

NO ORDINARY SHEPHERDS: CATHOLIC CHAPLAINS TO THE BRITISH FORCES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR by James Hagerty, *Gracewing*, Leominster, 2020, pp. xxxvi + 458, £25.00, hbk

A while before I became a Catholic I came to know of Fr Hugh Thwaites, a Jesuit priest and a great champion of the Rosary. Like many of his generation, the experience of war had a great effect on his faith and his priesthood. Listening to an interview with him, we can grasp a little of the experience of the faith of the soldier in the Second World War. Fr Hugh recounts that when he finally decided to become a Catholic, he went to the local presbytery and was greeted by a priest wearing a snuff stained cassock and in the ensuing meeting received no instruction in the Catholic faith, but rather a long lecture on the wickedness of Queen Elizabeth I. On board a troop ship, Fr Hugh was finally received into the Church by the Catholic chaplain, although his instruction seems to have amounted to simply saying 'yes' as the Catholic chaplain read out the *Catechism*. It was in Japanese captivity that Fr Hugh, living with Catholic soldiers, was taught the Catholic faith, and in fact from his account it seems that the Catholic chaplain's batman nurtured his faith and vocation.

Of course Fr Hugh's experience was not universal; Fr Philip Dayer, a priest of the Archdiocese of Westminster, was commissioned in July 1939, and finding himself stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk for four days at the mercy of dive-bombers and German artillery, spent his time saying Mass, hearing confessions, and evangelising the soldiers. Recalling the experience he wrote that he baptised more men during those four days on the beach than in the rest of his priestly ministry.

James Hagerty is honest about this rather uneven quality in the pastoral care of soldiers in the Second World War. Much of the book is a straightforward narrative account of the establishment of the Bishop of the Forces within the ecclesial landscape of England and Wales, and the gradual professionalisation of military chaplaincy over the course of the Second World War. The consecration of a Bishop of the Armed Forces brought an initial period of dispute between Cardinal Bourne, who as Archbishop of Westminster had traditionally had control of military chaplaincy, and Bishop Keatinge whose remit seemed almost as undefined as his episcopal power. Disputes raged not only about what territory was covered and the ever present disputes over funding, but also more fundamental questions like Keatinge's power to give faculties to priests who were either commissioned or extraordinary chaplains.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the most pressing problem was a shortage of chaplains, a perennial problem for the rest of the war. Many soldiers went for months without seeing a priest, many died without the consolation of the sacraments, and many were buried by Anglican or Free Church chaplains. Hagerty's account not only opens up the difficult

relations between the Bishop of the Forces and the diocese, but also the low regard in which some priests from religious orders were held. Bishop Dey, Keatinge's successor, wrote to the Archbishop of Birmingham that '... with the exception of the S.J.s, I wouldn't touch one of them if I could get seculars because they are always a nuisance and sometimes a menace' (p.46). Still the book offers accounts of the bravery of priests drawn from the religious orders, including the Jesuits, a good number of monks of the English Benedictine Congregation, and friars from the Order of Preachers. Some mention is made of our own Fr Thomas Gilby who was chaplain on HMS Renown and saw action when Renown faced the German battleships Scharnhorst and Hipper in Norway.

Little personal detail is given of the chaplains themselves, partly because of the sheer number of chaplains which the book follows, but there are ample references to the memoirs written by the chaplains if a fuller detail of their service is wanted. The difficulty with this, however, is that very little detail is given of the way that chaplains dealt with the trauma of their service or understood its spiritual impact. Some occasional detail is given of a shell-shocked chaplain sent back home, and some accounts give an idea of the crises which military chaplaincy brought about, the most arresting of which is Fr Denys Rutledge of Fort Augustus who after his service spends some time as a hermit before departing for India where he set up an ashram, ending his days on a remote hillside in Chile. This is obviously a more exotic example, but the more common experience was most likely that of Fr George Foster, whose experience of imprisonment in Germany left him dealing with nightmares some forty years after his release.

Of particular interest are the brief mentions of the emerging ecumenical movement which saw Catholics begin to live and work with their Protestant colleagues more readily and naturally. Fr Dan Cummings, an Irish Redemptorist, was struck by his experience as a chaplain which was his first experience of dealing with non-Catholics and on his return to his native Belfast at the end of his active service, began a ministry of outreach to non-Catholics. A fuller exploration of the trauma and the fruit of these priests' chaplaincy experience would perhaps have offered a useful account of the sociological trends and theological ideas in the years after the Second World War and in the build up to the Second Vatican Council. It would be especially useful to get some sense of the impact of the chaplains' ministry, some idea of the number of baptisms and receptions, as well as some idea of the number of confessions heard so as to give some kind of at least quantitative understanding of the impact these chaplains had.

No single volume could manage to do complete justice to the ministry of these priests, and there are still others whose works are not recorded in this volume whose ministry could probably give another several volumes. But the brief portraits of the chaplains give enough of the sense of the extraordinary ministry of these priests, and although this is not a work of

theology, or of church history, it gives enough of a sense of the experience of the Second World War and of chaplaincy to understand the deep and lasting impact which these events have left on the life of the Church.

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