

The Very Rev. William Corby, C. S. C.

The 100th anniversary of the dedication of the statue of Rev. William Corby on the Battlefield of Gettysburg will take place on October 29, 2010. I wish to see this event celebrated in an appropriate manner, and I am getting the word out to all I can. It is my hope that the Irish-American, Catholic, and Civil War communities of this nation will publicize this, and that it will become a major event.

No plans for this event have been prepared.

William Corby was born on October 2, 1833, in Detroit, Michigan.

He died on December 28, 1897. He is buried in the order cemetery north of the campus of Notre Dame University.

On July 2, 1863, just before the Irish Brigade went into battle, Father Corby gave the men absolution.

Father Corby's Absolution

“Dominus noster Jesus Christus vos absolvat, et ego, auctoritate ipsius, vos absolvo a vinculo excommunicationis et interdicti in quantum possum et vos indigetis; deinde, ego vos absolvo a peccatis vestris in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen!”

May our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you; and I by his authority absolve you from every bond of excommunication and interdict, as far as I am able, and you have need. Moreover, I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The Latin version is from the Catholic Alumni Sodality. The English version is from “Absolution at Gettysburg,” by Paul Jones, in the Catholic Digest, May, 1958. I have seen another Latin version, with at least one word different from the other.

Father Corby's Statue

On Friday afternoon, October 28, 1910, about two hundred members of the Sodality, with their friends, subscribers to the monument and invited guests, left Philadelphia on a special train over the Pennsylvania Railroad. On the evening of that day a “camp-fire” took place in Xavier Hall, Gettysburg.

“Solemn High Mass

On the morning of Saturday, October 29, 1910, low masses were celebrated in St. Francis Xavier's Church, Gettysburg, at six, seven, eight, and nine o'clock. After the arrival of a second special train from Philadelphia over the Pennsylvania Railroad a Solemn High Mass was celebrated by Rev. Thomas W. Hayes, Rector of St. Francis Xavier's Church, Gettysburg; the deacon was Rev. John Cavanaugh, C.S.C., President of Notre Dame University, and the sub-deacon was Rev. William S. Singleton, S. J., Vice-President of St. Joseph's College, Philadelphia. Rev. Mark Stock was Master of Ceremonies. Among those present in the sanctuary were Right Rev. Bishop McSherry, of South Africa; Right Rev. Stephen Soter Crtynsky, (Greek) Ruthenian Bishop for the United States; Mgr. Philip R. McDevitt, Superintendent of the parochial schools of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia; Mgr. J. M. Connolly, of New York; Rev. Charles W. Lyons, S. J., President of St. Joseph's College, Philadelphia, and Moderator of the Catholic Alumni Sodality. The sermon was delivered by Mgr. James P. Turner, D. D., Prot. Ap., Vicar-General and Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. It was characterized by the “Catholic Standard and Times” of Philadelphia, in its issue of November 5th, 1910, as a “sermon notable for its lucid presentation of the divine origin of the priest's power to forgive sin, closing with a striking picture of Father Corby's dramatic exercise of this power.”

The Final Exercises

At 1:30 in the afternoon of Saturday, October 29th, 1910, the church bell began to ring, and at 2 o'clock all was in readiness for the final exercises in honor of the first priest to be thus commemorated on any battlefield. Several hundred Catholics, whose number should have been greater, and doubtless would have been had the weather been more propitious, participated in the ceremonies. There was no procession or display of any sort, except that the speakers' stand was draped with the national colors, and the bronze figure of Father Corby was concealed by the folds of a large American flag, awaiting the hand of the little girl who was to unveil it.

"The site," says the "Catholic Standard and Times," of Philadelphia, in its issue of November 5th, 1910, "selected for the monument is most advantageous. A natural pedestal for the statue-similar to the one on which the heroic Chaplain stood upon that memorable July day-rises some three feet or more above the sod, close to the main avenue, and within a few hundred yards of the magnificent Pennsylvania Memorial Arch, dedicated a few weeks ago." When the statue was unveiled there was "disclosed the heroic figure of the Chaplain (in the uniform of his rank, captain of cavalry), standing with arm outstretched in the act of pronouncing absolution, and with a countenance upon which the sculptor, with exquisite art, has caught the look of spiritual love which must have radiated from the face of the Shepherd of that martial flock."

Samuel Murray, sculptor of the monument, was one of the honored guests of the occasion. The Gettysburg Band played several martial airs, and then the final exercises began. They were simple and impressive, admirable in their smoothness and dignity.

Address By Walter George Smith, Esq.

Prayer By Rev. John Cavanagh, C.S.C.

The Unveiling

The five-year old daughter of President Daily, Bernadette, was then escorted from the speaker's stand by Captain James G. Mitchell, engineer-in-charge of the Pennsylvania Memorial Arch. As she pulled the silken cord, the Stars and Stripes which enfolded the statue slowly fell, disclosing the simple and stately monument.

Address By Henry A. N. Daily, Esq
President of the Catholic Alumni Sodality of Philadelphia

Acceptance of the Monument

Address By Rev. Charles W. Lyons, S. J.

Completion of the Task

The above is from "The Corby Monument," by the Catholic Alumni Sodality of Philadelphia. It is a 36 page booklet, which I will not attempt to type in here. I found it at the Library of Congress, and copied it several years ago. I will mark 25 years of research on November 14, 2009.