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CATHOLICS, MILITARY SERVICE, AND VIOLENCE IN GREAT BRITAIN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Michael Snape

From the American Revolution to the First World War, military service (and its intrinsically violent corollaries) had a politically redemptive quality for Britain's historically suspect Catholic minority.¹ Catholic military service on behalf of the British Crown (notably in the French Wars of 1792-1815) was a significant driver of the progressive emancipation of British Catholics before and after the landmark Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829. By this time, rural Catholic Ireland, once feared as the ultimate incubator of 'popish' sedition, was widely recognised as the prime recruiting ground for the British Army and, by the end of the nineteenth century, even though the Army's recruiting base was now heavily Anglicised and urbanised, Catholic chaplaincy had a secure position in its institutional life. However, this key facet of the reconciliation of Catholicism and the British state was jeopardised during the First World War— a conflict which represented the most intense concentration of lethal violence in British history.

This essay will show that, when confronted with the voracious manpower needs of the British Army, the political turbulence of Catholic Ireland, the foot-dragging of Catholics elsewhere in the Empire, and the unhelpful peace-making of Pope Benedict XV, proponents of 'Imperial British Catholicism'² sought to counter a nascent wave of popular anti-Catholicism by proclaiming and celebrating the martial commitment and prowess of their fellow British Catholics (who, like their Protestant peers, were experiencing the largest military mobilisation in their history).³ However, it will also illustrate that Catholic attitudes and reactions towards wartime violence were heavily nuanced, despite this rhetoric. By the time they reached the battlefields, Catholic soldiers showed little sign of a neo-crusading consciousness, and Catholic chaplains were apparently anxious to uphold the restraining principles of the just war. Ironically, in the British Army at least, wartime violence and suffering stimulated devotion to non-military intercessors, rather than to more obvious warrior-saints.

¹ Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland from 1801 to 1922.

² Anon, *Catholics of the British Empire and the War* (London: Burns and Oates, 1917), 3.

³ Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 96.

Furthermore, there was a larger, more conspicuous, spiritual dividend to the war's concomitant violence. If soldiers' faith and Catholic theology were fundamentally unshaken by the shock of industrialised warfare, the robust and consoling quality of Catholic sacramental practice and of sundry manifestations of 'material religion' was also demonstrated, even in the eyes of a great many Protestants. Consequently, and in the face of serious internal cleavages and external challenges, this realisation gave rise to claims of a much larger moral and spiritual victory among British Catholics; for, through the colossal violence and unrelenting carnage of modern war, the potency and appeal of the Faith seemed dramatically vindicated.⁴

Catholics, conscription, and wartime cross-currents

When war broke out with Germany on 4 August 1914, Catholics represented almost 75 per cent of Ireland's population of 4.5 million, but just 6 per cent of the 42 million people who lived in mainland Britain.⁵ The latter were chiefly concentrated in the industrial areas of western Scotland, northern England, London, and the Midlands, which had long been centres of Irish immigration. If Catholic numbers were modest in overall terms, their political integration was also incomplete. In August 1914, Great Britain had no diplomatic representative at the Vatican (though this was soon to change) and there were no Catholics in the Liberal government that led Britain into war.⁶ However, and unlike Britain's other religious minorities (notably Protestant Nonconformists and Jews), for a century and a half British Catholics had been accustomed to demonstrating their loyalty, and pressing their claims upon the state, by playing upon Catholic participation in Britain's foreign wars.⁷

There was, moreover, a strong conviction (at least outside Ireland) that Catholics should show their loyalty to a polity which, since 1829, had been highly accommodating of the Catholic Church and its interests. This, of course, compared

⁴ In terms of continental Catholicism, these conclusions correspond with those of Annette Becker and Patrick Houlihan. See Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930* (Oxford: Berg, 1998) and Patrick Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015).

⁵ Anon, *Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1920), xxviii; Anon, *The Catholic Directory* (London: Burns and Oates, 1914), 625.

⁶ Keith Robbins, 'Britain, British Christians, The Holy See, and the First World War' in Lorenzo Botrugno (ed.), *'Inutile Strage'. I Cattolici e la Santa Sede nella Prima Guerra Mondiale* (Vatican: LEV, 2016), 143-57, pp. 145-47.

⁷ R.K. Donovan, 'The Military Origins of the Roman Catholic Relief Programme of 1778', *Historical Journal*, 28(1), 1985, 79-102.

favourably to the situation in Germany and Italy (where tensions between the Catholic Church and their post-Unification governments were stoked by the *Kulturkampf* and by the emergence of the Pope as ‘the prisoner in the Vatican’), and in France after the acrimonious separation of church and state in 1905. Thus, according to a 1917 propaganda pamphlet entitled *Catholics of the British Empire and the War*, a collective and instinctive sense of gratitude and reciprocity meant that British Catholics had responded promptly and enthusiastically to the call to arms. Furthermore, and in a nod to *Rerum Novarum* (1891), it also claimed this showed just how much the laity had internalised the principles of Catholic social teaching, especially their obligation to defend their country.⁸

Very much an expression of the ‘Imperial British Catholicism’ embodied by Cardinal Francis Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, this important pamphlet reflected both the ardour and insecurity of British Catholicism at the height of the First World War, when the problems, divisions and allegations facing Catholics across the Empire had become all too apparent. Indeed, and although it insisted that Catholic patriotism was instinctive, for critics of the Catholic Church — a motley but threatening array that included hyper-patriots and ultra-Protestants— there was ample evidence to show that Catholic support for the war was less than wholehearted, whether instanced in the neutrality of the Pope, the politics of Nationalist Ireland, or the hostility of Irish, French-Canadian and Australian Catholics towards conscription.

Undoubtedly, these suspicions strained national and imperial unity, prompting the Anglo-Catholic Arnold Pinchard, for example, to publish *The Pope and the Conscience of Christendom* (1915), which accused Benedict of ‘putting politics above prophecy’.⁹ Another 1915 pamphlet, entitled *The Power Behind the Scenes in the Great War*, even claimed that the war was ‘plotted by the Roman Catholic church to weaken the Protestant nations’.¹⁰ Inevitably, the war emboldened organisations such as the Protestant Truth Society. Founded in 1889 by the anti-Romanist rabble-rouser and Protestant pseudo-martyr John Kensit, by 1918 this had produced a catalogue of cheap ‘War Time Publications’, including *exposés* such as *Rome and the War*, *Rome*

⁸ *Catholics of the British Empire*, 4; Leo XIII, ‘Rerum Novarum’, https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html, accessed 23 November 2018.

