

Father William Corby, C.S.C.

On July 2nd, 1863, the Battle of Gettysburg was entering its pivotal second day. The Confederates were pushing on both flanks of the Union Line. An unauthorized advance exposed a salient in the Union Line which the Confederates were quick to seize upon. One of the areas of fiercest fighting has come down to history as the Wheat Field. Union Commander George Meade had ordered the area to be reinforced, and among those units that were to enter this maelstrom was the Irish Brigade.

The Irish Brigade was a brigade in name only. Originally composed of 5 regiments and 3000 men, the brigade's heroism at the battles of Fair Oaks, Seven Days, Malvern Hill, Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville had reduced its total numbers now to less than a single regiment of 600 men. Once



Absolution at Gettysburg by Brad Schmehl

again the Brigade was going to where the fighting was thickest. As they prepared to move off, their Chaplain Fr. William Corby C.S.C. hastily mounted a boulder wearing his purple stole and said he would offer the men absolution. As one of the men of the brigade knelt and lowered their flags as Fr. Corby pronounced the blessing. The entire surrounding second corps irrespective of their own faith fell silent as they watched this scene, even General Hancock, commanding the II Corps, removed his hat and bowed his head. As Fr. Corby's last words faded away, the

veterans of Irish Brigade moved off to battle, 198 of their depleted number never to return. Witnesses described it as the most moving moment of the war.

William Corby was born in Detroit on October 2, 1833 to Daniel Corby, a native of what would become County Offaly, Ireland. Daniel Corby had made a fortune in real estate and 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. William Corby graduated common school and then worked in his father's business for four years. However, William had a calling for the priesthood, so his father sent him to a small college run by French Fathers of the Holy Cross that had a reputation for strict discipline and was used as a last resort for desperate parents of rowdy boys: Notre Dame.

Corby took his vows as a Holy Cross Father and became the Prefect of Discipline at Notre Dame. When the Civil War broke out the Holy Cross Fathers sent one third of their number to become chaplains with Union Regiments. Father Corby was assigned as Chaplain to the 88th NY of the Irish Brigade where he served for three years. Many other Chaplains succumbed to the rigors of military life, for a time Corby was the only Chaplain in the Army of the Potomac. While best known for his acts at Gettysburg, Corby often ministered to his men's needs under fire, at Antietam he rode across the line of the 69th as it advanced under fire at Antietam again offering absolution and then ministering to the dead and wounded. He was known affectionately as "a fighting Chaplain". Though never granted, the veterans of the Irish Brigade petitioned congress to award Fr. Corby the Medal of Honor for his courage and devotion to his men under fire.

After the war, Fr. Corby returned to Notre Dame where he served two terms as President. He used the business acumen he gained from his father to help rebuild Notre Dame after it was nearly destroyed by fire and is considered its "Second Founder". Fr. Corby helped restore several other financially troubled parishes. 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 *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, describing his Irish Brigade experiences. Fr. Corby died in 1897, his pallbearers were not members of the Holy Cross Community as was custom, but aging Civil War veterans, his coffin draped with the flag of his old regiment. Fr. Corby's absolution at Gettysburg is commemorated with a statue at Gettysburg at the spot where it occurred and an identical copy in front of Corby Hall at Notre Dame.