

Fr. Thomas Scully, American Civil War Chaplain

by Gabriel Troy

Fr. Thomas Scully, the son of Jeremiah and Mary (Connell) Scully, was born in Limerick city, Ireland, on 24, March, (fittingly the eve of the Feast of Our Lady of the Annunciation) 1833 and Baptised in St. Michael Church. He received his early education in England, pursuing his ecclesiastical studies in Italy. While yet a student, he went to Boston, and, on 18, September 1860, he was ordained to the priesthood in old St. James Church, by Bishop John Bernard Fitzpatrick, a strong supporter of Abraham Lincoln, who made a special effort to provide Catholic chaplains for the Massachusetts regiments. As a newly ordained priest at the outbreak of the Civil War, Fr. Scully was commissioned chaplain of the 9th regiment commanded by Col. Thomas Cass. One of the many Irish Brigades, the regiment was approved by Governor John Andrew and initially funded by Patrick Donahoe, publisher of *The Boston Pilot* newspaper.

He went to war with his regiment, which had at least 800 Catholics in its ranks, and participated in many battles and skirmishes. He won the admiration of every comrade for his faithful and untiring work on the field of battle and in the hospitals, ministering to the sick, wounded and dying. He was then sent to join the Union Army of the Potomac, 'the Fighting 9th' and saw action in the Seven Days Battle, a series of six major battles over seven days from 27 June to 1, July 1862. Confederate General Robert E. Lee drove the invading Union Army of the Potomac, commanded by Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, away from Richmond and into a retreat down the Virginia Peninsula.

At the Battle of Gaines Mill on 27, June 1862, the first battle of this campaign in which the 9th regiment engaged, and in which 552 officers and men were killed, Fr. Scully, refused to abandon his dead, wounded, and dying comrades, "the



Fr. Scully as a young priest in Boston. (Photo courtesy St. Mary's Parish, Boston)

lads he loved so well." He remained on the battlefield and was captured, leading the others who had been captured with him; he quickly escaped when a sentry fell asleep at his post and re-joined the regiment.

Shortly thereafter, on 29, June, at the Battle of Savage Station, Fr. Scully was again taken prisoner. At first, he was treated poorly for being an Irish Catholic and a Yankee. His conditions improved when he was sent to Richmond. There he was stricken with malarial fever and was cared for at the home of a local

Tending the wounded Union soldiers at Savage's Station, Virginia, during the Peninsular Campaign. Photo by James F. Gibson, courtesy Library of Congress.





Father Scully prepares to celebrate Mass with Boston's Irish 9th at Camp Cass, Arlington Heights, Virginia. *Photographer: Matthew Brady. (National Archives, Washington DC)*

priest. Upon his recovery, Fr. Scully was honourably discharged from the army with a disability on 31 October 1862 and returned to the Boston area to take up parish work. His first assignment was as a curate at St. Patrick Parish, Roxbury.

In March 1863, Fr. Scully was appointed to succeed Rev. John Ryan as rector of the Immaculate Conception parish in Malden, where he remained until May 1867, when he was appointed pastor of the newly established St. Mary Church. The first Mass was celebrated in the parish on 9, June 1867.

Under Fr. Scully's guidance and leadership, the parish accumulated a vast amount of property, and its population grew to about 7,000 souls. When he arrived at the parish, the property consisted of 16,700 square feet of land, and the unfinished church, in all valued at \$25,000. At his death, the parish property comprised over 81,356 square feet of land, and besides the building of the gymnasium, schools and college, the church itself was enlarged and beautified. In recognition of his good work, Pope Leo XIII conferred the title of permanent rector upon Fr. Scully.

Fr. Scully was strong believer in Catholic school education for all students. Besides establishing grammar schools and a high school that educated over 2,000 students a year, he founded St. Thomas Aquinas College for men in the parish. This later became part of Boston College. Fr. Scully's steadfast commitment to Catholic education was not without controversy. His decision to deny the sacraments to

any parents sending their children to public schools caused quite a stir in the parish, the city and the diocese.