⁹ Marion J. Bradshaw, *The War and Religion* (New York: Association Press, 1919), 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and Germany, and *Revolution and War* (which targeted ‘the secret work of Jesuits in Britain’).¹¹ Faced in these dangerous times by a polemical onslaught from various quarters, Catholic apologists once again fell back on the example of Catholic soldiers in order to challenge renewed allegations of Catholic disloyalty and duplicity.

Catholic Ireland was, of course, the main source of their woes. Due to depopulation during and after the Great Famine (1845-49), the attractions of emigration, and anti-enlistment campaigning by radical Irish Nationalists, recruitment for the British Army had been in decline for decades before the war.¹² However, wartime factors also curbed the flow of enlistments. In such a highly clericalized society, it was unhelpful that the Irish clergy, whose authority ran well beyond spiritual matters,¹³ were so divided on the war. Although the Archbishop of Tuam and Bishop of Cloyne called for volunteers as late as their Lenten pastorals of 1916,¹⁴ such support was not representative. The Archbishop of Dublin covertly undermined recruitment efforts in his archdiocese, while the Bishop of Limerick, actuated by Benedict’s quest for peace and, increasingly, by Republican politics, became a vocal critic of the war.¹⁵ The parochial clergy were likewise divided, consensus precluded by respect for the Pope, hostility to secular France, sympathy for Catholic Austria-Hungary, historic anti-British sentiment, and by a pragmatic sensitivity to the mood of their flocks.¹⁶ In addition to this lack of co-operation, voluntary recruitment was further hindered by the (profitable) demands of the war on the agricultural sector, a problem common to rural areas across the British Isles, including Protestant Ulster.¹⁷ Finally, there was the wholesale radicalisation of Nationalist politics, especially after the 1916 Easter Rising and the execution of its leaders, all but one of whom received the last rites of the Church.¹⁸ Eventually, the growing disaffection of Catholic Ireland crystallised into fierce opposition to the extension of conscription to Ireland. In 1918 the Irish

¹¹ Baron Porcelli, *The Pope and the War* (London: Protestant Truth Society, 1918), n.p.

¹² Edward M. Spiers, ‘Army Organisation and Society in the Nineteenth Century’ in Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 337.

¹³ Thomas P. Dooley, *Irishmen or English Soldiers?* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 45; Jérôme aan de Wiel, ‘Catholic Ireland during the First World War’ in Botrugno, *‘Inutile Strage’*, 159-86, pp. 164-66.

¹⁴ *Catholics of the British Empire*, 68.

¹⁵ Patrick Callan, ‘Ambivalence towards the Saxon Shilling: The Attitudes of the Catholic Church in Ireland towards Enlistment during the First World War’, *Archivium Hibernicum*, 41, 1986, 99-111. Aan de Wiel, ‘Catholic Ireland’, 164.

¹⁶ David W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland 1898-1921* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), 312-13.

¹⁷ Beckett et al, *British Army*, 112.

¹⁸ Keith Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church, 1900-2000* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 140.

hierarchy instructed that Masses be said for the purpose of averting this ‘blood tax’,¹⁹ and priests lent conspicuous support to the anti-conscription cause in print and at public demonstrations.²⁰

The Dominions of Canada and Australia (40 per cent and 23 per cent Catholic respectively)²¹ also evinced a perceptibly ‘Catholic’ reluctance to embrace conscription and, by implication, a willingness to jeopardise the war effort. In Canada, the problem revolved around the historic cleavage between Canadians and *Canadiens*. While Anglophone Catholics of Scottish, English and even Irish extraction volunteered in disproportionate numbers, Francophone reluctance resulted in a clear under-representation of Catholics in the Canadian Expeditionary Force on the Western Front.²² After their lukewarm response to voluntary recruitment efforts,²³ the passage of conscription in 1917 was bitterly opposed by Francophones, who resorted to draft evasion and to anti-recruitment rioting in Quebec City.²⁴ In Australia, which staved off conscription until the end of the war, it soon became clear that Catholics of Irish heritage were much less likely to support compulsory service than were their Protestant neighbours.²⁵ Daniel Mannix, the maverick, Irish-born Archbishop of Melbourne, even emerged as a leading figure in the anti-conscription campaign.²⁶

Conscription also presented problems in mainland Britain, although conscientious objection was, significantly, not one of them. The Guild of the Pope’s Peace, formed after the introduction of conscription in 1916,²⁷ had very little traction in a highly clericalized community shaped by just war traditions, *Rerum Novarum*, and its own

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁰ Miller, *Church, State and Nation*, 406; P. Coffey, ‘The Conscription Menace in Ireland and some Issues Raised by it’, *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Fifth Series, 11, June 1918, 486-87.

²¹ Gordon L. Heath, ‘Introduction’ in Gordon L. Heath (ed.), *Canadian Churches and the First World War* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2014), 1; Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War* (Sydney and Canberra: Catholic Theological Faculty and Australian War Memorial, 1980), 6.

²² Mark G. McGowan, ‘“We Are All Involved in the Same Issue”: Canada’s English-Speaking Catholics and the Great War’ in Heath, *Canadian Churches*, 34-74, pp. 45-46.

²³ Simon Jolivet, ‘French-Speaking Catholics in Quebec and the First World War’ in Heath, *Canadian Churches*, 75-101, pp. 81-87.

²⁴ Robert Holland, ‘The British Empire and the Great War, 1914-1918’ in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume IV. The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 114-37, p. 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-28.

²⁶ McKernan, *Australian*, 120-23; James Griffin, ‘Mannix, Daniel (1864-1863)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mannix-daniel-7478>, accessed 4 October 2018.

