

Father James Sheeran

Both the Union and Confederate Armies had chaplains assigned to their regiments to offer spiritual consolation to their men during the American Civil War. However, many of them did not measure up to their calling. Incidents of theft and other misdeeds by chaplains led one brigadier general to declare that chaplains were "the scourge of the army." But most of the clergymen who served the soldiers who fought the Civil War were honest and courageous. Historian Bell Irwin Wiley says of the chaplains, "*The faithful chaplain shared the hardships of his flock. During periods of active campaigning, he slept on the ground under the open sky. His fare was the scant ration issued to private soldiers. Some ministers had horses but there were many who marched shoulder to shoulder with veteran infantrymen. When fighting began, the chaplain usually took a position near the ambulances or the field hospital in order to have access to the wounded.*" Some even abandoned their non-combatant roles and took up arms and joined in the conflict. Some were cited for gallantry under fire and some were killed in action. Two of the more colorful padres of the American Civil War were James Sheeran, a Confederate chaplain, and William Corby, a Union chaplain. This article is about Father Sheeran.

Father Sheeran was born in Temple Mehill, County Longford, in 1818. At the age of twelve, he emigrated to Canada and eventually settled in Monroe, Michigan where he taught in a boy's school opened by the Redemptorist Fathers. In 1842 he married and had a son and daughter, both of whom entered the religious life. Sheeran, after his wife died, joined the Redemptorist Congregation 1855 and was ordained a priest in 1858. Assigned to a Redemptorist Church in New Orleans, he became an ardent Southerner in his thoughts and affections. When his Father Provincial asked for volunteers to act as chaplains in the Confederate Army, Father Sheeran leaped at the opportunity, and on September 2, 1861 he was assigned to the 14th Louisiana of the Army of Northern Virginia. Father Sheeran hated the Yankee invaders as hotly as any Confederate could and referred to Union troops as "Lincoln's bandits." When he was imprisoned by the Union Army, he tried to convert any soldiers he met, not to his faith, but to the "justice and rightness of the Confederate cause," as he wrote in his journal. Not only did Father Sheeran administer his duties as a chaplain to both Confederate and Union soldiers, but he also waged an unending war on such camp vices as profanity, drunkenness, and gambling. He was absolutely fearless, as illustrated on the occasion when he rounded up flocks of straggling Confederate soldiers, formed them into a firing line, and kept them in action until a combat officer could be found to take over.

Father Sheeran kept two handwritten volumes in which he recorded his campaigns, war experiences, and observations on the Civil War from August 1862 until his return to his parish in New Orleans in 1865. This journal, entitled Confederate Chaplain, is invaluable to historians as Sheeran's words give a picture of military life that is, in Bruce Catton's words, "*vivid, fascinating, and often humorous. Father Sheeran's journal shares one thing with most of the enduring personal experience accounts of the Civil War, that is, the real enemy appears to be war itself, and not just the opposing army.*" Catton commends Sheeran, for in his journal Sheeran "*denounces the stupidity of incompetent troop commanders, the greed of supply officers who live, comfortably while the soldiers go hungry and unclad, the impersonal brutality of the military machine, and the profiteering of the civilians who make a good thing out of war while the fighting men bleed and die.*"

In 1867, Father Sheeran requested release from his vows as a Redemptorist so he could devote himself to the life of a Community that had the Rule of Saint Alphonsus. Then he did what was unexpected: he became a priest of the Newark, New Jersey diocese, and in October 1871, he was appointed pastor of the Church of the Assumption, Morristown, New Jersey. Father had served the people of the South in peace and war; he would now serve the people above the Mason-Dixon Line. Father Joseph Durkin, the editor of Sheeran's journal, says, "*He had been a Southern partisan; but he knew that partisanship stops at the boundaries of souls.*" Within a year of his appointment, Father Sheeran had built a new church and, not long afterward, a parochial school. The promotion of Catholic education had always been one of Father's chief passions. In this the last stage of his career, Father Sheeran dedicated himself to the religious and secular instruction of the "precious little ones," as he called the children. Father Sheeran died of apoplexy on April 3, 1881.

Father Durkin assesses Father Sheeran in these words: "*He may have been, at times, unduly stern and uncompromising. He may have lacked some of the gentler virtues. But, in a world which so readily sells responsibility for ease, and integrity for profit, we may well prefer Father Sheeran's iron to a more sophisticated irony.*"

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