



The Regimental Bulletin

Phil Kearny Civil War Round Table of Northern New Jersey

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***** NEXT MEETING *****
Wed, Feb 18, 2026 @ 7PM - Online Zoom Presentation

Volume 22 Issue 2
Feb 18, 2026

Faith of The Fathers

The Comprehensive History of Catholic Chaplains in the Civil War
With Father Robert J. Miller

Officers of the Phil Kearny CWRT

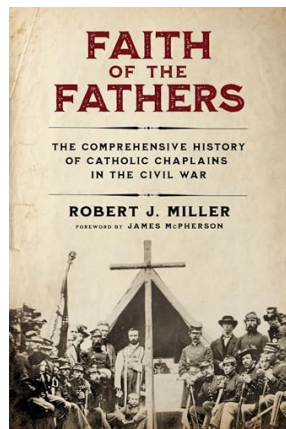
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Faith of the Fathers: The Comprehensive History of Catholic Chaplains in the Civil War By The Reverend Robert J. Miller; Foreword by James M. McPherson



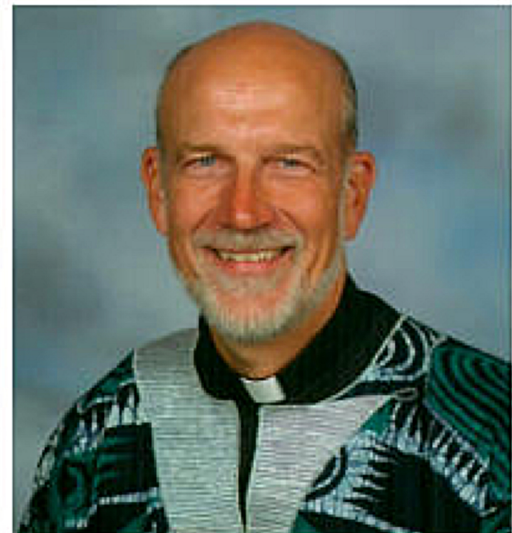
A major new contribution to Civil War scholarship and religious history, Faith of the Fathers: The Comprehensive History of Catholic Chaplains in the Civil War was published in April 2025 by the University of Notre Dame Press. Grounded in more than two decades of research, this 480-page volume brings to light the powerful, often overlooked role of Catholic clergy who served as chaplains to soldiers on both sides of America's defining conflict.

Author Reverend Robert J. Miller is a retired Catholic priest and respected historian whose work bridges faith and battlefield experience. A former president of the Chicago Civil War Round Table and author of several

books on religion in the Civil War era, Miller here presents a collective biography of 126 Union Catholic priests/chaplains, tracing their spiritual ministry amidst the horrors of battle, camp, hospital, and prison life. His narrative explains not just what these men did, but how their faith shaped the soldiers they served and the broader Catholic experience in the nineteenth-century U.S. military context.

What will most interest Phil Kearny readers is how Faith of the Fathers enriches our understanding of the lived war experience beyond strategy and tactics. Miller's detailed profiles show chaplains administering sacraments, comforting the dying, negotiating prejudice, and sustaining hope under fire, adding a vital spiritual dimension to the familiar saga of Civil War combat. The book also grapples with the challenges these priests faced, from anti-Catholic sentiment back home to the logistical hardships of ministering in war zones.

Faith of the Fathers is essential reading for anyone interested in chaplaincy, Catholic history, or the human spiritual experience in wartime. a rich supplement to battlefield studies that deepens our appreciation of the varied lives shaped by the Civil War.



Rev Robert J. Miller



Your membership of \$25 and continued support is always appreciated as it assists with our programs and tours

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Father William Corby and the Irish Brigade

Among the most compelling figures highlighted in **Faith of the Fathers** is **William Corby**, chaplain of the 88th New York Infantry, one of the core regiments of the famed Irish Brigade. Born in Detroit in 1833 and ordained a priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Corby entered the Union Army in 1862 at a moment when the Irish Brigade had already earned a reputation for discipline and ferocity in battle.

Corby is best remembered for one of the most iconic religious moments of the Civil War. On July 2, 1863, at Gettysburg, as the Irish Brigade prepared to advance into the Wheatfield, he stood upon a large boulder and granted general absolution to the brigade. The act, later memorialized in paintings and sculpture, was not theatrical flourish but grounded in Catholic sacramental theology. General absolution, under extraordinary circumstances, conveyed spiritual preparation to men who knew many would soon fall. Corby later wrote about the episode in his memoir *Memoirs of Chaplain Life* (1893), offering firsthand reflection on the battlefield ministry of a Catholic priest amid combat.

Miller's treatment of Corby goes beyond the Gettysburg moment. He situated him within the broader experience of Catholic chaplaincy: tending the wounded after Antietam and Fredericksburg, burying the dead, comforting the homesick, and navigating anti-Catholic prejudice within a predominantly Protestant officer corps. Corby's service underscores how chaplains functioned not merely as ceremonial figures but as embedded members of regimental life—marching, enduring disease, and sharing privations alongside enlisted men.