²⁷ Youssef Taouk, ‘The Guild of the Pope’s Peace: A British Peace Movement in the First World War’, *Recusant History*, 29(2), 2008, 254.

military and political heritage.²⁸ As the Catholic monthly magazine *The Harvest* sniffed in August 1916, the ‘peace-monger’ was very much out of their element in the Catholic Church: ‘To the Catholic, the soldier’s profession must ever call for respect and affection. [...] What would the blessed Maid of Orleans have thought of the conscientious objectors?’²⁹ In fact, a much greater problem was raised by the legal situation of the Catholic clergy. Although ministers of religion remained (controversially) exempt from conscription throughout the war, unmarried laymen and childless widowers were the first to be taken by the Military Service Act of January 1916, a fact that posed awkward questions for the celibate Catholic clergy in Great Britain— especially as their French equivalents enjoyed no such exemption. In order to avoid the awkward publicity that would have surrounded a legislative concession, Cardinal Bourne negotiated a gentleman’s agreement with the War Office whereby deacons and subdeacons were exempted from the draft.³⁰

Doubts over Catholic loyalty and commitment were further intensified by the role of the papacy. However admired by posterity, the neutrality of Pope Benedict and his efforts to secure a negotiated peace proved an embarrassing liability to patriotic British Catholics, who normally revelled in being ‘more Roman than the Romans’.³¹ If the Guild of the Pope’s Peace was shunned by the Catholic hierarchy and the Catholic press,³² Benedict’s high profile attempts to broker peace were less easily ignored. In August 1917, after fruitless attempts by Bourne to deflect the Pope from his efforts,³³ and just as British and Empire forces commenced another major offensive in Flanders, his Peace Note triggered a fresh spasm of anti-papal agitation in Great Britain. That autumn, this reached a crescendo with the rout of the Italian Army at Caporetto, a disaster that seemed to betray the Vatican’s efforts to undermine Allied resolve. Richard Bagot, a Briton resident in Tuscany and a longstanding observer of Italy’s war effort, proclaimed in the columns of *The Times*, *The Globe* and *The Morning Post*, that the catastrophe was due to the machinations of ‘the Black

²⁸ *Catholics of the British Empire*, 6; Katherine Finlay, ‘British Catholic Identity during the First World War: The Challenge of Universality and Particularity’ (University of Oxford DPhil thesis, 2004), 106.

²⁹ *The Harvest*, August 1916, 143.

³⁰ Judith Champ, *A Seminary Goes to War: St. Mary’s College, Oscott and the First World War* (Sutton Coldfield: Oscott Publications, 2015), 58.

³¹ Robbins, ‘Britain’, 144.

³² Taouk, ‘Guild’, 255; E.I. Watkin, *Roman Catholicism in England from the Reformation to 1950* (London: OUP, 1958), 221.

³³ John Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV (1914-1922) and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 123.

Party in Italy’, and that ‘[t]he foolish Italian Romish officers and men were prevailed upon to believe that it was wrong to fight against the Pope’s best friends [i.e. the Austrians]; that the British were only making a catspaw of the Italians; and that it was their duty to desist from fighting.’³⁴ This verdict was endorsed by other Britons on the ground, ranging from a Salvation Army commissioner to a war correspondent from the *Daily Telegraph*.³⁵ Other influential figures also took up the anti-papal cudgels. In his 1917 poem *The Holy War*, Rudyard Kipling denounced ‘[t]he Pope [and] the swithering Neutrals’ in terms crafted to echo the apocalyptic, anti-papal rhetoric of the Protestant hero John Bunyan. Another high-profile critic was Horatio Bottomley, voice and proprietor of the popular, muck-raking weekly *John Bull*, who had previously issued his own version of a plenary indulgence for those who died in the war.³⁶

Catholics in khaki

Despite many strident attempts to defend Pope Benedict, the most compelling evidence of Catholic loyalty and commitment to the British war effort was, as ever, the Catholic contribution to the nation’s armed forces, and to the Army in particular. Given their spiritual and moral authority, the role of the Catholic clergy in producing this response was unmistakable, especially before the introduction of conscription. In contrast to the Irish hierarchy, the position of the English and Scottish hierarchies was unambiguous. With the cause of the British Empire legitimised by the precepts of just war tradition (*ius ad bellum* – which required a just cause, legitimate authority, and right intention), and moved by outrage at German treatment of Catholic Belgium, the English, Welsh and Scottish bishops were united in their support for the war. However, not all shared the profound personal anguish felt by Bishop Charles Casartelli of Salford, who said of the fate of his *alma mater*, the University of Louvain, ‘[i]t is too painful to have to write on the subject: to me it is like describing the murder of my mother.’³⁷

Significantly, and consistent with the just war tradition elaborated by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, episcopal pronouncements tended to dwell on the justice of

³⁴ Porcelli, *The Pope*, 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 153.

³⁷ *Harvest*, October 1914, 246.

the cause, rather than indulge in fevered, anti-German rhetoric. In a pastoral letter read on 9 August 1914 Bourne described war as ‘one of the greatest material evils that the world can see’, but recognised (with reference to Mathew 24:6) that ‘our Divine Master has warned us that it is an evil for which we must be prepared’.³⁸ On the first Sunday of the war, Bourne also preached to the Irish Guards in Westminster Cathedral, assuring them of the justice of their cause and ‘that the hearts and prayers of their fellow countrymen, and especially of those who share their religious faith, would go with them’.³⁹ Early in 1915, the Jesuit periodical *The Month* acknowledged the unanimity of the bishops, while praising their nuanced understanding of the war as reflected in their pastoral letters of Advent 1914:

The Bishops are agreed on the question of historical fact— that, in the words of the Archbishop of Liverpool, ‘the British Empire entered upon this war with a clear conscience and clean hands’. [...] The vicious extremes of militarism and Quakerism are condemned and, no less clearly, the practice, common among the thoughtless, of dwelling too exclusively upon the good of which war can be made the occasion. The duty of prayer, of self-reformation, of charity towards the foe, of a purified public life — these are amongst the valuable moral lessons which these eloquent charges inculcate.⁴⁰

In the febrile atmosphere of war (and especially given the need to raise a vast new volunteer army) these convictions ineluctably fed into clerical recruiting efforts. The Bishop of Northampton, Frederick William Keating, urged resistance to German aggression as a religious as well as patriotic imperative, on a par with duty to family. Citing St. Paul, he who shirked this responsibility ‘hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel’.⁴¹ For his part, Father Bernard Vaughan, a celebrated Jesuit preacher, seized the opportunity to reprise the role of Peter the Hermit, Adhemar of le Puy and St. Bernard of Clairvaux by touring England drumming up Catholic recruits for a new crusade,⁴² a crusade which, he envisaged, ‘might bring about universal peace among the nations’.⁴³ The theme of Catholic zeal for King and Country, especially in response to Lord Kitchener’s voluntary recruitment campaign of 1914-15, was very

³⁸ *The Tablet*, 8 August 1914, 204.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 August 1914, 246.

