

# A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

## *In the Service*

I learned about Eugene Patrick O’Grady from a story in the Baltimore Sun. He was a Baltimore-born priest who volunteered for the army during World War II, just six years after being ordained. He was shipped out to Europe, with the 115<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and landed on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944.

Many men never made it off that beach.

But Father O’Grady did. He prayed over the fallen and notified their families, and did it with grace. “He had to write a lot of letters home,” one priest remembered. “No seminary teaches how to do that.”

Another veteran remembered that, on that awful morning, Father O’Grady stumbled upon a young soldier digging a slit trench in the sand, while shells exploded around him. Father O’Grady noticed the boy’s hands were worn raw. He gave the soldier his gloves. Many of the soldiers who survived D-Day said that was typical of him. He gave whatever he could.

He reached out, they remember, to everyone, no matter what their faith. Father O’Grady volunteered for every mission he could. He wanted to be with the soldiers, to look them in the eye and let them know that he felt what they were feeling—the nervousness, the dread, the loneliness.

But the people back home never sensed that. He wrote long and optimistic letters home in which he didn’t talk much about himself, and didn’t mention the medals he’d earned. He asked instead about neighbors and family.

He never took it easy, one priest remembered. There was always more to do.

So it was not surprising that in November 1944, after one long day, Father O’Grady headed back to the aid station near the front lines, to see if there were any wounded he’d missed. He was struck by shrapnel, and died instantly.

But something of him lived on. That much was clear when surviving soldiers and family members gathered for a final salute to dedicate a chapel in his name in Maryland.

I think of men like Father O’Grady today, and so many others who are in the service. Besides our prayers, they merit our gratitude. Most of us can’t imagine what they are living with every day. But I am reminded, too, of Jesus’ call to his disciples: Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me.

Father O’Grady understood the cross as a kind of selflessness. It is the cross of ducking gunfire to give a man your gloves. It is the cross of saying Mass on the hood of a Jeep, genuflecting in mud, anointing the dying under a tattered tent. It is the cross of placing others first, until one day all you leave behind is a prayer book riddled with shrapnel, and a chapel with your name over the door, and memories and stories that reveal, again and again, the heart of a good Christian, and a great priest.

The most enduring homily is the one Father O’Grady preached with his life—one all of us need to hear, and remember. His niece toasted him with an Irish proverb: “The work,” she said, “praises the man.”

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