

1964

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Recommended Citation

Dowling, Richard J. "Father Joseph Timothy O'Callahan." *Woodstock Letters* 93.3 (1964): 317-326.

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Father Joseph Timothy O'Callahan

*"Any priest, in like circumstances, should do,
and would do, what I did."*

RICHARD J. DOWLING, S.J.

A JESUIT FUNERAL is, usually, solemnly simple. But on the first day of Spring, March 21, 1964, in the little church-yard, nestling amid the hills of Packachoag, at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, a soul-stirring pageant was enacted. Three Bishops of the Roman Catholic hierarchy were present; the United States Navy Chief of Chaplains, Admiral Drerth, stood at attention; representatives of the federal, state, and civic governments stood among the mourners. A Captain of the U.S. Navy, in full-dress uniform, stood beside the grave, as the ramrod sailors fired their farewell salute. The haunting notes of "taps" echoed through the academic groves. Sailor pallbearers folded the flag, draping the coffin, and presented it to His Excellency, Most Reverend Bernard J. Flanagan, D.D., Bishop of Worcester, who, in turn, presented it to a ninety year old mother, seated in a wheel-chair. For this was the funeral of Captain Joseph T. O'Callahan, S.J., U.S.N. Chaplain Corps (retired).

Joseph T. O'Callahan was a Jesuit with a unique distinction. In the glorified history of the United States, he was the only Roman Catholic Chaplain ever awarded the cherished Congressional Medal of Honor.

"By their fruits you shall know them" said our Lord. When asked by a fellow chaplain how he explained his courage, Fr. O'Callahan answered: "I owe it to my Jesuit training." When his late commanding officer on the Franklin, then Captain Leslie E. Gehres, publicly stated: "The bravest man I ever

knew was Commander Joseph T. O'Callahan," Fr. O'Callahan's sincere rejoinder was: "Any priest, in like circumstances, should do, and would do, what I did." If success can be described as preparedness to meet your opportunities, Fr. O'Callahan's triumph hour loses much of its mystique. To be well-prepared for his allotted tasks could be called the key-note of his life.

Born in Roxbury, Massachusetts on May 14, 1905, Joseph Timothy O'Callahan was the third son of Cornelius J. O'Callahan and Alice Casey O'Callahan. He attended St. Mary's parochial school in Cambridge, Massachusetts for his elementary schooling. In September, 1918, he entered Boston College High School. Here, his promise began to flower. He was a solid student in the college preparatory course; he wrote for the class magazine; he was a member of the school dramatic society; he ran on the relay team. On July 30, 1922, he entered the Society of Jesus, at the novitiate of St. Andrew-on-Hudson, at Poughkeepsie, New York. There, on July 31, 1924, he pronounced his first vows as a Jesuit, and received his vow crucifix. Transferred to Weston College in 1926, he completed his philosophical studies there in 1929. From 1929 to 1931 he was a teaching member of the Physics Department at Boston College. September 1931 found him back at Weston College to begin the formal study of Theology. He was ordained a priest on June 20, 1934, by the late Bishop Thomas A. Emmett, S.J., then Bishop of Jamaica, B.W.I. The fall of 1935 welcomed Fr. O'Callahan as a tertian at St. Robert's Hall in Pomfret Center, Connecticut. Finishing tertianship, Fr. O'Callahan proceeded to Georgetown University for a year of special studies. In the summer of 1937 he was appointed to teach Cosmology to his brother Jesuits at Weston College. During the summer of 1938, Fr. O'Callahan was transferred to Holy Cross College to teach mathematics and Physics. By 1940, he was head of the Mathematics Department, and had founded a Mathematics Library.

Then, the ominous clouds of war were surging in an anxiety-afflicted world. To do his part as a Catholic citizen, Joseph T. O'Callahan, S.J., applied for a commission as a Navy chaplain. Many of his friends sincerely remonstrated with him. His hyper-tense nervous nature did not augur well for the strin-

gency of combat. More, his obvious talents in physics and mathematics could be used better for the war effort by teaching at Holy Cross, soon to be one of the top Naval R.O.T.C. units in the United States. But logical arguments were of little avail with the adamant Fr. O'Callahan. On August 7, 1940 he was commissioned a Lieutenant, junior grade, in the Navy Chaplain Corps. Paradoxically, his first duty assignment in the Navy was teaching calculus at the Naval Air Station at Pensacola, Florida. The fiery chaplain chafed at the confinement, yearning for sea duty, particularly aboard a carrier.

