

THE PRIEST ON THE BATTLEFIELD

THE APOSTOLATE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

(Continued.)

Mass at the Front.

Who can read unmoved the following account of a Battle-Mass?—

'We came one night to the little village of Vassincourt. . . . As soon as we had finished eating, the orderly came and told me that a man wanted to speak to me. It was one of our stretcher-bearers, a brave lad, who had always previously kept in the background.

"Monsieur le Medecin-en-Chef," he said to me, "to-morrow is Sunday. I ask permission to go to Mass at the church here."

"You are, then—?" I said.

"Vicar in my own village," was the reply.

"Granted."

"Many thanks, M. le Medecin-en-Chef."

'As soon as he had gone, it was suggested that all the mess should go in a body to the Mass of the stretcher-bearer, and this proposition was carried by acclamation. The other two ambulance corps were advised, and they, too, jumped at the idea.

'Sunday morning came. As I was the senior officer, the place of honor was given to me, facing the choir. My brother officers sat on each side of me, and behind us were the nurses and stretcher-bearers, who came because we had come. The officiating soldier-priest, entered, and what struck me at first were the red trousers below the chasuble and the alb. But we were in the presence of the enemy, and it was not the time for taking off your uniform. I had not been to a Mass that I know of since my First Communion, except occasionally at marriages and funerals, but these did not count. And at the commencement I was very uneasy, for I could not remember when to rise, when to sit down, when to bow. But our soldier-priest made a sign to me with his hands what to do, and the others all followed my example.

'Then, suddenly, our soldier-priest began to speak to us. He told us that there were only soldiers in the church; that all who took part in the Mass were for their country; that many might have stayed comfortably at home, considering their age. And then he suggested that there were many among us who neglected a little the good God and His Church, but who were, at the same time, serving Him by our work. And he added that it was better not to invoke unceasingly the Spirit of the Lord; not to proclaim that He is with us on the buckles of our belts and on the plates of our helmets, but to respect His teachings more, the first of which was to be good to others and not to cut our brothers' throats. After that he started talking about our families, about our womenfolk at home, consumed with anxiety about us, and about our little ones, whom, perhaps, we should never see again; about the example which those of our corps had left us who had died in doing their duty.

'Then I began to feel something damp running down to the end of my nose. I looked to my right, and there I saw our dispenser—you know, the old pill-roller, who believes in nothing, not even medicine—making the most horrible grimaces in order to hide his emotion; while on my left the other Medecin-en-Chef was busy scrubbing his moustache with his handkerchief as hard as he could. I drew out my handkerchief, and this seemed to act as a signal. Soon other handkerchiefs were fluttering all over the little church. Then someone sobbed noisily; it was Sidi, an old soldier from Africa, who in civil life is the keeper of a stall in some part of Montmartre. And then, just at that moment, as if to enable us to hide our snufflings, the whole building began to vibrate, and we heard music of a kind which certainly did not come from the organ; it was cannon on all sides of us. We ran to the doors, and the last thing I saw was our soldier-priest giving us a hasty blessing, and then running to the sacristy to put

off his sacerdotal vestments, and become a soldier once more. This was the last Mass for some of those who were at Vassincourt on that beautiful autumn Sunday of 1914. It was also the last Mass at the poor little church in which we had mingled our tears. She also died a soldier's death—she was burnt by the Prussians.'

A Call to Australia.

Mass! Aye, such a Mass ranks with the Masses of the Roman Catacombs, or the Irish Caves. We have our churches here in Australia to-day, unshattered and unprofaned, thanks to the efforts of these very men. Let us in gratitude throng them, and when, at the call of the priest, Christ comes from His throne in Heaven and stands among us as of old He stood in Judean streets, let us kneel at that gate of Heaven—the Communion rail—and pray for those who die that we may live.

This shows that France has never ceased to be a Catholic nation. The folly of her Governments and the indifference of many of her children were surface blemishes, and did not touch her deep-rooted and abiding national life. Stirred to the depths, she rises in splendid greatness. Trampling these surface weaknesses beneath her feet, she strikes for home and honor, standing firmly by her Catholic traditions. Never has the Light of the Sanctuary lit the land as to-day, when often that Sanctuary is unroofed and desolate and in ruins.

Faith glows in all hearts, and keeps them in all times and dangers fixed steadfastly on God. 'I am a cavalryman,' cries one soldier. 'I am never without my Rosary; with that and my sword, what should I fear?' Another hero, mortally wounded, called for a priest, but could not get one. 'He steeped his finger in his wound, and wrote on the ground in his blood, "I believe in God," and died.'

This is the spirit that filled the pit of the Colosseum in the early ages of the Church, and the sulphur pits of the Japanese mountains in later days.

On sea or land, sailor or soldier, it matters not, this spirit is everywhere.

Heroism at Sea.

When shall men cease to speak of the bravery of the sailors of the Formidable, one of the links in the mighty chain of steel and flame that guards the heart of England? She took her place on the waters. Beneath the cold rush of icy seas, death, silent and unseen, crawled to them in the blackness of the sea depths, and smote heavily. On the sloping deck above the torn side those men stood, in their splendid manhood, towering above the world, and went to their God like heroes.

Here are the words of the chaplain, telling of his last visit to that vessel:—

'The men returned one by one for confession. Some came from the stokehold dressed only in flannel trousers and undershirt, so black with coal-dust that it was quite impossible to recognise their features. Others came from the engine-room covered with oil and dirt, often without boots and socks, clutching in each hand a piece of oily cotton waste. They were brave men, and died brave deaths, and the fact that they had made their peace with God surely contributed in no small degree to their bravery. May they rest in peace.'

Another observer writes that—

'It is all religion with all denominations, and the Catholics are simply grand. Of the Irish Fusiliers and Dublin here, I think, every one has absolution once a fortnight, often twice a week. Those who are not killed outright receive the ministrations of the priest very soon, or within a few hours.'

An Irish priest, writing of 'his boys,' says:—

'The faith of the old Crusaders was not in it, and while you remained with these excellent Catholic men, nothing else was anything to them. God bless them. It is true to say that the German Kaiser is fighting a community of saints—converted, if you will, but with scarcely a mortal sin to be found among them.'

As we look at our armies, we see that men march conscious of the presence of the mighty, towering Figure

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