

On ANZAC Day 2023 Remembering the Great War of 1914-18

Neil Dwyer
Archivist
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*I heard my country calling, away across the sea,
Across the waves and waters, she calls and calls to me.
Her sword is girded at her side, her helmet on her head,
And around her feet are lying the dying and the dead;
I hear the noise of battle, the thunder of her guns;
I haste to thee, my mother, a son among thy sons.¹*



There are some events in history for which there are no words or enough words or the appropriate words to describe them, whether it is the story of a war, the destruction of a people or culture, or the story of abject poverty or neglect. The Great War of 1914-18² was one such event. The death of a serviceman in that war or the long-term injury or illness of a Great War ex-serviceman changed the lives of people at home. Parishioners grieved for loved ones who died, while priests supported and counselled a parish anxious and, at times, mourning. The fifty months of war from September 1914 to November 1918 seems such a small time in the history of the Catholic Church in the Wollongong district; yet the lives of most parishioners at that time changed because of it.

To the occupants of the Chair of Saint Peter, the prospect of war was deeply disturbing. The day before the declaration of war, Pope Saint Pius X had ‘ordered Catholics all over the world to offer prayers for Peace.’³ He was deeply distressed by Europe tumbling towards hostilities. It has been said that the outbreak of the conflict and the deaths from the initial German assaults on Belgium contributed to his death at the age of seventy-nine on 20 August 1914. The enthusiasm for war between the British Empire and its allies on one side and Germany and its allies on the other was also deplored by Pius X’s successor, Pope Benedict XV. Recalling Pope Benedict XV’s election, Pope Benedict XVI said during his first general audience in St Peter’s Square on 27 April 2005:

¹ This was the original first verse of *Urbs Dei* (The City of God) or *The Two Fatherlands* now known as *I vow to thee my country* by Sir Cecil Spring-Rice (27 February 1859 – 14 February 1918). He wrote this poem in 1911 and then, shortly before his death, he wrote a new first verse. The verse above was never intended to be the middle verse but is sometimes sung when *I vow to thee my country* is performed. The poem was set to music by Holst with an adaption of the melody of the fourth movement of his *Planets Suite, Jupiter*. It was first performed in 1921.

² The war fought between 1914, and 1918, was known at the time as the Great War, the War to End All Wars; to the United States, it was the European War. Only when the world went to war again in 1939 did the earlier conflict become known as the First World War.

³ *Illawarra Mercury*, Tuesday 4 August 1914, p.2

I chose to call myself Benedict XVI ideally as a link to the venerated Pontiff, Benedict XV, who guided the Church through the turbulent times of the First World War. He was a true and courageous prophet of peace who struggled strenuously and bravely, first to avoid the drama of war and then to limit its terrible consequences. In his footsteps, I place my ministry, in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples ...⁴



Once war was declared peace, reconciliation and harmony seemed forgotten. Benedict XV did not cease in his efforts for peace, including his appointment of Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) as a nuncio to counsel and negotiate with Germany. He looked to Our Lady in these troubled times, placing the world under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the invocation *Mary Queen of Peace* was added to the Litany of Loreto.

Left: Pope Benedict XV appointed Eugenio Pacelli as nuncio to Bavaria on 23 April 1917, consecrating him as titular Bishop of Sardis and, in the Sistine Chapel on 13 May 1917, immediately elevated him to archbishop

One recruit, an Anglican clergyman from Tasmania, Frank Bethune, enlisted as a private soldier. In April 1916, the newly commissioned Lieutenant Bethune was at sea bound for France. In the absence of an official clergyman, Bethune was asked to preach and his sermon that day aboard the troopship *Transylvania* became well known. In part, he said,

I do not know whether a man may put it beyond the power of God to help him. But I know this, that whether you are bad or good, or religious or not religious, God is with you all the time trying to help..... Here we are on that great enterprise going out across the world, and with no thought of gain or conquest, but to help right a great wrong. What else do we wish, except to go straight forward at the enemy – with our dear ones far behind us and God above us, and our friends on each side of us and only the enemy in front of us – what more do we want.⁵

The Great War meant that untested in war, the people of Australia – including clergy (as padre or parish priest) – faced new and different situations. As the naval historian, Dr Sheila Dwyer, said:

The destiny of Australians was that war would dramatically, deeply change their lives: personally, socially, economically, and politically. The Commonwealth Government would exercise greater power at home (censorship, control of industry, domestic surveillance) and many of the men sent away to war would not come back. Courage, patriotism and individual

⁴ Various sources

⁵ *Sermon aboard the troopship Transylvania, Mediterranean Sea, 2 April 1916* in Fullilove, M. (Ed.), *Men and Women of Australia: Our Greatest Modern Speeches*, Viking, Revised Second Edition, Melbourne, 2014, Pp. 292-293

heroism by land forces, as well as enormous casualties, would change Australia's identity and status ...⁶

To Australia's third prime minister, Chris Watson: "Nations, like men, have often to face great crisis before the secret of their being becomes revealed to the world and to themselves."⁷ What strikes you in the personal letters found in the service records of the Catholic soldiers of this parish and the articles in the local newspapers was the patient suffering of the family and friends left behind. For many, the war brought sorrow, nothing but sorrow. W. J. Cochrane, O.B.E.,⁸ a St Francis Xavier's parishioner, recalled this when speaking at the ANZAC Day ceremony in Wollongong in 1925

There was also the heroism of those who waited and theirs perhaps was even greater than those who fought, because they just had to stand by and wait for news of their beloved ones while the latter in the heat of battle gave no thought but the fight in hand.⁹

Those who served our country may have died on a battlefield or years later in a nursing home; they may be known unto God; they may be an admiral or an ordinary Digger, but 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.'



⁶Dwyer, Dr. S., *Sir William Rooke Creswell and the Foundation of the Australian Navy*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014, P.222

⁷ *Australia and the War* by Chris Watson (the presumed author) in Robson, L.L., *The Round Table*, March 1915, p.39

⁸ Nephew of John Beatson the prominent parishioner of St Francis Xavier's and Mayor of Wollongong

⁹ *Illawarra Mercury*, Friday 1 May 1925, p8. William John Cochrane (1892-1930) had been secretary to his uncle, John Beatson, the Mayor of Wollongong for many years and an equally outstanding member of the Wollongong community, especially his work for ex-servicemen.