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Bringing Faith to the Front

Catholic Chaplains with the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force
1939-1945.

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Abstract

The contribution made by the chaplains who were part of New Zealand's 2nd Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) during World War Two has received relatively little recognition. Yet their presence began with the First Echelon that sailed to Egypt in January 1940 and remained an established part of the fighting forces in the Middle East, Europe and the Pacific until the end of the war. Their principal role was one of spiritual leadership and guidance and although unarmed non combatants, they shared the dangers of combat and were an important element in the treatment and care of casualties. Chaplains were acknowledged as being integral to the maintenance of morale. Many men needed assistance to cope with the violence and destruction and the military recognised that for many, a spiritual dimension was required which would provide assurance that there was some meaning behind it all.

At the outbreak of war the suspicion with which the Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church had viewed one another had eased considerably and the beginnings of a much more cordial relationship were beginning to show. The military sought to have an ecumenical structure where denominational boundaries were minimised, with provision for separate Catholic liturgy. One of the successes of 2 NZEF was the manner in which Protestant and Catholic clergy worked co-operatively to provide a chaplaincy service that ministered to all yet preserved denominational integrity.

Catholic chaplains had a different set of priorities than their Protestant colleagues. Their emphasis was to ensure that the sacraments were available to all Catholic soldiers and that no Catholic soldier would be disadvantaged by the failure to discharge that duty. Catholic teaching stressed that the way to God was through the reception of the sacraments and as such Catholic chaplains were constantly visiting their parishioners, who were scattered across the army, to say Mass, hear confessions and distribute communion. Consistent with the visiting was their attendance at battlefield stations to give fatally wounded

Catholic men the last rites. While Catholic soldiers were their priority, in practice they provided support and comfort to whoever needed them, just as their Protestant colleagues did.

For the Protestant denominations, religious worship in 2NZEF became more ecumenical over time. The Catholic chaplains had neither the inclination nor authority to embrace ecumenism and retained liturgical independence throughout the war. Yet the soldiers saw ecumenism practised in spirit, especially as the duties of Catholic and Protestant chaplains overlapped in an environment where co-operation was intrinsic to the success of the army and discord actively discouraged. In post war New Zealand the experiences of Catholic soldiers and their chaplains helped break down some of the artificial barriers between Catholic and Protestant and give some impetus to a slow ecumenical shift that would bear fruit some 20 years later.

Introduction

Seeking the protection of the divine or at least minimising any potential harm has been a staple in battle ritual from early pre-Christian history. Religion and war have been intertwined throughout the ages and military chaplaincy has, in some form or other, has been to the fore. Military sociologists hold that any system of military organisation expresses the social order from which it springs.¹ The relationship between the form of the organisation and the society from which it springs is likely to be complex. So the role of religion and the place it has in the military organisation reflects the degree to which religious observance was valued in the society from which it came.

Religion has been used to legitimise causes, bolster morale and give both confidence and trust that allows death to be faced with equanimity. Military chaplains or the accompanying priests had an important place in the ritual of how men prepared for battle. Machiavelli wrote that 'The ancient lawgivers, and governors of kingdoms and republics took great care,to inspire all their subjects – but particularly their soldiers - with fidelity, love of peace, and fear of God.....Who are under greater obligations to God than soldiers, daily exposed to innumerable dangers, men who have the most occasion for his protection'.² Warriors were, and remain, complicated individuals who needed assurance about what was before them and have to face the potential consequences of battle. Their death needed to have some express purpose.

But just as importantly the chaplaincy has always been perceived by the State and by those who commanded armies as an important element in providing a sense of good morale. At the same time they recognised familiar religious practices have provided a powerful connection with the soldiers' home. It was at this point the interests of two powerful institutions meet. On the one hand there

¹ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993).p223

² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Art Of War* Ellis Farnsworth trans. (Cambridge, 1965). p4.

is the State whose interests are secular and political in maintaining an army with its capacity for violence and death while on the other hand the Christian Church has an ethical base around a gospel of peace and love. Ordained priests and ministers have accompanied armies at the invitation of the State and with the full acquiescence of the Church.

In New Zealand military chaplaincy effectively began with the appointment of clergy to the Imperial and volunteer forces deployed in the Land Wars. Since then chaplaincy has remained a consistent presence in New Zealand's armed forces, and when those forces have served outside of New Zealand, chaplains have accompanied them. Chaplains served in South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, in both World Wars and later in Korea, Malaya and Vietnam.

