

American Catholic Motivations and Contributions to World War One

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“And now, before we rush into battle, I pray to God if I be mortally struck, mutilation will leave me a hand to bless myself, and lips untouched so as again to say a prayer before the end comes.”

-The Prayer of a Catholic Soldier¹

Though often brushed aside in most historical dialogues, religion plays a vital role in war, and American Catholicism is no exception. The United States entered the Great War on April 6, 1917, mobilizing nearly 5 million people before the war ended.² As one historian has noted, “After Congress declared war on Germany, the US archbishops informed President Woodrow Wilson: ‘We are all true Americans, ready as our age, our ability, and our conditions will permit, to do whatsoever is in us to do, for the preservation, the progress, and the triumph of our beloved country.’”³ The war would also be the first time that Catholics provided support on such a large, national scale. The archbishops’ promise would be fulfilled as the American Catholic contribution to the war effort helped to ensure victory and recovery. Though the Vatican was strongly opposed to war, the church’s members used their faith to justify entering and supporting it on and off the battlefield. Many Catholics were motivated to fight for equal status in American society and used their faith as the moral justification to join the conflict. Through their faith, American Catholics were able to significantly contribute to making an end to the Great War a reality, creating cohesion with international and domestic allies through shared

¹ “The Prayer of a Catholic Soldier,” *Catholic Columbian*, May 11, 1917, <https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=CC19170511-01.2.18&e=--1917---1925--en-20--1--txt-txIN-war----->.

² Leonard P. Ayres, *The War with Germany: A Statistical Summary* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 13.

³ “Background: American Catholics and World War One, American Catholic Women’s Participation in 20th Century World Wars,” *American Catholic History Classroom*, <https://cuomeka.wrlc.org/exhibits/show/american-catholic-participatio/catholics-wwi>. (accessed February 23, 2023).

values, performing acts of valor and courage, and ministering to all who needed it.

Catholics in a Protestant-dominated America were excluded from social circles and political power and were often the subject of persecution. Even in institutions like West Point, issues of religious discrimination were prominent. Catholic cadets were forced to walk miles off post to get to church and that was only after 1877, when John Schofield relaxed chapel standards to accommodate denominational differences. The Catholics at West Point covered 40% of the cost to have a chapel built in Highland Falls just so they could practice their faith. Later, 500 people (1/3 of the population at West Point at the time) petitioned to Superintendent Oswald Ernst to have a Catholic chapel on post, which was approved, if it was not paid for by the institution or the government, nor would the chaplain have a salary (both of which, their Protestant counterparts had).⁴ West Point, a collection of the country's future military leaders, reflected the persecutions against Catholics that persisted throughout the nation. That persecution ramped up especially for the German-American population as World War One drew on and created a stronger desire for acceptance.

By 1916, Catholic persecution had taken multiple forms and had even intensified against the German-American Catholic demographic. Several times, the loyalties of German-Americans were questioned to the extent that Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels said, "I am getting a little tired and very much disgusted at this un-American and indecent effort to attribute disloyalty to men in the navy who bear German names."⁵ Not only were these doubts so frequent that they had become irritating to the secretary of war of the United States, but also they revealed both the discrimination against the German population in America during the war,

⁴ Arthur T. Coumbe and William C. Taylor, *Should American Soldiers be Religious: Political History of Chaplains Job at West Point* (Edwin Mellen Press: 2019) 41-100.

⁵ "American Soldiers," *Catholic Columbian*, June 8, 1917, <https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=CC19170608-01.2.13&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-world+war+one----1917--->. Though Secretary Daniels was talking specifically about the members of the U.S. Navy, the entire German-American population was under suspicion. More than 1,000,000 German American men were eligible for conscription and their labor would be extremely beneficial to the war effort. These immigrants had adopted their new country not only as their new home but also as a part of their identities, their loyalty was to America and its allies.

and an underlying religious tension between the Protestant American and the Catholic German. Though Germany is and was predominantly Protestant, “the majority of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island starting in 1892 were Catholic or Jewish,” rather unpopular faiths in Protestant America.⁶ As immigrants from a country America was at war with, and a faith that most were raised to hate, Catholic German-Americans were faced with suspicion and discrimination that they had to overcome.