⁴⁰ *The Month*, January 1915, 79.

⁴¹ 1 Timothy 5:8. *Catholic Federationist*, January 1915, 1.

⁴² *The Tablet*, 12 September 1914, 377.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29 August 1914, 312.

much to the fore in *Catholics of the British Empire and the War*, which dwelt happily on the image of new crusaders flocking to the colours:

The tale of Catholic effort for the war is endless. The pastorals of Bishops have emulated the crusade-preachings of St. Bernard: hundreds of priests have hurried to take up chaplaincies with the troops [and] the laity have shed their blood with a heroism that can more than hold its own in an army that is all heroes.⁴⁴

In fairness to such claims, Catholics in mainland Britain do seem to have volunteered in disproportionate numbers. Speaking in Glasgow in April 1915, the veteran Nationalist MP John Dillon claimed that ‘of all classes of the community, there was none who contributed so many recruits in the new army as the Irish in Great Britain’.⁴⁵ Some idea of the scale involved can be gleaned from statistics published by individual dioceses — figures which, even allowing for some exaggeration, serve as a strong indication of grassroots Catholic commitment to the war, especially when compared to broader national patterns. Of nearly 5 million wartime recruits for the British Army, around half volunteered prior to January 1916, and official statistics indicate that 24 per cent of all English males had been recruited into the British Army by 11 November 1918, whether as volunteers or conscripts.⁴⁶ However, figures from the diocese of Salford alone indicate that at least 23 per cent of its Catholic male population had *already volunteered by the end of 1915*.⁴⁷

In addition to the summons of their clergy and the dictates of moderate Irish Nationalist politics, this level of volunteering also reflected the long-term success of Catholic elementary schools which, in addition to promoting conservative social values, had for generations aimed to promote a sense of British (and, more specifically, English) identity among the children of Irish immigrants.⁴⁸ Key to this process was the powerful cult of the English Martyrs, inspired by the hundreds of post-Reformation English Catholics executed between the 1530s and the 1680s.

⁴⁴ *Catholics of the British Empire*, 8.

⁴⁵ Elaine McFarland, ‘“How the Irish Paid Their Debt”: Irish Catholics in Scotland and Voluntary Enlistment’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 82(2), 2003, 261-84, p. 261.

⁴⁶ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), 363.

⁴⁷ *Almanac of the Diocese of Salford* (Salford: Diocese of Salford, 1916), 78-80.

Illustrated by the beatification of 54 martyrs in 1886, contemporary Catholics were acutely aware of the heritage and martyrology of English Catholicism, so stridently evoked in Frederick William Faber's rousing hymn *Faith of Our Fathers* (1849). This ethno-religious awareness was given a sharper edge on the Western Front. As one Catholic periodical announced to its readers in December 1918: 'Of the many towns held in captivity in France, the Catholics of England have looked forward to the deliverance, from the hands of the Huns, of Douai, associated as it has been with us since 1568, when Cardinal Allen founded the English College there.'⁴⁹ Significantly, this was even picked up by the secular press, with the *Manchester Guardian*, despite its Liberal and Nonconformist pedigree, noting in 1918 that '[t]he capture of Douai by the British [...] would be a fitting commemoration of the 350th anniversary this year of the famous English College [...] which during the next two centuries became the rallying-place of exiled Roman Catholics from England.'⁵⁰

Although it seems highly likely that the cult of the English Martyrs (replete with its overtones of sacrifice, suffering, patriotism and heroism) helped reinforce Catholic identity and resilience in the face of the violence of the First World War, from a very different perspective typical British Catholics already represented ideal military material. With Victorian military wisdom having cast the (loyal) Catholic Irish as a martial people (along with Scottish Highlanders and the various 'martial races' of British India), there was a firm identification of Catholic piety with courage, belligerence and fighting prowess. This was prominent in the poetry and prose of Rudyard Kipling, especially in his conjuration of the 'Mavericks' (an Irish regiment in India), and was also reflected in the formation of the Irish Guards in 1900, an elite regiment that stood as a 'paradigm of the old order — Ascendancy Anglo-Irish officers with a smattering of loyal "Castle Catholics" leading decent, honest Catholic farm boys'.⁵¹

Besides inheriting this cultural mantle, the overwhelmingly urban and industrial working-class character of the Catholic community in mainland Britain also ensured a body of manpower attuned to the workplace discipline of the factory, shipyard and

⁴⁸ Mary J. Hickman, *Religion, Class and Identity: The State, the Catholic Church and the Education of the Irish in Britain* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995), 111-20, 173-81.

