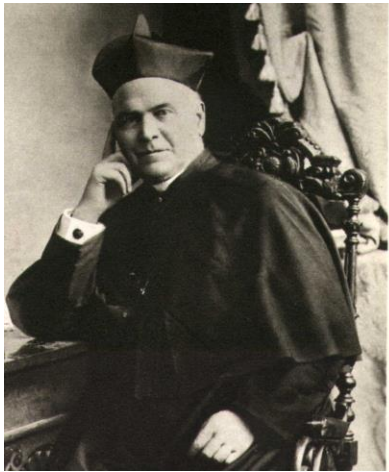


Father William Corby

William Corby was born in Detroit on October 2, 1833 to Daniel, a native of King's County (County Offaly), Ireland and Elizabeth, a citizen of Canada. Daniel became a prominent real estate dealer and one of the wealthiest landed proprietors in the country. He helped to found many Detroit parishes and aided in the building of many churches. The Michigan Catholic reported that there was no worthy charity which he did not support. His son William was educated in the common schools until he was sixteen and then joined his father's business for four years. Realizing that William had a calling to the priesthood and a desire to go to college, Daniel sent him and his two younger brothers to the ten year old "university" of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. The school was staffed then as now by the Congregation of the Holy Cross, a religious community first organized in Le Mans, France.



In 1853 when Corby arrived at Notre Dame, it was a small school for boys of all ages managed along the lines of a French boarding school. In 1860 when the American Civil War began, Notre Dame had only 213 students, the majority of whom were in the primary and preparatory school divisions. Since discipline and order were paramount, parents used Notre Dame as a school of last resort for rowdy sons. As the school was always in financial trouble, it conducted a brick making business to make the extra money needed to put food on the boarding school table.

Within a year of his arrival at Notre Dame William committed himself to the religious life. He entered the novitiate in 1856 and took final vows three years later. By 1859 Father Corby was Prefect of Discipline at Notre Dame and in 1861 he became the Director of the Manual Labor School and pastor of a local church. Corby's steady progress at Notre Dame was interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War in the spring of 1861. The war would throw Notre Dame and the country into a period of turmoil and uncertainty and turn Father William Corby's life in a new direction.

The Roman Catholic Church took no official stand on the war. Seeing itself as the church of persecuted outsiders in Protestant America, the Church found itself in a "no win" situation: If it chose a side in the conflict, it would be branded as a traitor by the other side; if it remained neutral, it would be attacked as disloyal by both sides. At Notre Dame, both faculty and students were prohibited from discussions favoring either the Union or Confederate side. Father Edward Sorin, founder of Notre Dame in 1843, sympathized

with the North but was able to maintain a neutral stance on campus, with the result that many Southerners continued to attend Notre Dame along side northern sympathizers, including the children of William Tecumseh Sherman. Father Sorin did send seven C.S.C. priests to serve as chaplains in Union regiments and more than eighty Sisters of the Holy Cross to nurse the sick and wounded in Union hospitals. Father Corby joined the chaplains' corps in 1861 and was assigned as chaplain to the 88th New York Volunteer Infantry in the famed Irish Brigade of Thomas Francis Meagher. The Irish Brigade was constituted primarily of Irish Catholic soldiers.

Father Corby volunteered his services as a chaplain in the Union Army at the request of Father Sorin, now the Superior-General of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. Corby resigned his professorship at Notre Dame, and, with a song on his lips, boarded the train from Chicago:

*I'll hang my harp on a willow tree.
I'll off to the wars again:
A peaceful home has no charm for me.
The battlefield no pain*

For nearly three years, Father Corby ministered to the needs of Catholic soldiers in the Army of the Potomac. The editor of Corby's memoirs, L. F. Kohl, says about Corby, "Chaplains, like officers, won the common soldiers' respect with their bravery under fire. Father Corby's willingness to share the hardships of the men with a light-hearted attitude and his calm heroism in bringing spiritual and physical comfort to men in the thick of the fighting won him the esteem and the friendship of the men he served. Frequently under fire, Corby moved among casualties on the field, giving assistance to the wounded and absolution to the dying. For days after the battles, he inhabited the field hospitals to bring comfort to men in pain."