After the war, Corby returned to academic life and twice served as president of the University of Notre Dame, helping to shape one of the nation's leading Catholic institutions. His postwar prominence further illustrates a theme central to Miller's book: that Catholic chaplains were not peripheral actors but men whose wartime service had lasting institutional and cultural consequences.

For Round Table readers familiar with the Irish Brigade's battlefield record, Corby's story adds a spiritual dimension to the brigade's legacy, revealing how faith, ethnicity, and martial identity converged in some of the war's fiercest fighting.



Absolution Under Fire by Paul Wood. 1994. Rev William Corby granting general absolution to the Irish Brigade at Gettysburg July 2, 1863.

2026

Wed, Feb 18th

Fr Bob Miller

Catholic Chaplains

[Click on links to Register](#)

Wed, Mar 18th

Evan Portman

*A Civil War within a Civil War:
The New York City Draft Riots*

[Register](#)

Wed, Apr 15th

Kevin Levin

Col Robert Gould Shaw

[Register](#)

Wed, May 20th

Roseann Garza

War on the Rio Grande

[Register](#)

Wed, Jun 17th

Sarah Nierle

Gallant Pelham

[Register](#)

Wed, Sept 16th

Neil Chatelain

Privateers in San Fran

[Register](#)

Wed, Oct 21st

Sean Chick

Don Carlos Buell at Shiloh

[Register](#)

Fri-Sat Nov 6th-7th

Gettysburg Trip, Gettysburg, PA

LBG Jim Hessler

Sat, Dec 5th - 1pm

Holiday Dinner

Bistro 107, Moonachie

Speaker TBA

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Lincoln and the Irish: Emmet, the Irish Brigade, the Fenians, and a Wartime St. Patrick's Day

- Jim Madden

Abraham Lincoln was not Irish, yet few American presidents have been so closely associated, both in documented fact and in enduring memory, with the Irish experience in nineteenth-century America. From famine relief in the 1840s to wartime dealings with the Irish Brigade, from his condemnation of nativism to later Irish-American claims that he admired Irish Patriot Robert Emmet, Lincoln occupies a distinctive place in Irish-American Civil War history.

For a Civil War audience, this story unfolds along two parallel lines: what we can firmly document in the archival record, and how Irish Americans themselves remembered Lincoln, as a figure who could stand, symbolically, within a larger Atlantic struggle for liberty.

Lincoln and Anti-Irish Nativism

Before the war, Lincoln publicly distanced himself from the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic politics of the 1850s. In his famous August 24, 1855 letter to Joshua F. Speed, reacting to the rise of the Know-Nothing movement, Lincoln warned that American principles were being hollowed out. The Declaration of Independence, he observed, began as "all men are created equal." Americans had already limited that phrase; now, he feared, it might read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics."

That was not casual language. It was deliberate. Lincoln understood that the exclusion of immigrants, many of them Irish Catholics, was incompatible with the moral foundation of the Republic. For Irish immigrants who faced discrimination, job competition, and political hostility, such a stance mattered. It signaled that at least one national political figure understood the danger of nativism to American republicanism itself.



Famine Relief: A Small but Telling Gesture

Lincoln's connection to Ireland predates the war. In 1847, during the height of the Great Famine, Lincoln, then a freshman congressman, appears on a donor list contributing \$10 (\$395 today) toward Irish famine relief. While the amount seems modest, it was not insignificant at the time.

More important than the amount of the donation is what it reveals: Lincoln participated in the transatlantic humanitarian movement that mobilized American churches, civic groups, and political figures to assist Ireland during catastrophe. The famine relief movement was one of the first modern international aid efforts, and Lincoln's name appears within that broader civic response.

It does not prove deep Irish political alignment, but it does show engagement. Later Irish-American memory would build upon that fact.

The Irish Brigade and Lincoln's Wartime Engagement

The most concrete Irish-Lincoln connection comes during the war itself. The Irish Brigade, principally the 63rd, 69th, and 88th New York Infantry, became one of the most famous ethnic formations in the Army of the Potomac. Their green flags, harp insignia, and "*Erin Go Bragh*" symbolism marked them as distinctly Irish within a Union army composed of many immigrant groups.



Their commander, Brigadier General Thomas Francis Meagher, was himself a former Young Ireland revolutionary of 1848 who had been transported to Tasmania before escaping to America. Meagher embodied the transatlantic nature of Irish republicanism.

On February 12, 1863, Meagher met with Lincoln to advocate promotions for officers in the brigade. Lincoln immediately wrote a note to General-in-Chief Henry Halleck stating that Meagher claimed the brigade had received no promotions and that Colonels Robert Nugent and Patrick Kelly had "fairly earned" advancement. Lincoln asked Halleck to review their records.

This brief note is significant. It shows Lincoln responding directly to concerns raised by an Irish commander. It demonstrates awareness that ethnic regiments required recognition to maintain morale and recruitment. In a volunteer army dependent on immigrant communities, such gestures were politically and militarily meaningful.