⁴⁹ *Harvest*, December 1918, 183.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

coalmine and very much inured to physical hardship.⁵² The moral and spiritual authority of the Catholic priest, which was not normally matched by his Anglican, Nonconformist or Presbyterian equivalent, further reinforced their sense of duty and discipline. Published in 1917, and thus addressed to a partly conscript readership, Father Philippe Casgrain's widely distributed *Catholic Soldiers' and Sailors' Prayer-Book* was emphatic about the military obligations of the Catholic serviceman. Here, and with the endorsement of Cardinal Bourne, Casgrain, a French-Canadian chaplain,⁵³ insisted:

Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us, in St. Matthew's Gospel, to **'render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God, the things that are God's'** (St. Matt. xxii. 21). [...] Now, with regard to your duties to your country, your officers will teach you what these are. Listen very attentively to their instructions and obey their orders instantly and respectfully. Unquestioning obedience is a virtue essential to a soldier. [...] Do your duty bravely; **'fear God, honour the King'** (1 St. Peter ii. 17).⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, these factors conspired to produce an impressive roster of Catholic war heroes, one that served as a clear rebuttal of charges of temerity and disloyalty. *Catholics of the British Empire and the War* profiled eighteen 'Catholic Officers and Men of Great Britain and Ireland' who had won the Victoria Cross, the British Empire's highest award for gallantry, prior to September 1916.⁵⁵ Representing 8 per cent of all Victoria Crosses awarded up to that point, this was an impressive tally, especially when Catholics comprised only 3 per cent of the Empire's population.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the Catholic press trumpeted Catholic heroes throughout the war. When, for example, one of Britain's highest-scoring air aces, Major James McCudden V.C., was killed in March 1918 after destroying more than fifty German aircraft and receiving 'all the decorations within the power of the authorities to grant', *The Tablet* was careful to underline the fact that McCudden had been a soldier's son and a Catholic.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 67.

⁵² John Bourne, 'The British Working Man in Arms' in Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1996), 336-52, pp. 348-49.

⁵³ 'Chaplain Philippe Henri Duperron Casgrain', Canadian Great War Project, <http://canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=109162>, accessed 29 November 2018.

⁵⁴ P.H.D. Casgrain, *The Catholic Soldiers' and Sailors' Prayer-Book* (London: Washbourne, 1917), 5-6. Bold in the original.

⁵⁵ *Catholics of the British Empire*, 32-38.

⁵⁶ *Catholic Directory*, 633.

⁵⁷ *The Tablet*, 27 July 1918, 23.

Faith at the front

Despite the salience of crusading as a theme in Catholic recruitment propaganda, a neo-crusading spirit does not appear to have animated Catholic soldiers. Amidst widely aired Catholic concerns about the Holy Places (in ‘defence of which so many of our ancestors died’), and over the plight of Christians in the Ottoman Empire,⁵⁸ the notion of crusading against Teutonic barbarians or infidel Turks appears to have had very little purchase among serving soldiers. In part, this was because crusading discourse was a rhetorical cliché in British society, being widely rehearsed during the war by Anglican clergymen such as the Bishop of London, as well as by David Lloyd George, Britain’s first Nonconformist Prime Minister.⁵⁹ Despite the military traditions of British Catholicism, and Catholic susceptibility to the militaristic traits and trappings of late Victorian Christianity, the musical and devotional repertoire of British Catholicism lacked the militarism of contemporary British Protestantism, to say nothing of the militancy of various strains of continental Catholicism. Whereas Charles Wesley’s *Soldiers of Christ, arise*, J.S.B. Monsell’s *Fight the Good Fight*, and Sabine Baring Gould’s *Onward Christian Soldiers* were staples of Protestant hymnody, in November 1914 *The Harvest* acknowledged with some embarrassment that Catholics had no equivalent: ‘It is remarkable that among our many hymns we had not one expressly for the time of war, for the welfare of the soldiers and sailors who are in daily risk of their lives, or of petition for peace.’⁶⁰ And nothing changed in this respect, for as late as 1917 the seven essential hymns included in Casgrain’s *Catholic Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Prayer-Book* comprised such familiar (and distinctly non-military) titles as *Faith of Our Fathers*, Aloys Schlör’s *To Jesus’ Heart, all Burning* and John Lingard’s dolorous *Hail, Queen of Heav’n*.⁶¹

Despite the mushroom growth of the cult of the Sacred Heart in British and Irish Catholicism from the mid-nineteenth century,⁶² even this did not have the militant, ultra-Catholic political overtones it had, for example, in France or Spain. In May 1915, the 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers carried an Irish tricolour adorned with the

⁵⁸ *Harvest*, July 1915, 173-75.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Siberry, ‘Images of the Crusades in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’ in Jonathan Riley-Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 365-85, pp. 381-82.

⁶⁰ *Harvest*, November 1914, 263.

⁶¹ Casgrain, *Catholic Soldiers*, 57-63.

⁶² Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford: OUP 1995), 151-53; John Brennan, ‘Irish Catholic Chaplains in the First World War’ (University of Birmingham: MPhil thesis, 2011), 19.

Sacred Heart into their attack on Aubers Ridge,⁶³ but this was a rare appropriation of French Catholic and Royalist symbolism. Significantly, in a showpiece sermon preached before thousands of Irish soldiers gathered at the cathedral at St. Omer in July 1917, Father William Doyle, a Jesuit chaplain and prime morale-booster of the largely Catholic 16th (Irish) Division, chose neither the crusades nor any militant devotion to inspire his listeners, but opted instead for the exploits of France's eighteenth-century Irish Brigade.⁶⁴ Certainly, for British Catholic soldiers, the appeal of the cult of the Sacred Heart was essentially apolitical, offering an emotive source of personal consolation and protection.⁶⁵

In another reflection of the national variations inherent in devotional preferences, the cult of Joan of Arc, burnt by the English in 1431 and beatified in 1909, had (perhaps understandably) little traction among British Catholic soldiers — though she proved popular among the Americans.⁶⁶ In fact, unlike in France, where the cult of the Maid of Orleans surged during the war,⁶⁷ no warrior saint had a comparable appeal in the British Army, though in 1917 the militancy of certain Marian devotions was highlighted when the 16th Division raised £250 for a statue to Our Lady of Victories.⁶⁸ With St. George connected with England (where his cult was debased, shared with Protestants, and eclipsed by that of the English Martyrs), only St. Michael offered a sufficiently exalted and inclusive example, a fact reflected in the creation of the Guild of St. Michael for Airmen. Formed soon after the creation of the Royal Air Force in 1918, the Guild demonstrated the adaptability of Catholic piety to new circumstances, and to new forms of technology. As advertised, its purpose was:

To unite all our Catholic airmen under the special protection of St. Michael the Archangel. St. Michael is the natural patron for flying men. He got his wings before the creation of the world. He fought as Leader in the great battle against the demon-dragon and its evil followers, bringing down innumerable enemies out of control and in flames (Apoc. xii). And at the end of time he will be the recognised Champion against Anti-Christ (Dan. xii). Under the protection of this eminent flyer and air-fighter our Catholic airmen are asked to place themselves by joining this Guild.⁶⁹

⁶³ Brennan, 'Irish Catholic', 52.