In the summer of 1863, the Irish Brigade was no longer the impressive force it had been. Nearly two years of war had reduced its numbers from 3000 to 530 combat ready troops. The Union forces had suffered severe losses in the early battles at Gettysburg. Yet among the units sent to restore the Union lines was the battered Irish Brigade led by Colonel Patrick Kelly. Before the Brigade engaged the Confederate soldiers at a wheat field just south of Gettysburg, Father William Corby, in a singular event that lives in the history of the Civil War, addressed the troops. Placing his purple stole around his neck, Corby climbed atop a large boulder and offered absolution to the entire unit, a ceremony never before performed in America. Kohl, editor of Corby's memoirs, tells us that Father Corby sternly reminded the soldiers of their duties, warning that the Church would deny Christian burial to any who wavered and did not uphold the flag. The members of the Brigade were

admonished to confess their sins in the correct manner at their earliest opportunity. Those who witnessed this event would never forget it, for at a crisis point for the young nation, Father Corby had married the Catholic faith and American patriotism. Over the years, this event would become the subject of poems, sculptures and an impressive painting, "Absolution Under Fire" by Paul Henry Woods. With their sins forgiven, the Irish Brigade plunged into battle and were met with withering fire from the Confederate soldiers. At the end of the day, 198 of the men whom Father Corby had blessed had been killed. On October 29, 1910, a bronze statue of William Corby, C.S.C. was dedicated at the battlefield at Gettysburg, the only statue at Gettysburg to memorialize a chaplain (photo shown to the right).



After the war, in 1865, Father Corby returned to Notre Dame where he was made vice president. Within a year, Corby was named president of Notre Dame upon the untimely death of the university's president. At the end of his term at Notre Dame 1872, Father Corby was sent to Sacred Heart College in Watertown, Wisconsin, a young, struggling college which Corby placed on firm financial footing, no doubt as a result of his training in his father's business. He returned to Notre Dame as president in 1877 and took on the task of rebuilding the college which was almost destroyed by fire on April 23, 1879. He became known as the "Second Founder of Notre Dame" for his successful effort to rebuild the campus and for laying an enduring financial foundation. At the end of his second term as president of Notre Dame, Father Corby was assigned to St. Bernard's parish in Watertown, Wisconsin. In 1886, he was elected Provincial General of the Congregation of the Holy Cross for the United States. Later he became Assistant General for the worldwide order.

In 1888 Father Corby was invited to a reunion of the Irish Brigade to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. At the meeting, the veterans endorsed a campaign to have the Congressional Medal of Honor bestowed on Father Corby. The deposition to the War Department called Father Corby "The Fighting Chaplain," referred to his

risking his life for his men, and emphasized his "very gallant and most remarkable act in preaching a most patriot sermon and administering the religious rite of General Absolution on the battlefield of Gettysburg." The medal was not granted.

Motivated by a desire to remind Americans of the patriotic service that thousands of Catholics had rendered to their country in the Civil War, Father Corby wrote a book of his recollections, entitled *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, published in 1893. Readers of this book find it a vivid account of the life of the ordinary soldier in the Civil War and an illustrates the passionate style of Father Corby: *"Oh, you of a younger generation, think of what it cost our forefathers to save our glorious inheritance of union and liberty! If you let it slip from your hands you will deserve to be branded as ungrateful cowards and undutiful sons. But, no! You will not fail to cherish the prize-- it is too sacred a trust-- too dearly purchased."*

Father William Corby died of pneumonia on December 28, 1897. His casket was borne to the grave, not by his fellow Holy Cross priests as was the custom, but by aging Civil War veterans. His coffin was draped in the flag of his old regiment and a rifle volley was fired as his coffin was lowered into the grave. Accompanied by the sound of a bugle, old Grand Army of the Republic veterans sang a song over their heroic chaplain's grave:

*Answering the call of roll on high.
Dropping from the ranks as they make reply.
Filling up the army of the by and by.*

(Written by Joseph McCormack and originally printed in April 2002)

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