On August 23, 1916, thousands of Catholics met for the German Roman Catholic Central Verein, a conference for many German-Catholics to come together and discuss their population’s ability to integrate and move forward in American society. In its closing session, Colonel Patrick Henry Callahan from Louisville, Kentucky said that the 5/6ths of the non-Catholic population in America “has been very tolerant of us and permitted us to build up our institutions.” He was immediately countered by Joseph T. Brennan from Boston who said: “With all due respect to this prominent gentleman, what he says is silly. That talk of tolerance is soft soap.” He went on to show the desire for something more than just tolerance, but legitimate acceptance: “And why tolerance? We are Americans with the right to be here and need no tolerance and accept none.”⁷ After nearly 150 years of persecution within the United States, many Catholics who had immigrated to the United States had earned their citizenship and believed that they deserved to be recognized as truly American.

Despite the persecution they faced, German-American Catholics allowed their values to transcend their faith boundaries. Assimilation became a paramount priority, especially as America began to shut down schools, language practice, and even the musical expression of German culture.⁸ A wide display of patriotism rose among the American Catholic

⁶ “Ethnic Minorities at War (USA),” *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, October 8, 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/ethnic_minorities_at_war_usa (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁷ “Tolerance Tribute Arouses Catholic,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 1916. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1916/08/24/104688061.html?pageNumber=4>.

⁸ Katja Wüstenbecker, “German-Americans during World War I,” *Immigrant Entrepreneurship*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entries/german-americans-during-world-war-i/> (accessed April 8, 2024).

population as an effort to prove themselves loyal. Patriotic organizations were created, American flags were flown over German shops with names changed to sound more “American, purely democratic, and patriotic.”⁹ Just as Brennan said that they have “the right to be here,” they also believed that being American meant they were loyal to the nation. In December 1917, the *Catholic Columbian* explained what war meant to the American Catholic:

The United States is at war with Germany. That means that every person, whether native or foreign born, who claims the protection of the American flag, is at war with Germany. War is more than fighting. War is service. War is sacrifice. War is the elimination of self. War is country first and individual last. This war will directly or indirectly affect every person living in the United States. This war will not be won unless every person does his or her part, gives his or her service, makes his or her sacrifice, places self behind the need of the nation. The flag means freedom for us all, but the flag, in time of war, does not mean freedom of action for the individual. The flag means restraint, co-operation, obedience, recognition of authority, preservation of law and order. Most of all it means economy. It means loyalty in little daily things as well as loyalty to the great principles of our Government. It means the conduct of our lives so that the nation may be hourly strengthened. It means the giving of our best effort for the universal good. It means careful living. It means stopping of waste. It means the uttermost use of our resources, our abilities and our strength for the great cause. It means guarding our talk and avoiding useless discussion. It means that the United States is first, paramount, supreme, and that the want or pleasure or action of each individual must be subordinated to that fact.¹⁰

1 million out of 17 million Catholics in the U.S. served in the armed forces. Roughly 6% of the entire Catholic population did their part, serving

⁹ Katja Wüstenbecker, “German-Americans during World War I.”

¹⁰ “What This War Means,” *Catholic Columbian*, December 28, 1917, <https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=CC19171228-01.2.41&srpos=6&e=-1917---1925--en-20--1--txt-txIN-war-----> (accessed April 12, 2024).

as soldiers, medics, volunteers, war stamp sellers, and more.¹¹ They would participate in all of these roles, and would contribute significantly in the National Guard. The *Catholic Columbian* posted: “Of [the projected forces to be in France at the end of 1917], approximately 140,000 will be members of the National Guard. There will be nine regiments of engineers, a force of marines, 6,000 aviators, a destroyer flotilla, 10,000 doctors, and thousands of nurses, etc. General John J. Pershing will command.”¹² Pershing, a devout Christian himself, called for America “to rest the brunt of the terrible burdens to come...the more she [France] is weakened in her power to fight...it is the Unites States upon which the burden falls to meet all the deficiencies caused through this drain.”¹³

Since Britain and France had been locked in devastating combat with Germany since 1914, the primary deficiency for America to remedy was manpower. American industrial mobilization was incomplete, and soldiers were forced to wear hodge-podge mixes of European and American uniform pieces and weapons. The most valuable resource that America provided was manpower. After some training with French and British forces, American units could fill gaps in the lines, and fight in major offensives including the Aisne-Marne, Oisne-Marne, and Meuse-Argonne campaigns, helping to break through the German defenses and end the war.¹⁴

The First World War, starting merely as a small regional conflict, quickly expanded to a global war. The integration of the values of cooperation, justice, shared responsibility, and self-determinism of America and its allies not only enabled it to eventually win the war operationally, but also complemented the principles of those who practiced the Catholic faith in war. It also created a belief that the war was inherently defensive, as

¹¹ “Background: American Catholics and World War One · American Catholic Women’s Participation in 20th Century World Wars · American Catholic History Classroom,” accessed February 23, 2023, <https://cuomeka.wrlc.org/exhibits/show/american-catholic-participatio/catholics-wwi>.