⁶⁴ Alfred O'Rahilly, *Father William Doyle, S.J.* (London: Longmans, 1932), 522.

⁶⁵ Brennan, 'Irish Catholic', 79-80, 91-92, 103-4.

⁶⁶ Becker, *War and Faith*, 82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 69, 79-82.

⁶⁸ O'Rahilly, *Father William Doyle*, 488-89.

⁶⁹ *Harvest*, August 1918, 140.

If the piety of Britain's Catholic soldiers was not significantly infused by a wartime militancy, the influence of the just war tradition also served to temper their belligerency. As a concept rooted in the virtue of charity, it was essential that due restraint and proportionality was observed (*ius in bello*). In this respect, an unusually bloodthirsty address given by the loquacious Bernard Vaughan at London's Mansion House in January 1916 proved offensive to many Catholics, especially his blunt pronouncement that '[o]ur business is to keep on killing Germans. Somebody has got to be killed, and do you suppose we ought to be killed in view of the motive we have gone out to fight for.'⁷⁰ More representative of Catholic opinion, even among Vaughan's fellow Jesuits, was an editorial in *The Month* in February 1915, one that considered the Christmas Truce of 1914 from the perspectives of military discipline and Christian morality. Denouncing 'the ambitious rulers, the unprincipled statesmen, the vain-glorious soldiers, and all the brood of fishers in troubled waters', it went so far as to praise the front-line soldiers who had elected *not* to fight on Christmas Day:

The authorities are said to be indignant, for they are there to make war. [...] This war is certainly a fight between a good cause and a bad one; one side is in the wrong, but the combatants on either side believe they are in the right. They can respect each other on that account. [...] And so these poor fighting men, whom a cruel destiny had commissioned to destroy one another, eagerly seized on an occasion which enabled them to throw off their artificial military character and appear as their simple, natural selves. All honour to them, though doubtless they deserve to be court-martialled.⁷¹

Despite Robert Graves's famous invocation of belligerent Catholic chaplains in his thoroughly mendacious memoir *Good-bye to All That* (1929),⁷² there is plenty of evidence to show that Catholic chaplains, steeped in the scholastic tradition, were often deeply concerned that the precepts of the just war tradition were observed. Consequently, and besides demanding 'Have you been respectful and obedient to your officers?', the searching and direct examination of conscience included in Casgrain's *Catholic Soldiers' and Sailors' Prayer-Book* also enquired: 'Did you wound or kill

⁷⁰ Youssef Taouk, 'The Roman Catholic Church in Britain during the First World War: A Study in Political Leadership' (University of Sydney: PhD thesis, 2003), 205-7.

⁷¹ *The Month*, February 1915, 196-97.

⁷² Robert Graves, *Good-bye To All That* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), 242-43.

anyone not in fair fight during the war?’⁷³ For Father Benedict Williamson, reflecting on his time on the Western Front, it was a source of real pride that he had ‘never heard an expression of hatred uttered by our boys’.⁷⁴ He also hailed the example of a Lieutenant Joseph Flanagan of the 20th London Regiment, killed on 22 August 1918: ‘He was leading his men into the German position and had just exclaimed: “Don’t kill them, take them prisoners!” when he fell mortally wounded, struck in the lungs by a piece of shell [...] even in the stress of battle, his last thought was to save life and to spare.’⁷⁵

The temper of soldier Catholicism was also evident in some devotional trends. While devotion to the Virgin Mary retained its perennial appeal, if the stock of any intercessor rose among British Catholic soldiers during the war, it appears to have been that of Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), ‘The Little Flower’, whose canonization process began in 1914, just weeks before the outbreak of war. That the sufferings and writings of an enclosed Carmelite nun who died of tuberculosis twenty years previously should have served as inspiration and solace to British Catholic soldiers (and, indeed, soldiers from other Allied nations) may at first sight seem surprising, but in many respects her appeal highlights the crucial and profound connection between the violence and privations of war and a Catholic understanding of the spiritual value of suffering.

The growing importance of Thérèse as an intercessor was reflected in scores of soldiers’ letters sent to her former Carmel at Lisieux, among which, as Annette Becker has noted, were a ‘surprising’ number of letters from ‘British Catholics’.⁷⁶ In his memoirs, Williamson also stressed the significance of Thérèse, detailing cases of her intervention and declaring that ‘I owe very much in various circumstances of my life to the help and intercession of Sister Teresa [sic] of Lisieux, especially during the War’.⁷⁷ According to Catholic teaching, which was widely reiterated by preachers and writers in wartime Britain, war (however just) was an inevitable and consistent feature of human existence — a divinely appointed ‘chastisement of the sins of men’.

⁷³ Casgrain, *Catholic Soldiers*, 14.

⁷⁴ Benedict Williamson, *‘Happy Days’ in France and Flanders* (London: Harding & More, 1921), 190.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷⁶ Becker, *War and Faith*, 83.

⁷⁷ Williamson, *‘Happy Days’*, 84-85.

However, by virtue of this fact it was also a spiritual opportunity, an urgent call to repentance and penitence for nations and individuals alike.⁷⁸ In this respect, therefore, the violence and vicissitudes of war were to be endured as part of a spiritual discipline, one that could bear tangible and salutary fruit — a good death, for example, or the opportunity, through suffering, to emulate the Passion of Christ and so atone for one’s sins.

While the life and death of Sister Thérèse, together with her profound acceptance of her smallness and simplicity, offered an apt and proximate role model for this generation, in a manual of devotional and moral counsel published in 1918 entitled *For the Front*, Catholic soldiers were urged to embrace ‘Patience in Suffering’:

Hardships in themselves do not make a man better or worse. All depends on how he takes them. [...] Let us make up our minds that we at any rate will bear our hardships in the right spirit. Let us remember that whoever bears suffering patiently in this life will receive a great reward from God in Heaven. Let us all say to ourselves:

I will take this for my sins. This shall be part of my purgatory.

