

'They remembered him a saint': The heroic life of Irish priest Father Willie Doyle

As the news is once more dominated by war and misery in Eastern Europe, one abiding motif from the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the presence of priests and religious comforting their people.

It was ever thus, and a new association was founded earlier in April to work for the canonization of Irish Jesuit priest Father Willie Doyle, who bravely ministered to priests during World War I..

Willie Doyle was born in County Dublin in 1873 and entered the Society of Jesus in 1891. As the Great War raged across Europe, Father Doyle volunteered himself as a chaplain and served the 16th Irish Division of the British Army.

Nationalist leaders in Ireland, then still part of the British Empire, encouraged young Catholics to join the war effort, seeing it as a fight against might for the rights of small nations. They also hoped that their loyalty would be rewarded and the British authorities would grant the Irish a modicum of home rule following the war. Even though conscription was not compulsory in Ireland, more than 200,000 men volunteered to fight in continental Europe. It is estimated that as many as a quarter of those soldiers lost their lives.

Father Doyle was among them, making the ultimate sacrifice, as he was killed during the Battle of Passchendaele while rescuing two wounded soldiers.

'They remember him a saint'

A contemporary war correspondent wrote the following about Father Doyle: "A certain Roman Catholic chaplain ... lies in a soldier's grave in that sinister plain beyond Ypres. He went forward and back over the battlefield with bullets whining about him, seeking out the dying and kneeling in the mud beside them to give them absolution, walking with death with a smile on his face, watched by his men with reverence and a kind of awe until a shell burst near him and he was killed ... they remember him as a saint – they speak his name with tears."

Now, the hope is that his saintly deeds will be formally recognized by the Church. Known as the Father Willie Doyle Association, the new lay movement – known in canon law as a private association of the faithful – will work to highlight Father Doyle's holiness of life, including his many letters and correspondence.

Other accounts of his ministry paint a similar picture of a chaplain devoted to his men. One Protestant officer noted in his diary: "Father Doyle never rests. Night and day he is with us. He finds a dying or dead man, does all, comes back smiling, makes a little cross and goes out to bury him and then begins all over again."

A strong devotion

Father Doyle was also a popular writer and published pamphlets on priesthood and vocations that sold in the hundreds of thousands in the years after his death. He helped innumerable individuals to pursue their religious vocation and established fundraising schemes to help poorer boys afford seminary training.

The president of the new association, Patrick Kenny, insisted that the launch is a "response to the wish of many people,

over many decades, who have wanted to see Father Willie Doyle recognized as a saint in the Catholic Church.”

“Willie Doyle volunteered as a military chaplain in the First World War and served in this role from late 1915 until his death in August 1917,” Kenny said.

Father Doyle was awarded the military cross for his bravery at the Battle of the Somme, which saw the British and French fight the Germans between July and November 1916.

More than 3 million men fought in the battle, and 1 million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the deadliest battles in human history.

According to Kenny, Father Doyle “accompanied his men through the horrors of war. His heroism, and the holiness of his life, led to an outpouring of devotion to him in the years after his death.”

The association revealed that by the early 1930s, more than 50,000 letters testifying to devotion to Father Doyle were received. Crucially, over 6,000 of these claimed favors and healings attributed to the intercession of Father Doyle – a key requirement for the Church to recognize someone as a saint.

Kenny has read through much of Father Doyle’s correspondence and is the editor of “To Raise the Fallen: A Selection of the War Letters, Prayers and Spiritual Writings of Father Willie Doyle SJ.”

Kenny describes Father Doyle as a “very compelling figure.”

“His attractive personality, and his love for God and for others, shines through all of his writings, especially the diaries and letters he wrote during the war,” he said.

A wish 'to become a saint'

The association is also keen to highlight the fact that it was two Protestant soldiers that Father Doyle lost his life saving at a time when tension between Irish Catholics and Protestants was intense. Kenny described Father Doyle as “a tremendously relevant figure for the Church today, especially in Ireland. By offering his life to save wounded Anglican soldiers, he became an ecumenical martyr of charity and is an icon of reconciliation and unity in the midst of religious and political division.”

“He explicitly offered his life to God in reparation for the sins of priests; this offering has a greater resonance with us now than it did at the time of his death,” Kenny said referring to the clerical abuse scandals.

There is also the fact that Father Doyle overcame great adversity as a younger religious. As a young novice, he was caught up in a fire at the novitiate building, which scarred him greatly and led him to suffer a mental breakdown. “Yet,” as Kenny points out, “20 years later, he was admired by all who met him as a rock of courage in the trenches of World War I.”

“His example is one of hope for many,” Kenny said.

The initiative has the blessing of Bishop Tom Deenihan of Meath, Ireland, where Father Doyle first entered the Society of Jesus. It has also won the approval of the provincial of the Irish Jesuits, Father Leonard Moloney, SJ.

Father Doyle was ordained a priest on July 28, 1907. On that day, he made a diary entry that might well be described as summing up his entire attitude to his life and vocation: “My loving Jesus, on this the morning of my ordination to the priesthood, I wish to place in your Sacred Heart, in gratitude for all that you have done for me, the resolution from this

day forward to go straight for holiness.”

He continued: “My earnest wish and firm resolve is to strive with might and main to become a saint,” he wrote.

Little did he know, as he wrote those words, that he had only 10 years of life on earth left. But Kenny is in little doubt that Father Doyle now enjoys the glory of eternal life in heaven, and he is keen for everyone else to know as well.

“We want to reach out to as many people as possible, everywhere in the world, and tell them about this remarkable priest’s life, and we need as much spiritual and material help as we can get,” Kenny said.

“Only one native Irish person has been canonized a saint in the last 500 years; we want the heroic Father Willie Doyle to be among the new saints of Ireland.”

Michael Kelly writes from Ireland.