¹² “American Soldiers” *Catholic Columbian*, June 8, 1917.

¹³ “American Soldiers” *Catholic Columbian*, June 8, 1917.

¹⁴ For a general overview, see David R. Woodward, *The American Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

France was invaded through the neutral country of Belgium in 1914 and under direct threat of subjugation of the resurgent Prussian authoritarian lifestyle. Paired with the submarine attack on the *Lusitania*, and thus the attack on American entrepreneurship, the German attacks provided enough justification for Catholics to join in the defense of national sovereignty, even changing their formerly pro-German or pro-neutrality views.

Catholic just war doctrine requires that moral legitimacy for war is dependent on the factors that the damages inflicted on a nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain, that all other means of ending the conflict are impractical or ineffective, that there is a serious chance of success, and that the use of arms will not produce evils worse than the those sought to be eliminated.¹⁵ The Entente was at a breaking point, the damages done on all sides of the conflict would last for decades. Even now, over 100 years later, France is still littered with millions of rounds of unexploded ordinance, barbed wire, bunkers, and the scars of trench warfare.¹⁶ The war was a grim deadlock that left both sides a reasonable chance of success, and so long as soldiers were disciplined and morally guided by their chaplains, no evil worse than the war itself would arise from entering the conflict. Despite constant pleas by the Church to end the war, many were using its principles as justification for continuing to fight it.¹⁷

Furthermore, “Catholic” means universal, and the Catholic faith is meant to be just that. With France being a Catholic country, the shared understanding of the mass would have helped foster cohesion between the

¹⁵ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 554-559.

¹⁶ On a spring break trip (March 4-10, 2023) to France with the United States Military Academy History Department, a group of cadets including myself were able to walk the ground of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign. found several issued wine ration bottles, the remnants of a fortified bunker position, an unexploded 105mm Howitzer shell, copious amounts of barbed wire, and more, within only a few hours of being there.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XV, “Meeting with the Children of Rome, Homily of His Holiness Benedict XV, July 30, 1916,” https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/it/homilies/documents/hf_ben-xv_hom_19160730_bambini-roma.html (accessed April 9, 2024).

French and Catholic-American soldiers. A shared faith would make a more cohesive team. Though they were learning quickly from their French and British partners, they had one lesson that could only truly be taught through experience. War was ugly. The offensives that the Americans took part in were some of the bloodiest that Americans had ever faced. The conditions of trench warfare were horrendous, and the losses of life were staggering. The shocking number of American casualties quickly forced the members of the AEF to come to terms with the harsh reality of death and many would turn to their faith for the support to press on.

Christian, and specifically Catholic beliefs provided comfort in how soldiers confronted death. Alan Seeger, a Calvinist, expressed that death was “neither tragic nor to be feared,” and that it “could be both an object of love and a way to new life” in his poetry.¹⁸ “Those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever with Christ,” and see God “face to face.”¹⁹ Many Americans, fighting for the values and principles of their faith simultaneously displayed in the ideologies of the countries they fought for would not only live and fight for their faith, but in death were honored for it as well. Unit markers, names of beloved friends, and the constant symbols of faith filled the walls of former quarries, converted into underground caverns for American soldiers to stay when off the front lines. These symbols were used to support and reassure soldiers as a means of passing the time while shells boomed overhead as well as to honor those lost as grave markers that some soldiers would never receive.

¹⁸ Jonathan H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 81.

¹⁹ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference), 267.

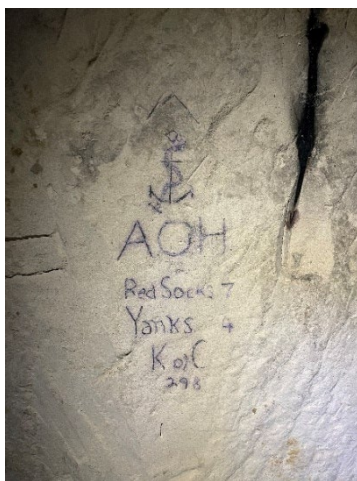
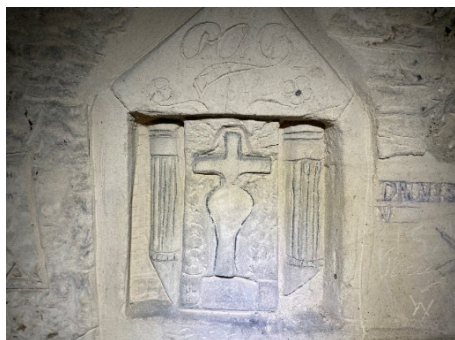
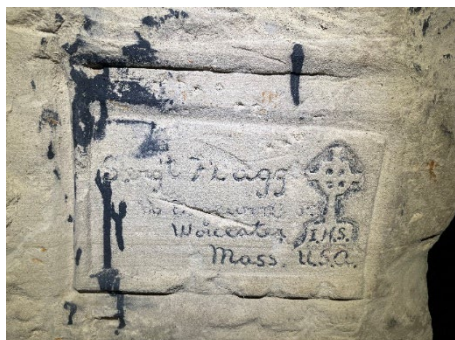