By the providence of God we are now leading a hard life. We cannot make it less hard. A great opportunity is now given us of earning for ourselves a high place in heaven —much higher than we should be able to get in ordinary times— and of atoning for our sins. It would be a sad pity if we were to miss it. We **must** suffer, as things are; let us suffer well!⁷⁹

To reinforce such advice, Catholic chaplains were at hand with edifying tales of those who had served as exemplars in this respect. For instance, from Italy in 1918 a Catholic chaplain wrote to the mother of a fatally injured soldier describing how ‘[h]is dispositions of resignation and of love for God were very great and edifying. He constantly united his sufferings to our Lord’s Sacred Passion, and he constantly said “Thy will be done.” The Sisters used to say they never saw a patient so docile and quiet, and resigned.’⁸⁰ In a particularly vivid account, Williamson described his ministry to Private Patrick Murphy of the Machine Gun Corps, who was executed for desertion in September 1918. According to Williamson, and in answer to his prayers

⁷⁸ John Davies, “‘War is a Scourge’: The First Year of the Great War 1914-1915: Catholics and Pastoral Guidance”, *British Catholic History*, 30(3), 2011, 495-98.

⁷⁹ Anon, *For the Front: Prayers and Considerations for Catholic Soldiers* (Market Weighton: St. William’s Press, 1918), 16-17. Bold in the original.

to Sister Thérèse ‘to take the lad under her especial care and obtain for him strength and fortitude in his supreme need’:

He made his confession with great recollection. I gave him absolution, and then, kneeling on the bare stones, he received Our Lord with the most fervent devotion. [...] The scene almost carried one back to the days of the martyrs. [...] The boy’s death and his fine courage made a great impression on all who assisted at that sorrowful scene, and bore striking testimony to the power of the Catholic religion in the most terrible circumstances. [...] I have never in the course of my experience assisted at a death more consoling or one in which I felt more absolute assurance of the state of the soul going forth to God.⁸¹

Such exemplary deaths also underlined a fundamental aspect of the Catholic understanding of salvation, and the reassurance it offered even among the violence and tumult of modern war. As Casgrain emphasised, ‘[t]here is only one way of getting to Heaven and that is by dying in a state of grace’.⁸² Defined as ‘free from the guilt of mortal sin’ and held to be the state in which Catholics were permitted to receive Holy Communion (ideally with the benefit of ‘a good confession’ beforehand),⁸³ the sacramental needs of the Catholic soldier drew the Catholic chaplain into a vortex of violence with an urgency that was not felt among his Protestant peers. Given the randomness of death on the battlefield, and the ever pressing need to rescue souls from perdition, the gravitational pull of the front line for Catholic chaplains was conspicuous, and helped to foster a misleading wartime discourse on the unique courage of Catholic chaplains that has inhered in the historiography of the war.⁸⁴ While it certainly helped the reputation of Catholic chaplaincy that the first British Army chaplain to die in the conflict was mangled by Turkish bullets and shells while ministering to Irish soldiers at Gallipoli in April 1915,⁸⁵ this was further amplified by the work of Fortunino Matania, the most celebrated illustrator of the day, whose 1916 painting ‘The Last General Absolution

⁸⁰ The *Harvest*, October 1918, 167.

⁸¹ Williamson, ‘Happy Days’, 158-60.

⁸² Casgrain, *Catholic Soldiers*, 9-10.

⁸³ Henry Gibson, *Catechism Made Easy: Being a Familiar Explanation of the Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (London: Burns and Oates, 1882), III, 74, 190.

⁸⁴ Michael Snape, ‘Church of England Army Chaplains in the First World War: Goodbye to *Goodbye to All That*’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62(2), 2011, 318-45.

⁸⁵ James Hagerty, *Priests in Uniform: Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2017), 175-79, 423.

of the Munsters at Rue Du Bois' became the war's most iconic depiction of British martial piety.⁸⁶

However open to question (there were, of course, bad Catholic chaplains as well as plenty of bad Catholic laymen), the vaunted standing and reputation of Catholic chaplains lent considerable weight to an emergent and central narrative in the Catholic perception and representation of the war, namely that it represented the triumph of the Church over the horrendous violence of the war and over the godless modern world which had begotten it. In this respect, Catholic claims and assumptions were fundamentally anchored in Christ's celebrated words to St. Peter: 'And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it [Matthew 16:18].' This statement of Petrine supremacy was not only a cornerstone of Catholic identity, apologetics and catechesis, but its apparent vindication in the context of war was something in which almost all Catholics in the British Isles could rejoice — regardless of the stance of the Pope, or their deep political differences over the conflict.⁸⁷

The British Army's lengthy sojourn on the physical and cultural terrain of France and Belgium also boosted the perceived potency and appeal of Catholicism, both in the army and in British society at large. Unaffected by the war's shattering challenge to liberal theological optimism,⁸⁸ unencumbered by the sheer diversity of belief and practice among Britain's Protestant churches, and armed with a sacramental and penitential theology that lent certitude and purpose to those in mortal danger, even to non-Catholics the violence and devastation of war seemed to demonstrate the spiritual and even material resilience of the Catholic faith. Although impossible to enumerate, and hard to disentangle from pre-war factors and influences, Catholic sources spoke of soldier converts running into tens of thousands.⁸⁹ And there certainly were some notable cases, including that of Lieutenant Edward Rawle Hicks of the 1st Munster Fusiliers, youngest son of the Anglican Bishop of Lincoln, who

⁸⁶ Lucinda Gosling, Goodbye, Old Man: Matania's Vision of the First World War (Stroud: History Press, 2014), 83.

⁸⁷ Gibson, Catechism, I, 124-27.

⁸⁸ Douglas John Hall, "'The Great War' and the Theologians' in Gregory Baum (ed.), The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 3-13.