In 1894 Fr. Scully donated the land upon which the Holy Ghost Hospital for Incurables was built. The Sisters of Charity of Montreal (Grey Nuns) opened the facility the following year. Fr. Scully took no part in the administration of the hospital, but he did stipulate that the hospital be for all incurables, regardless of race, creed or state in life.

Fr. Scully was a strong advocate of temperance and the no-license policy for Cambridge, in which he worked hand in hand with the Protestant clergy. It was said that his influence and work, more than

any other organizations, was the means of keeping the city in the no-license column. Fr. Scully was not only a temperance leader in Cambridge, but for several years he was president of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union of the Archdiocese of Boston. On his death, the City of Cambridge erected a fountain in recognition of his work in the temperance movement.

For many years, Fr. Scully was greatly interested in the Grand Army of the Republic G.A.R. (an organisation for Union veterans), and in several of his pictures, he is seen wearing the G.A.R. badge, of which he was justly proud. He was active in Post 30, G.A.R. in Cambridge and in the late 1890's, Fr. Scully became chaplain of the Massachusetts chapter of the G.A.R. when he was nominated at convention by Past Department Commander George S. Evans.

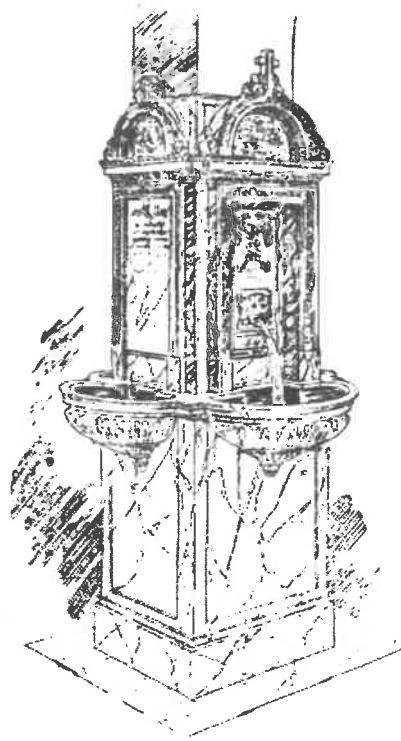
On 11, September 1902 Fr. Thomas Scully, pastor of St. Mary of the Annunciation Church, passed away at the age of 69 years 5 months and 18 days. He had been ill with Bright's Disease, a kidney disorder. Before his funeral, George C. W. Fuller, the well-known clothier and a close friend of Fr. Scully, canvassed Massachusetts Avenue between Central and Lafayette squares and more than forty local merchants agreed to close their stores from 10 to 11 o'clock, during his funeral service in tribute. He was buried in Holy Cross Cemetery in Malden.

Below left: The Grand Army of the Republic badge worn on the uniform by Fr. Thomas Scully and other Union Army veterans.

Below right: Fr. Scully wearing his G.A.R. badge (*Photo courtesy St. Mary's Parish, Boston*)



Thomas Wentworth Higgins, minister, author, abolitionist, soldier, and temperance supporter, noted that, as a man of deep conviction, Fr. Thomas Scully “was afraid of nobody in the world, except possibly the Pope”. On 24, September 2016 the City of Cambridge once again honoured Fr. Scully by dedicating the corner of Harvard and Norfolk Streets as Father Thomas Scully Square.



The Father Scully Memorial Fountain
(Cambridge Public Library).

Fr. Gabriel Troy was born in Kilkenny and ordained to the priesthood in 1966 for the Archdiocese of Boston. He joined the Society of St. James and went to Peru, where he served for 27 years, working with the poorest of the poor. From 1989 to 1994 he served as the Country Coordinator for the Society, in Peru. He was then elected to the first of two three-year terms as Society Director, in Boston. In 2000, Fr. Gabriel returned to parish ministry in the Archdiocese of Boston, serving as pastor, for seven years in St. Joseph's in the West End and for ten years in St. Mary of the Annunciation in Cambridge, a parish which celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2017. Fr Gabriel resides as Pastor Emeritus of St Mary's since his retirement on 17 March 2017.

Sources

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