Figure 1: Collective images taken by the author on a Spring Break AIAD to World War I battlefields (March 4-10, 2023). There are dozens more photos of this very same nature, but these highlight the Catholic determination and influence most strongly, as well as the integrated nature of Catholicism with the ordinary American cultural experience, like that of keeping track of baseball games back home.

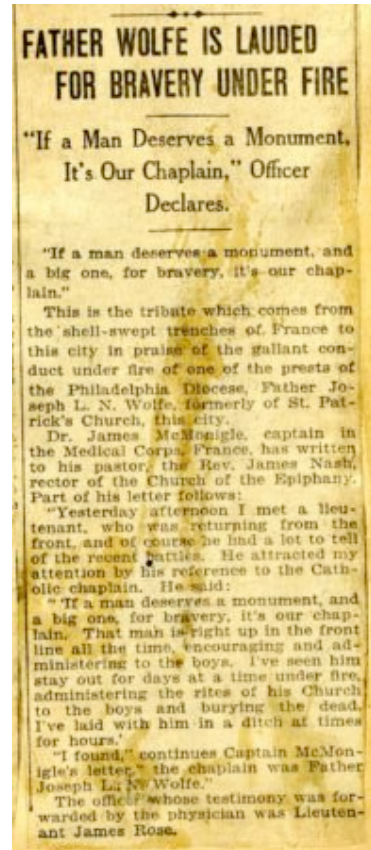
Inside these caverns, many Catholics would find ways to pass the time through carving art that best represented themselves and what was important to them. Carvings of altars for mass, saints, Knights of Columbus icons, and even the scores of baseball games back home have been preserved for over 100 years. What was an artistic pastime was now a window into the faith and spirituality of the American soldiers who served in the war. The amount of time and dedication spent on the artwork carved into these walls varied, but its presence and sheer quantity alone signified the value of the Catholic faith to a significant number of American soldiers. Though the evidence presented here comes from a National Guard division from New England, there was a wider Catholic influence on the American war effort from across the country, in the forms of funding, services, and the chaplaincy.

Paramount to the mission of spiritual support was the army chaplain. There were only a handful of Catholic chaplains in 1917 when America first joined the Great War, as they were not even allowed in the army until the Mexican-American War in 1846. By the end of the war however, that number had grown to over 1,000.²⁰ The efforts of these chaplains provided soldiers with the necessary spiritual guidance and direction through every stage of their time as soldiers, from basic training to the caverns and to the graves themselves. One chaplain, Father Joseph L. N. Wolfe followed his men and was often found saying mass in particularly dangerous places. Wolfe's exploits as a chaplain would gain him the respect and admiration of the 28th Infantry Division. Captain James McMonigle, a soldier in the 28th said, "I've seen him stay out for days at a time under fire, administering the rites of his Church to the boys and burying the dead. I've laid with him in a ditch at times for hours. If a man deserves a monument, and a big one, for

²⁰ Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. "World War One Army Chaplains," November 5, 2018. <https://chrc-phila.org/world-war-one-army-chaplains/>.

bravery, it is our chaplain.”²¹ His actions “right up in the front line . . . encouraging and administering to the boys” would merit him a citation star from General Pershing himself.²² Catholic chaplains like Father Wolfe administered last rites, confessions, and services for Catholics all throughout the war, evidenced by the personal testimony of soldiers that bore witness to it, and images taken of them doing so. Not only did these Catholic chaplains perform their duties with excellence and extreme displays of courage and valor, but they ministered freely to all the soldiers, as evidenced by Captain McMonigle’s use of “his Church,” demonstrating a growing admiration and respect for the Catholic American through the shared hardship of war and the excellence displayed in those fighting and supporting it.

Figure 2: A newspaper headline featuring a Catholic chaplain, Father Joseph Wolfe. “World War One Army Chaplains,” *Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia*, November 5, 2018. <https://chrc-phila.org/world-war-one-army-chaplains/> (accessed April 12, 2024).