⁸⁹ George Stebbing, The Position and Prospects of the Catholic Church in English-Speaking Lands (Edinburgh: Sands, 1930), 249-50.

converted in 1915 having been strongly impressed by ‘the piety of the Irish troops to which he found himself attached’ amidst the carnage of Gallipoli.⁹⁰

However, the most ubiquitous source of reflection on the perceived strength of Catholic faith and culture was the dramatic survival of religious statuary — typically roadside calvaries — amid the blasted, apocalyptic landscape of the Western Front.⁹¹ Although the most famous and visible example was the case of the ‘Golden’ or ‘Leaning’ Virgin of Albert (a municipality in the French department of the Somme), a statue that for most of the war hung precariously from the dome of Albert’s battered basilica, such phenomena were commonplace. As Rowland Feilding, a pre-war Catholic convert serving as an officer in the Coldstream Guards, noted of a ruined church at Vermelles in July 1915:

[O]ne thing alone remains intact, or practically so. This is a recumbent statue of Our Lord which lies beneath the High Altar. Though a shell has actually passed through the centre of the altar that covers it the Figure remains unharmed, except for a tiny fragment chipped from the beard. Even the fingers are perfect.⁹²

This unprecedented appreciation of Catholic material culture was also reflected in the eagerness with which Protestant soldiers acquired devotional items such as rosaries, scapulars and miraculous medals as part of their ‘religious insurance policy against harm’.⁹³ Properly borne by Catholics as devotional aids and as emblems of attachment to a given saint, cult or intercessor, even for the well-instructed Catholic such items could easily acquire the character of amulets. For Protestants, however, this was inevitably the case, and Catholic devotional items formed a major element in a welter of religious and secular preservatives ranging from Bibles and New Testaments to mass-produced lucky charms.⁹⁴

Despite such competition, the extent to which Catholic artefacts were appropriated by non-Catholic soldiers was remarkable. Besides personal gifts and purchases (one

⁹⁰ The *Harvest*, February 1916, 38; G.R. Evans, *Edward Hicks: Pacifist Bishop at War* (Oxford; Lion, 2014), 207-8.

⁹¹ Nicholas J. Saunders, ‘Crucifix, Calvary and Cross: Materiality and Spirituality in Great War Landscapes’, *World Archaeology*, 35(1), 2003, 11-13.

⁹² Rowland Feilding, *War Letters to a Wife* (London: Medici Society, 1929), 25-26.

⁹³ Owen Davies, *A Supernatural War* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 192.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135-76.

source spoke of the presence of rosaries ‘in every shop window’ in France)⁹⁵ this was aided by mass distributions by indulgent or proselytising Catholics at home and abroad.⁹⁶ According to one soldier of the Royal Engineers, by 1916 four out of ten British soldiers wore rosaries around their necks,⁹⁷ and Orangemen of the 36th (Ulster) Division even asked a Jesuit priest, whom they encountered on a train in England, ‘to bless their miraculous medals’.⁹⁸ The new-found popularity of Catholic artefacts was acknowledged well beyond conventional Catholic circles. In November 1916, for example, an article appeared in the highly esoteric *Occult Review* entitled ‘The Wearing of Religious Emblems at The Front’. Written by the Irish journalist Michael MacDonagh, it began by citing testimony from ‘a non-Catholic Private in the 11th Hussars’: ‘Nearly every man out here is wearing some sort of Catholic medallion or a rosary that has been given him, and he would rather part with his day’s rations or his last cigarette than part with his sacred talisman’.⁹⁹ It also recounted a vivid example of how devotion to the Sacred Heart had saved Private Thomas Kelly, of the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers, during the landings at Gallipoli:

A bullet struck him, passing through his left hand, which at the moment was placed over his heart. The bullet hit and shattered a shield badge of the Sacred Heart, which was sewn inside his tunic, then glanced aside and passed over his chest, tearing the skin... When wounded he fell into the water, where he lay for about two hours under a perfect hurricane of bullets and shrapnel. In all that time, while his companions were falling on every side, he received only one slight flesh wound. He is now in Ireland, loudly proclaiming, to all whom he comes in contact with, his profound gratitude to the Sacred Heart.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The First World War produced some new dynamics in the relationship between British Catholics and wartime violence. With military service having proved a key route to the rehabilitation of British Catholics in a historically Protestant state, soldiering in the British Army had a special — if, in Ireland, controversial — place in

⁹⁵ Michael MacDonagh, *The Irish on the Somme* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), 102.

⁹⁶ Becker, *War and Faith*, 61; Davies, *Supernatural*, 199-200.

⁹⁷ MacDonagh, *The Irish*, 100.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁹ Michael MacDonagh, ‘The Wearing of Religious Emblems at the Front’, *Occult Review*, November 1916, 266-74, p. 266.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 271-72.

the heritage and identity of British Catholicism. However, the terrific violence and unprecedented manpower demands of the First World War put this relationship under severe strain: many Irish, French-Canadian and Australian Catholics balked at the war, and still more at conscription, while the Pope was widely identified as a supine neutral or, worse still, a stooge of the Central Powers. Amidst this crisis, and encouraged by historical precedent, patriotic British Catholics trumpeted the loyalty and heroics of their co-religionists who had voluntarily taken up arms. However, and despite the impressive response of Catholics in mainland Britain to the voluntary recruitment drive of 1914-15, it would be easy to misconstrue the relationship between war, violence, and Catholicism in the British Army.

Although they deemed the war to be just, and duly urged participation upon the faithful, the Catholic hierarchy in mainland Britain did not rejoice in the conflict, which they fundamentally understood to be an affliction. For their part (and far from being actuated by neo-crusading rhetoric, seduced by a sense of exalted violence, or even widely inspired by the cults of soldier saints) Catholic soldiers were admonished by their chaplains to be practitioners of just war principles, and were much more liable to draw solace and support from Catholic penitential theology and the burgeoning cult of Thérèse of Lisieux. In any event, and as proclaimed by a comforting Catholic narrative that crystallised around a politically divisive war, theirs was a far greater triumph than the mere defeat of human foes. For, in the crucible of the First World War, and in a way that seemed to echo a central passage of scripture, the faith of the Catholic soldier, the example of his priests, and the signs of his Church stood fast amidst the violence of war and defied the evils of the modern world which had unleashed it.