In April 1943, now Lieutenant (senior grade) O'Callahan realized his persisting desire. After eighteen months of shore duty, he reported to his first ship, the U.S.S. Ranger. For two and a half years, Fr. O'Callahan was aboard the Ranger. The good ship made few headlines. But she ranged the Atlantic from the arctic to the equator. She played a big part in the invasion of North Africa. She made hit and run raids against the Germans in Norway. Her chief morale officer was the newly promoted Lieutenant Commander O'Callahan. The Ranger long since has joined the scrap heap of outmoded sea giants. But the life stories of her gallant officers and crews are a golden page in U.S. Naval history. At Captain O'Callahan's wake, a beautiful crucifix was the treasured memento of appreciation from the officers and crew of the U.S.S. Ranger.

In December 1944, Father O'Callahan was assigned to shore duty at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. After the moil and broil of combat duty, this was a cushion assignment for the energetic chaplain. His roommate recalls that he used to spend his evenings reading poetry.

But Fr. O'Callahan's life of quiet would be a brief one. His youngest sister, Alice, now Sister Rose Marie, O.P., was a Maryknoll nun, imprisoned in the Japanese detention camp in the Philippines. For three years, the O'Callahan family had not heard a word from her. So, Father Joseph prayed that he would be assigned to the Philippines, that he might at first hand discover the fate of his beloved sister. Little did he dream what life had in store for him.

On March 2, 1945, Fr. O'Callahan received peremptory orders from Captain John Warner Moore, fleet Chaplain of

U.S. Pacific Fleet and Ocean Areas from 1943-45, to report for duty to the U.S.S. Franklin (C.V. 13). He came aboard Big Ben at 15.35, amid piles of potatoes and ammunition, to keep his date with destiny.

The Franklin, an Essex class, 27,000 ton, aircraft carrier, was named after Admiral Farragut's flag-ship in the Civil War. She was commissioned in January 1944. In the engagement at Leyte Gulf, she was badly battered by the Japanese. But now she was back at Pearl Harbor, ready to join Task Force 58, to seek out and destroy the remnants of the Japanese Navy left after the disastrous defeat of the battle of the Philippine sea.

Shortly after dawn on March 3, 1945, Big Ben as she was affectionately called by the sailors, steamed out of Pearl Harbor to accomplish her task. She was only one of sixteen carriers, eight battleships, sixteen cruisers and sixty-three destroyers which made up the formidable American armada, called Task Force 58.

"Conspicuous Gallantry"

On Saturday afternoon of St. Patrick's day, on the fore-castle deck of the Franklin, twelve hundred Roman Catholics, more than a third of the ship's complement, gathered for Mass. For too many, this would be their last Mass, since before dawn on the morrow, the first attack would be launched. Who would dare to surmise the thoughts of Commander O'Callahan, as he, another Christ, pronounced the General Absolution over his kneeling brothers?

After twelve General Quarters during the night, came the cool dawn of March 19th, St. Joseph's day. At 0700, fighters zoomed off the deck for a strike at Kobe. Thirty Hell Divers were still warming up on the flight deck. Chaplain O'Callahan was having his breakfast in the wardroom with a few officers.

At 7:07 a.m., out of the cloud bank, flashed a Jap Judy plane, flying 360 miles an hour at a height of seventy-five feet. It dropped one five hundred pound bomb on the center of the flight deck; then, swung around the island, and dropped another aft. Then, ominous silence, a momentary prelude to one of the most fearful tragedies in the history of the United States Navy. The world press has justly publicized the chaos

on the Franklin, but only a Dante could fittingly portray the inferno which greeted Commander O'Callahan, as he, hastily, left his unfinished breakfast.

However, for the ship that would not die, now came a beacon of hope, the white cross of the Chaplain's helmet. Amid the murk and fetid grime of destruction it flashed like a guiding star in the fight for survival. Apparently made of indestructible steel, Commander O'Callahan was everywhere; cajoling, helping, encouraging, inspiring. "Look at the old man up there (the Captain on the bridge). Don't let him down!" And this was the priest who, his friends knew, for years could not even stand the sight of blood.

The saga of the Franklin should be recounted in American history as one of the master triumphs of ecumenical courage. Race, color, or creed counted for naught in this sublime struggle of the brotherhood of man. The fatherhood of God, too, had splendid example in the tireless leadership of His vicar, His priest, O'Callahan. To the Jewish boys aboard, he was "Rabbi Tim"; to the Protestant lads, he was their "Padre Joe"; to all hands he was the counselor, consoler, exemplar. Though wounded by shrapnel, for which he was later to be decorated with the Purple heart, he carried on. There was a job to be done—his job—and he did it. Three days and three nights, he stayed at his post. When Japanese planes strafed the Franklin deck, Father O'Callahan continued his ministrations to the dying. When his skipper yelled: "Why don't you duck?" with a grin he answered: "God won't let me go, until He's ready." It was to be a wait of nineteen years.