²¹ “A Phila. Chaplain’s Heroic WWI Acts,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 1, 2017, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/20170101_A_Phil_a_chaplain_s_heroic_WWIActs.html.

²² “A Phila. Chaplain’s Heroic WWI Acts.”



Figure 3: Chaplain Joseph Wolfe saying mass near a World War I battlefield. “World War One Army Chaplains,” *Catholic Historical Research Center of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia*, November 5, 2018. <https://chrc-philadelphia.org/world-war-one-army-chaplains/> (accessed April 12, 2024).



Figure 4: American and French Chaplains at the review of the 101st Infantry, Chassemy, France, March 6, 1918. Albert E. George, Edwin H. Cooper, *Pictorial History of the Twenty-Sixth Division, United States Army, with Official Government Pictures Made by United States Signal Corps Unit Under Command of Captain Edwin H. Cooper* (The Ball Publishing Company: 1920). <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/428856>.



Chaplain Rollins administering baptism to Americans near front. Colonel Logan in foreground with book. February, 1918.

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Figure 5: Chaplain Rollins administering baptism to Americans near the front. Albert E. George and Edwin H. Cooper, *Pictorial History of the Twenty-Sixth Division, United States Army*.



Chaplain O'Connor of 101st Infantry Saying Mass at Neufchateau, France, before the Men started for the Trenches. Captain William Mahoney Assisting, February, 1918.

Figure 6: Chaplain O'Connor of 101st Infantry saying Mass at Neufchateau, France, before the men started for the Trenches. Albert E. George and Edwin H. Cooper, *Pictorial History of the Twenty-Sixth Division, United States Army*.

Finally, the Knights of Columbus (KoC), an organization founded first as a Catholic insurance organization to assist families who lost their income to tragic work accidents or war, became a national support organization, bringing events, supplies, and anything required of either the soldiers or the citizens of France. Raising money, organizing the sale of war bonds, and even paying for the reconstruction of prominent areas after the end of the war were all vital efforts done by the Knights between 1917-1919. They offered rest and recreational activities to service members with the motto, “Everybody Welcome, Everything Free.”²³ Everybody actually meant *everybody* in this case, including African American soldiers also stationed in France and men of other faiths. Supreme Knight Flaherty even wrote to President Wilson that “regardless of creed,” centers for recreational and spiritual comfort would be provided.²⁴ Nearly 400,000 men would join the Knights between 1917-1923 and in 1917 the KoC independent fund raised nearly \$30 million to finance its efforts to support soldiers abroad.²⁵ American soldiers would be able to recover, relax, and practice their faith with their brothers in faith and arms there, further bringing American forces together, and breaking down the religious differences between them.

Acting to justify both going to war and comforting those enduring war, the Catholic faith provided inspiration and hope to many Catholic soldiers. The evidence of unit history books including images of Catholic

²³ “1910-1918 Everybody Welcome,” *Knights of Columbus*, <https://www.kofc.org/en/who-we-are/our-history/everybody-welcome.html> (accessed April 9, 2023).

²⁴ Albert E. George, Edwin H. Cooper, *Pictorial History of the Twenty-Sixth Division, United States Army, with Official Government Pictures Made by United States Signal Corps Unit Under Command of Captain Edwin H. Cooper* (The Ball Publishing Company: 1920). <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/428856>.

²⁵ That would be the equivalent of \$649,920,438 in 2023. The contributions were not limited to the war, but also in the financial support of those at home. Catholic Women were also being recruited to work hard in their stead and to buy and sell war bonds. See “Background: American Catholics and World War One, American Catholic Women’s Participation in 20th Century World Wars, American Catholic History Classroom,” Accessed February 23, 2023. <https://cuomeka.wrlc.org/exhibits/show/american-catholic-participatio/catholics-wwi> for more details.

mass and Knights of Columbus groups sheds light on the value and contribution of American-Catholic soldiers to the war. Furthermore, the unifying nature of the faith allowed for the expedient integration of the AEF and brought about an end to the war faster than most had planned for. It also helped to erode biases against Catholics, unifying Americans under the country's values rather than dividing them over faith. With so many Catholics serving in the conflict, their contributions ought not to be understated. Religion is deeply rooted in the motivation and conduct of people, and to study major conflicts without considering its influence does that history a disservice, as it removes a vital perspective on who is fighting and why they decided to do so. Simply in fighting to be recognized as truly American, many Catholics embraced their nation and its values, and through their many contributions, they were able to greatly influence the conduct and outcome of the war.