

St. Patrick's Battalion

By Father James Hannon

Around St. Patrick's Day in the month of March we read and hear a lot about the contribution of Irish people to American history. At the present time, more than forty million people in the United States and perhaps as many as *forty-four million*, claim to be at least part Irish in their ancestry.

The army of George Washington was about one-third Irish and an even higher percentage during the terrible winter at Valley Forge. There were Irish brigades on both sides of the Civil War. The valor of the 69th New York Regiment in the First World War was portrayed in the popular movie "The Fighting Sixty-Ninth", with James Cagney and Pat O'Brien. But a very different type of story is that of St. Patrick's Battalion.

From 1845 to 1848 the United States and Mexico waged war. Since the southern states were nearer to Mexico, a high percentage of the American troops came from that area. Most of these boys would have been of English and Scottish Protestant background and not very friendly to Catholics. This is not to be taken as a harsh criticism of these soldiers. But from the time they were small they received a great deal of anti-Catholic information. This was all they knew.

At the same time the blight on the Irish potato had occurred and now the Irish nation was suffering from the famine. Large numbers begin to emigrate to the United States. Many of them were recruited into the army. They participated in the American advance into Mexico. Meanwhile, they were suffering the taunts, mockery and discrimination of their fellow soldiers. As the army made progress and occupied village after village in Mexico, the Irish troops saw the little churches and observed the strong Catholic faith of the native population. They began to question what they themselves were doing. They were shooting at poor Catholic people and destroying much of their property. This reminded them of their own Catholic and poverty-stricken background in Ireland. At the same time, they were suffering from the treatment given them by the American soldiers from the south.

So several hundred made the decision to desert from the American army and join the Mexican forces. From then on until the end of the war, they fought against the advancing Americans. Eventually, they were all either killed in battle or captured. Fifty of them were executed by hanging, sixteen were whipped and the rest were branded with a large "D" on their hips for desertion. The Mexican government erected a large Celtic crucifix with a skull, crossbones, gamecock and dice as a memorial to their bravery.

This story is told not to praise desertion from the American army but to show that discrimination and strong spiritual bonds can often lead men to change their allegiances and to make some very crucial and fateful decisions in their lives.