

The Civil War Diary Of Father James Sheeran: Confederate Chaplain And Redemptorist

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Review

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Redemptorist Revived: The Religious and Military Life of Father James Sheeran

In a splendidly edited work, Patrick Hayes has brought together the full diary of Father Sheeran, hitherto available only in an extracted form. The present volume, the result of collaboration by Hayes and several of his Redemptorist brethren, not only records in great detail the observations of a chaplain assigned to the 14th Louisiana Infantry which served in the Army of Northern Virginia, it also offers key insights into the divided religious landscape of Civil War America. Sheeran's observations begin with the Battle of Cedar Mountain in August 1862 and continue through the end of the Civil War, following Sheeran's release from imprisonment at Fort McHenry. Because the journal itself consists of both diary entries alongside of later elaboration, Sheeran's consistent agenda comes through. He is at once thoroughgoing in his Confederate loyalties, devoted to his Catholic faith and ministerial office, and an apologist for the ecclesiastical and theological stances of his church, which invited so much scrutiny and criticism from Protestants.

Although consistently maintaining in word and deed his ultimate devotion to the Church and to God, Sheeran was diehard Confederate. He refused to be labeled a Rebel, preferring the term Confederate, and in the odd voice that characterizes his narration of conversations, consistently defended the states as the creators of the Union, the absolute right of secession, and the rectitude of the Confederate cause. He simply avoids discussing the institution of slavery, but his use of "niggers" and "darkies," along with stories he tells of his interactions with African Americans, indicates his cultural white supremacy. His denunciations of Abolitionists add to the case that he saw nothing contrary to Christianity in the

institution of slavery. And of course, Sheeran had no use for Abraham Lincoln.

Throughout the diary, Sheeran contends with Protestantism in general and provides an incomplete but informative image of his relationship with the other chaplains in Lee's Army. He politely refuses to join in the Chaplain's Organization that played a significant role in the storied series of revivals in the Army of Northern Virginia. At the same time, he did preach to ecumenical assemblages, though the bulk of his ministerial efforts focused on Catholic troops. He was especially critical of Protestant chaplains allegedly refusing to provide bedside support, especially nursing services, to wounded Confederates. His commitment to his Catholic charges resulted in his arrest and imprisonment by General Sheridan, as he was attempting to provide ministerial aid to wounded soldiers in Winchester, who were now behind United States lines by late fall 1864.

As recent studies are elucidating, the Confederate chaplaincy's efforts to convert soldiers led to cooperation much more than theological ecumenism. Given his Catholic faith, theological cooperation proved even harder for Sheeran. Throughout the diary, he engages in apologetics, referring to Protestants as apostates and chastising Protestant chaplains for having little to offer to make the Good Death trope a reality. Here he means the lack of a proper baptism, extreme unction, and prayers for the dead insure that the departed stand before God "with their souls stained with original sin. . . . O! Protestantism! How much thou has done to offend God, injure man and serve the evil one." (23) Fiercely devoted to his dogma, Sheeran simply believed that without conversion to Catholicism the Protestant majority that surrounded him were destined for hell.

Yet, for all of what Hayes terms "braggadocio and bloviation," the product of a controversialist nature and literary style that had earned him favorable reputation in the Catholic religious press before the war, Sheeran was much more than a parochial partisan. (2) Sheeran considered the Civil War as a sinful, wasteful enterprise, brought on by human cupidity. He believed that the war's circumstances did not provide an excuse for military atrocities, drunkenness, profanity, or other moral lapses. On more than one occasion, he urged his congregants during wartime mass to conduct themselves as missionaries for the true faith through their day-to-day moral living. And he relates at least two occasions where he confiscated a whiskey-laden canteen from imbibing soldiers.

Sheeran's diary provides a spirited view of one person's observation of a massive conflict. Read alongside of J. William Jones' wartime correspondence and his *Christ in the Camp*, Sheeran's wartime writings illustrate many parallel themes to those of the Chaplain of the Confederacy. They rehearse and really are an initial draft at what would become the Lost Cause. Confederate leaders were heroic, even Jefferson Davis. Lincoln ("King Abraham 1st, of infamous memory") and his generals were brutal and abusive. (534) Confederate soldiers fought with élan and only yielded against massively overwhelming odds. Union soldiers were often cowardly and always coarse and vulgar. Still, even the minister, Sheeran heard confessions, 'and aided in washing and dressing some' of the wounded northerners who fell behind Confederate lines. (366).

For all of its peculiarities, Sheeran's diary is a delight to read. His prose is spirited, dramatic and vivid. He describes the continuation of the Battle of the Wilderness: "The Moloch of the north had . . . not been satiated." (384) He compared his determined nighttime battle against bedbugs to Hannibal's determined quest to redeem his father's honor in the Second Punic War.

The diary adds some insights into the religious ecology of a chaplain's work. Regular religious devotions were typically suspended not only in the heat of battle but also when units were assigned picket duty. He offers contemporaneous descriptions of the impact of war on the home front from high prices to scarcity of food. But some of the passages are incredulous, reading more like what Sheeran wanted to believe that what actually may have happened. Lengthy passages of exchanges with Generals Lee and Sheridan seems to say more about Sheeran's desire to have his ministerial office respected than what one would actually have said to a general officer. Because Sheeran was imprisoned during the last winter and spring of the war, he could make no observation on the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia, especially as the noose around Petersburg grew ever tighter. In sum, this large diary is well worth the time required to wade through its text, it offers insights into the presence and perspectives of Confederate Catholics, and augments the historiographical understanding of the contours of Confederate devotion to its cause for independence.

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