St. Patrick's Day in the Army

St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Union camps further illustrate the visibility of Irish identity during the war. In 1863, the Irish Brigade held elaborate festivities in the Army of the Potomac. Accounts describe horse races, music, and ceremonial display of the green flags.

These celebrations were not trivial diversions. They reinforced ethnic solidarity, boosted morale after heavy casualties at Antietam and Fredericksburg, and signaled to both fellow soldiers and readers at home that Irish soldiers fought as Americans without surrendering their heritage.

Lincoln did not need to appear personally at every celebration to be connected to them. His administration's recognition of the brigade and engagement with Meagher placed him within that cultural sphere.

Robert Emmet and Lincoln: The Tradition

One of the most persistent stories linking Lincoln and the Irish concerns Irish Patriot Robert Emmet, executed in Dublin in 1803 after a failed rebellion against British rule. Emmet's famous "*Speech from the Dock*", in which he asked that no man write his epitaph until Ireland was free, became one of the most widely memorized pieces of nationalist oratory in the English-speaking world.

According to postwar recollections, particularly those associated with Lincoln's law partner William H. Herndon, Lincoln admired Emmet and could recite portions of the speech. While the documentation rests largely on recollection rather than a contemporary written declaration from Lincoln himself, the tradition has endured for over a century.

Whether literally true in every detail or shaped by memory, the story reveals something important: Irish Americans wanted to see Lincoln aligned with an older republican tradition. Emmet symbolized martyrdom for liberty. Lincoln, assassinated after preserving the Union and ending slavery, became a martyr of a different but related cause. In Irish-American interpretation, the two could sit within the same moral universe.

From Emmet to the Fenians

The bridge from Emmet's memory to the Civil War runs through the Fenian Brotherhood. Founded in the United States in 1858 by Irish nationalists including John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny, the Fenians sought Irish independence from Britain. Thousands of Irish immigrants who joined the Union Army also had Fenian sympathies or later became involved in Fenian activity.

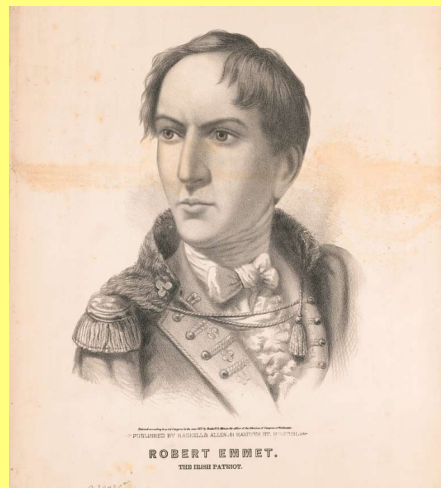
After the war, Civil War veterans played key roles in Fenian Brotherhood and the 1866–1870 Fenian raids

into Canada. The war had given Irish immigrants military experience, organizational structure, and confidence. The language of Emmet, unfinished struggle, national redemption, remained central to Fenian rhetoric.

Lincoln did not live to witness the Fenian raids, but Irish-American memory often connected him indirectly to this larger nationalist arc. Many Irish veterans who revered Lincoln as a defender of liberty also revered Emmet as a martyr of Ireland. In that shared moral language, the American Civil War and Irish nationalism were not separate stories but parallel struggles.

Robert Emmet

(1778-1803)



Robert Emmet was an Irish nationalist best known for leading the failed 1803 rebellion against British rule. Born in Dublin and educated at Trinity College, he joined the United Irishmen, a movement inspired by the American and French

Revolutions that sought Irish independence and religious equality.

After the defeat of the 1798 uprising, Emmet went into exile in France but returned to organize another revolt. The rebellion of July 23, 1803, collapsed quickly. Emmet was captured, tried for treason, and executed on September 20, 1803.

He is remembered chiefly for his famous speech from the dock, in which he declared:

"Let no man write my epitaph... when my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written."

Though his revolt failed, Emmet's eloquence and martyrdom made him one of Ireland's enduring symbols of republican sacrifice. Throughout the 19th century, especially among Irish immigrants in America, his name was invoked by later nationalist movements, including the Young Irelanders and the Fenian Brotherhood.

Emmet matters because Irish-American soldiers during the Civil War and activists carried his memory with them. In that transatlantic republican tradition, Emmet and Abraham Lincoln were often placed within the same moral frame: men who sacrificed, or died, for liberty.



Phil Kearny Civil War Round Table

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REMINDER: New and returning members, Renew your membership in the Phil Kearny CWRT, which is \$25 annually.

Each Phil Kearny CWRT Bulletin Newsletter there is always a reminder, and we do accept renewals at any time. Our "membership year" has always been from April to March. So, if you have not yet paid your dues for 2026 (*thank you to those who have already*), now is the perfect time to write that check! You can find my address on the front page of every PKCWRT newsletter as well as on this membership form.

Thank you,
Norm Dykstra
PKCWRT Treasurer