Limping between two tugboats, the once mighty flagship, Franklin, arrived at Pearl Harbor on April 3, 1945, just one month to the day after she set out to do battle with the Japanese. Hardened Navy veterans were in tears at the sight. 832 officers and crew had lost their lives. But a nondescript band made up mostly of tin pans and an accordian and two horns—and organized by Father O'Callahan heartily sang: "Oh, the old Big Ben, she ain't what she used to be." When the fleet chaplain met the late Rev. Admiral Gehres, U.S.N. (retired) on the flight deck, he asked the skipper: "What about your two chaplains?" Squaring his shoulders, the doughty warrior answered "Each of those two chaplains were worth to me any

six officers under my command." At Pearl Harbor, also, Chaplain OCallahan organized what he called a "most exclusive club," the 706 Club. These were the men who had survived the catastrophe of the Franklin. Until their death day, their membership card in the 706 Club was one of their most cherished trophies.

Once again under her own power, the Franklin proceeded from Pearl Harbor, by way of the Panama Canal, to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. War time precaution prevented any civic celebration. But on a beautiful Spring morning, on the forward flight deck, an appreciative Navy honored her hero sons. Truly, it was an historic ceremony for an historic ship. 388 deserved decorations were bestowed, the greatest number ever given to the personnel of a single ship in Navy history.

Next came Father O'Callahan's own triumph hour. On January 23, 1946 at the White House in Washington, D.C., President Harry Truman placed the Medal of Honor around his neck. The student who literally was scared stiff before his final examinations, now wore his nation's highest honor. But his joy was not for his modest self. Rather, his eyes keenly watched God's first gift and first teacher to him, his tear-misted mother. His grateful country had glorified him as a symbol of its faith in God and in its citizens. Yet that night the dutiful chaplain returned to his ship, the new air-craft carrier Franklin D. Roosevelt.

However, the glare of publicity did not change Chaplain O'Callahan. On June 17, 1945, he was invited to be the commencement speaker at his beloved Alma Mater, Georgetown University. On that occasion, also, he was lauded with the honorary degree of Doctor of Science. His terse talk to the war-tense graduates was characteristically O'Callahan. "Take life seriously," he pleaded, "which means for your happiness, that you live your life as God would have you lead it."

On the 12th of November 1946, Father O'Callahan was released from the Navy, with the rank of Captain, U.S.N.C.C. (retired).

Return to Holy Cross

Returning to his religious community, Fr. O'Callahan planned to spend the remainder of his life, working for the

Japanese missions, and the missions of the Caroline Islands. His religious superiors readily cooperated with his wishes. But his yearnings far surpassed his strength. What effect Father O'Callahan's traumatic experience aboard the Franklin had on his physical and mental well-being must now remain a medical mystery. Suffice it to say, that never again in life would he enjoy adequate health to carry out professorial duties. Yet, "quitting" was never a word in Father O'Callahan's vocabulary.

Back to his first love, Holy Cross, he came to teach philosophy. His medal of honor was locked in the library safe to remain there, at his request, until his death. The Navy chaplain was again the consecrated Jesuit professor. With single-minded will power he went to work. But his anguished body refused to cooperate. On December 1949, he suffered his first stroke. The glory of Thabor and the acclaim of the medal of honor would yield to the silent suffering of Gethsemane. Yet the same unflagging spirit which merited him the medal of honor aboard the Franklin now flared anew—and even stronger. His first stroke had left his right arm paralyzed. Hour after hour, day after day, he exercised that weak member, to restore it to efficient usefulness. Still, amid his lonely hours, there were some refreshing consolations. A personal letter from his commander-in-chief, President Harry Truman, spurred him to carry on. In 1956 the motion picture, "Battle Stations," depicting his life; appeared in American theaters. On September 21, 1956, a helicopter landed on Fitton Field at Holy Cross College. The commanding officer of the Quonset Naval Air Station, Captain P. C. Needham presented the invalid hero with the color film "Sage of the Franklin." This film is an historic recorded sequence of Father O'Callahan's heroic performance of duty aboard the Franklin and is now used as an exemplar in the training of Navy recruits.

