Catechism* teaches us, "Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in His second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. ... Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation" (CCC, 1021-1022).

Celebrating on their knees

Father Doyle's fearless and indefatigable attitude earned the affection of his men—as a result, nearly all of them were willing to receive the sacraments. Father Doyle would sometimes have to celebrate the Holy Mass in a shelter so small that neither he nor the men could kneel, or so low that he had to celebrate on his knees. One day, having dug a trench to protect against the bombs raining down, he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice for the dead and dying fallen around him. Providence rewarded him for his fearless generosity by protecting him on numerous occasions. On the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, August 15, 1916, he was in a village with some soldiers. A burst of German gunfire began, and everyone ran for the church before they realized that the church was in fact the enemy's target. Shells fell all around them, but not one touched the church. Father Doyle noted in his journal: "and August 15th, 1916 went down on my list as another day of special grace and favour at MARY's hands."

In a letter written around Christmas 1916, Father Doyle recounted the exceptional graces he had received on the front. In spite of the constant danger and inhuman conditions imposed on the soldiers by trench warfare, his spiritual life only continued to intensify: "God has given me one grace at least since I came here. I feel absolutely in His hands and joyous in the thought that no matter what may happen it will be all for His greater glory. Though Christmas Day was miserably wet, the Divine Baby filled my heart with joy at the thought that my life now was a little bit at least more like to His. I am learning here better every day that there is no life of happiness like one full of 'hard things' borne for love of God." Christmas also brought presents, which Father Doyle shared with the soldiers. Moreover, on December 25th, white flags were raised on both sides of the front—not a single gunshot rang out on the birthday of the Prince of Peace. In January 1917, Father Doyle was decorated with the military cross.

Father Doyle spent the feast of Easter 1917 in Pas-de-Calais for a time of rest and military exercises. The chaplain took advantage of this time to offer his men the opportunity to fulfill their Easter duty. Outside of these rare occasions of calm, there was often not enough time to hear all the men in confession. Therefore, before each new attack the chaplain gave a general absolution, a moving moment for all: "I do not think there can be a more touching or soul inspiring sight than to see a whole regiment go down upon their knees, to hear that wave of prayer go up to Heaven, as hundreds of voices repeat the Act of Contrition in unison, 'My God, I am heartily sorry that I have ever offended You'. There is an earnestness and a depth of feeling in their voices, which tells of real sorrow, even if one did not see the tears gather in the eyes of more than lone brave man. And then the deep, reverent silence as the priest raises his hand over the bowed heads and pronounces the words of forgiveness. ... I love to picture the foul garment of sin falling from every man there at the words of absolution, and to watch the look of peace and happiness on the men's faces."

The normal means of receiving the Lord's forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance is individual and complete confession, made to a priest and followed by absolution. Through the priest, Christ Himself acts and speaks personally to each sinner to heal him. Nevertheless, the Church has always allowed a general absolution to be given in cases of grave necessity, if individual confession is not possible for everyone. Such absolution is understandable in emergency situations such as on a battlefield. In our day, the application of this principle is often unduly extended. Yet the teaching of the Church is clear: "In case of grave necessity recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation with general confession and general absolution... Grave necessity can ...

As the 100th anniversary of the First World War draws near, there is renewed interest in this great figure of a priest who died on the field of honor. May his example help all of us to conduct ourselves as *good soldiers of CHRIST JESUS* (2 Tm 2:3), through faithfulness to our daily duty and our availability to serve the Kingdom of God.

exist when, given the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors to hear individual confessions properly in a reasonable time, so that the penitents through no fault of their own would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time. In this case, for the absolution to be valid the faithful must have the intention of individually confessing their sins in the time required [that is to say, 'as soon as possible and when the opportunity arises'—cf. *Code of Canon Law*, nos. 962-963]. The diocesan bishop is the judge of whether or not the conditions required for general absolution exist. A large gathering of the faithful on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity" (CCC, 1483).

Exposed to fire

During the fourth battle of Ypres (July 31 to August 16, 1917), Father Doyle devoted himself to one and all, as he usually did. On Thursday, August 16th, during the charge on the village of Frezenberg, he was informed that an officer lay wounded in an area exposed to enemy fire. Accompanied by two soldiers, he slipped into the area, administered last rites to the wounded man, and then dragged him behind Allied lines. At that very moment, a shell fell in the midst of the little group, killing all of them. Father Doyle's body, recovered the same day, was buried where he died.

All of the soldiers, Protestant and Catholic alike, testified to their admiration for Father Doyle. A Protestant from Belfast wrote, "Fr. Doyle was a true Christian in every sense of the word... He never chose the easy way. He always shared the risks of the men... Many a time have I seen him walk beside a stretcher trying to console a wounded man with bullets flying around him and shells bursting every few yards."

Dom Antoine Haice
O.S.B.

Father William Doyle S.J., by Alfred O'Rahilly, Tradibooks 2009.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.