A significant achievement that occurred within 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force was the transition by their civilian clergy, both Protestant and Catholic, into a smoothly operating chaplaincy service. During the inter-war years in New Zealand the relationship between the Catholic Church and the major Protestant denominations had become increasingly less suspicious and verged on the cordial. Although inflammatory rhetoric erupted from the more excitable ends of the spectrum of both sides, Catholics by and large succeeded in showing that they could retain their faith and be loyal subjects. Their involvement in World War I was testament. Yet the Catholic Church in the observance of its religious beliefs and practices brooked no compromise and steadfastly refused to lend any sort of validity to the Protestant Churches.

Ecumenism was unthinkable at the outbreak of World War II, yet by the end of the war a group of Catholic chaplains and thousands of Catholic men had continued to worship in an environment that in itself was ecumenical in spirit. The chaplaincy service endeavoured to reach all servicemen while preserving denominational integrity where possible. The net effect was that many Catholic men had Protestant clergy as their Unit chaplains and it was those chaplains who

were with them in the heat of battle and conversely the first contact a wounded Protestant soldier might have had was with a Catholic chaplain providing support in an Advanced Dressing Station or Regimental Aid Post.

This study considers the experiences of New Zealand Catholic chaplains during World War II and how they integrated into a mainly Protestant military. These men were all ordained into the priesthood in the 1930s, a priesthood which was imbued with the necessity of strengthening the faith of their people and combating the corrosive affects of a secular society upon Catholics. They were the products of their time.

I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who have assisted me with the work of this thesis. In particular I wish to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Peter Lineham for the support and encouragement he willingly gave. Peter initially suggested this topic and despite some initial misgivings, I found the work much more interesting and enjoyable than I could have anticipated. Our meetings were always positive and they provided inspiration at times when I needed it. My thanks to Associate Professor Hugh Laracy whose knowledge of the Marist Order was of great help.

Special thanks to the staff of Auckland Catholic Diocesan Archive, the Wellington Archdiocesan Catholic Archive and the Marist Archives. I was made welcome at all three Archives and given unimpeded access to material. I am grateful for the personal reminiscences that some of the older staff were able to give about those World War II chaplains. Being invited to share morning and afternoon tea with them was a big bonus.

My family have been patient and their encouragement helped to get this work completed.

Structure

The thesis is divided into four parts:-

Part One provides an historical context for the development of chaplaincy.

Christian military chaplaincy began with Christianisation of the Roman Empire and its armies. The essential nature of the work, namely the provision of spiritual ministry to the military, has remained remarkably similar over time. Fourth century Roman military chaplaincy embraced a largely ceremonial role. Priests conducted ritual and ceremonies before battle, but as both the political and religious environments changed during the next millennia, the fundamentals of modern Christian military chaplaincy were established. Issues surrounding the notions of 'Just War' are considered. This section concludes with a review of the development of military chaplaincy in New Zealand. .

Part Two. Given that this study is concerned with Catholic chaplaincy, this section considers the situation of Catholics and the church in New Zealand during the inter-war years. The Catholic responses to the rise of fascism and the Nazis are of interest. As Susan Skudder noted 'The threat to the faith, not only in Spain but in the other parts of Europe as well meant that Catholics had a particular interest in international affairs. The fact that they belonged to an international Church organisation gave New Zealand Catholics a wider perspective in the outside world.'³ The defence of the fascist regime in Spain and the increasing disquiet about Nazi Germany provided a great deal of the international coverage of the Catholic press in New Zealand. The priests who became chaplains would have read and preached about the situation, while some of the priests had travelled in Europe during the mid-1930s as part of their advanced studies. The distinction between the efforts of the Catholic Church in Germany to resist the tide of anti-Christianity and the actions of the Nazis was a

³ Susan Mary Skudder, "Bringing It Home. New Zealand responses to the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939." (Waikato, 1986).p169.

staple item of published news and opinion. The situation was somewhat more complex than the press was able to convey.

Part Three is the substantive section of this study. It is divided into four sections:

-*In New Zealand*: the response to the outbreak of war by the Catholic Church and the situation as regards the training of troops in New Zealand;

-*Pastoral care*: setting up a working structure in the war theatres, the role of the chaplain as shepherd and servant on active service and the facilities used to undertake their work;

-*Coping with the big concerns*: the chaplain and morale, moral and spiritual issues, welfare;

-*Religious worship in 2NZEF*: including a theological perspective and co-operation across the denominations and whether military religion superseded the traditional denominational religions.

Part Four looks at other types of chaplaincies, in particular the work of Vatican Radio and some immediate post-war issues, of which welfare work was one area where the returned chaplains had significant involvement.

The main archival resources used were the Auckland Catholic Diocesan Archive (ACDA), the Wellington Archdiocesan Catholic Archive (WACA) and the Marist Archives Wellington (MAW).

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