Truly, the glamor hero of acclaim was now the hidden hermit of pain. Patient, he was, but his was the perceptive patience of Job, "the Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away." Come glory, come torture, all was God's will. Yet never was he bitter. Few humans could realize more vividly, "man's inhumanity to man" in the awful armageddon that is modern warfare. Still, each summer he prepared meticulously

for fall classes, trusting and hoping that by September he would be strong enough to return to the class room. Now, also, he prepared his best-seller book: "I was Chaplain on the Franklin," though some days he was able only to compose a short paragraph. Perhaps his deepest source of strength was his daily Mass. He had received ecclesiastical permission to offer his Mass sitting down. Some days, he literally dragged himself to the altar to share with Christ the infinite sacrifice of love.

Then came a deceptive plateau of peace. During the last year of his life, his health and spirits seemed to improve. His ready grin was often in evidence. Tuesday was St. Patrick's day and he looked forward to its celebration. For him it was an anniversary of treasured memories: the last General Absolution aboard the Franklin, his Doctor altarboy now praying for him in heaven. He began his day by reading St. Patrick's Mass. Then, at the breakfast table, he suffered a slight stroke. As soon as a room could be procured for him, he was transferred to St. Vincent's Hospital. His mind remained very clear; his wit was never sharper. He was in God's Hands. Even if this were to be his last battle, let God's Holy Will be done. As even in his life, he was prepared. Tuesday night, Fr. O'Callahan endured a restless siege, but on Wednesday morning he appeared much improved. However, late on Wednesday afternoon he took a bad turn. Yet he cheerfully said "Good-bye" to his loved ones, as they left his room about 10:30 P.M. About five minutes later he suffered a slight convulsion. Five of his Jesuit priest brothers, two Sisters of Providence, and his physician were standing beside his death-bed reciting the prayers for the dying. At 10:40 P.M., during the prayers, his noble soul, quietly, went home to God. It was a wonderful way for a great American, a great Jesuit, and a true priest to die. The official medical report of his death coldly stated: that the cause of his death was a ruptured, aortic, abdominal, aneurysm.

On the plain coffin at Father O'Callahan's wake were two symbols which, most fittingly, capsule his life. Side by side on his coffin, lay his vow crucifix, and his medal of honor. On his first vow day, on St. Ignatius' feast in 1924, as a symbol of his dedication to Ignatian ideals, he received his vow crucifix. From that hour, until he was cradled in his grave, he would be

a man crucified to the world, and to whom the world is crucified. More, this son of a soldier saint would strive to gain the crown of Ignatian humility, that all the acts of his life should be done for the greater glory of God. Only through carrying the daily cross Christ chose to send him, could he attain this goal. Drab, monotonous and dreary, many days would be; others might be spent amid the plaudits of the multitudes, cheering daring deeds of heroism. Yet, through all his life the ruling motive of all his actions should be love of God, sweetened by his saving grace. The vow crucifix could be tear-stained but the warrior of God carried on—even unto blood. The medal of honor pledged mute evidence of how well this servant of the Crucified, fulfilled his assigned tasks. Truly, the eternal "Amen," uttered by Father Joseph Timothy O'Callahan, S.J., on his death-bed, came from a holocausted heart to divine love.

Presidential Citation

In the files of the manuscript department of the Dinand Library at Holy Cross College rests a precious parchment. It is the official citation, issued by the President of the United States, when he bestowed the medal of honor on Father O'Callahan. Thus does the most powerful nation in the world, through the voice of her commander-in-chief, speak of her humble Jesuit citizen: "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity, at the risk of his life, above and beyond the call of duty, while serving as Chaplain on Board the U.S.S. Franklin, when the vessel was fiercely attacked by enemy Japanese aircraft, during offensive operations near Kobe, Japan, on 19 March, 1945. A valiant and forceful leader, calmly braving the perilous barriers of flame and twisted metal to aid his men and his ship, Lieutenant Commander O'Callahan, groped his way through smoke-filled corridors to the flight-deck, and into the midst of violently exploding bombs, shells, rockets and other armament. With the ship rocked by incessant explosions, with debris and fragments raining down and fires raging in ever-increasing fury, he ministered to the wounded and dying, comforting and encouraging men of all faiths; he organized and led fire-fighting crews into the blazing inferno on the flight deck; he directed the jettisoning of live ammunition and

the flooding of the magazine; he manned a hose to hot, armed bombs, rolling dangerously on the burning deck, continuing his efforts, despite searing, suffocating smoke, which forced men to fall back gasping, and imperiled others who replaced them. Serving with courage, fortitude, and deep, spiritual strength, Lieutenant Commander O'Callahan inspired the gallant officers and men of the Franklin to fight heroically, and with profound faith, in the face of almost certain death, return their stricken ship to port."