

IN A GERMAN PRISON-CAMP

EDIFYING FERVOR OF THE MEN.

[The following article, translated by the Dublin Leader from *La Sainte Famille*, a publication of the French Redemptorist Fathers, was written by the Rev. Father Ducroquet, C.S.S.R. It will be noticed that in the first part of the article Father Ducroquet describes what had taken place before his arrival at the prison camp. In the occurrences described in the rest of it, he has himself taken part. He is still a prisoner.]

War is a terrible scourge. The justice of God allows man's fury to run its course, and on all sides are heard stories that make one shudder, and everywhere is sorrow and anguish. But while God sends difficulties and trials, He pours out over souls graces of resignation and prayer—graces that have already produced a rich harvest. Instead of revolting against Him, or going away from Him, people submit and draw near to Him, in repentance and hope. In France crowds, weeping and praying, fill the churches. On the battlefields, and in the trenches, men who had not prayed for many a day have sought among their childhood memories for prayers that are not forgotten, and have said them with fervor. Whole companies have been seen rushing to battle reciting the Rosary, and others have said the Rosary in the trenches while the shells were bursting overhead. Many have promised conversion to a new Christian life, if life at home is again given to them.

It is especially in the prison-camps that the grace of God is working wonders. Would that mothers and friends at home could see the sights which we see! I will try to give you some idea of things here, for the glory of God and the consolation of those who have prayed.

Where Men Turn to God.

The camp of Friedrichsfeld is situated near Wesel, about two miles from the Rhine, beside an old camp which was occupied by the prisoners in 1870, and which was subsequently transformed into military barracks. The ground allotted to the prisoners is about sixty acres in extent, and is surrounded by triple lines of barbed wire. Wooden huts built by the prisoners themselves, and suitably furnished, give shelter to about 20,000 men. There are 16,000 Frenchmen, 3500 Russians, 500 Belgians, and 300 Englishmen. The first prisoners to come here formed part of the garrison of Maubeuge, and came here a few days after the fall of that town: that is to say, about September 16. Amongst them were some ten priests from Nord and Cotes-du-Nord. The oldest of the number, Father Tibauts, a Redemptorist, asked at once for authorisation to have Mass said in the camp. The question was duly considered by the authorities, and permission was granted, and from the second Sunday Mass was said on an improvised altar in the open air. From eight to ten thousand attended, happy to find something of the fatherland in this land of exile. This was the beginning of a wonderful return to religion. These men who had now nothing on earth, turned to God, Who was to be thenceforth their consolation and strength.

The Work of the Priest-Prisoners.

It was then asked if a chapel might be erected at the expense of the prisoners, and again permission was granted. A few wealthy ones offered to defray all expenses, but every one desired to contribute something. A collection was made in all the huts, and in a few days a sum of close on £500 was in hand. The chapel was built in a fortnight, and Mass was soon said in it. On Sundays the altar was placed at the entrance, and the crowd remained outside. The number of those who thus assisted went on always increasing. The singing was rendered by a large, well-trained choir, and soon a harmonium was bought. In fact our devotions recalled some of the most beautiful devotions in France, and the German officers were astonished, so impressive were the singing and general fervor of our men. The

Father in charge of the chapel profited by this religious awakening, and began to give sermons to his fellow-prisoners. His words went straight to their hearts, and soon all the priests were engaged hearing confessions. And as the evening fell little groups could be seen walking slowly and silently. The confessor, accompanied by the penitent with bowed head and collected look, was followed by a few members of the new flock, awaiting their turn for confession. Every evening the Rosary was said in common. There were four or five hundred men at the beginning; now there are 3500. Things have been going on thus since the Feast of All Saints, and the numbers could scarcely increase, as the place was too small. When, however, the bad weather set in, and Mass could no longer be said in the open air, Providence provided a new place. The German officers, who were delighted by such manifestations of piety, offered a large unoccupied building as a chapel. It is there the prisoners unite now for Mass and devotions. On the Feast of All Saints there were 1500 men at Holy Communion, and as great a number on the day following—All Souls' Day.

From that day forth Christian life became more intense in the camp. There were then ten priests among the prisoners of Friedrichsfeld, but when they were told that prisoners in other camps were deprived of the assistance of religion, four priests volunteered to go to them, and were sent to Munster.

Men Eager for Spiritual Consolation.

It was at this time that I arrived from Maubeuge with two other priests, Fathers Lecoite and Derycke—both curates of Armentieres. We came with the wounded whom we had assisted in the hospital. We had spent three months attending to their bodily needs, and now we were going to work for their souls, and we had the most beautiful ground for our Apostleship that the heart of a missionary could desire. Trouble and long days of reflection had prepared the hearts of the men, and they were eager for the consolation that comes from above, the time had arrived for sowing good seed, and Father Tibauts and I began a series of sermons to the men. Father Lecoite gave us his assistance also, and three times a week at the evening devotions we have an audience of almost four thousand men, who listen to the lectures with an eagerness that is very touching. They stand crowded together, as there is no sitting room for all, and to get a good place some of them come three-quarters of an hour before the time. The chapel is soon filled, and those who despair of getting in by the doors come in through the windows. Others remain standing in the mud outside, crowding round both windows and doors. We very much regret that we have not a larger building, as we could easily have an audience of six thousand. The men cheerfully bear all the inconveniences of the present crowded building, so eager are they to assist at the sermons. When an appeal is made to their feelings, many an eye is dim, and many a cheek is wet with hot tears. It is the beauty of religion that especially appeals to them, and they tell us that words can not express their gratitude to us.

As a result of the sermons, the number of conversions has gone on rapidly increasing. We must now have two High Masses on Sundays, and yet at the 10 o'clock Mass several hundreds of people have to remain outside the building. It is calculated that 9000 assist at Sunday Mass: 1500 hear daily Mass, and, since the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we have about 200 daily Communions. The German colonel who is in command at the camp is a Catholic, and is all kindness to us. He never fails to come to one of our High Masses on Sunday.

Their Devotion to Our Lady.

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception of 1914 will remain long in the memory of the Friedrichsfeld prisoners. We prepared for it by a series of sermons on the feast and by a special novena. During the novena 3500 men assembled in the chapel three times daily. There were from 400 to 500 Communions every morning and 1300 on the feast day itself. As a result