

For God and Country

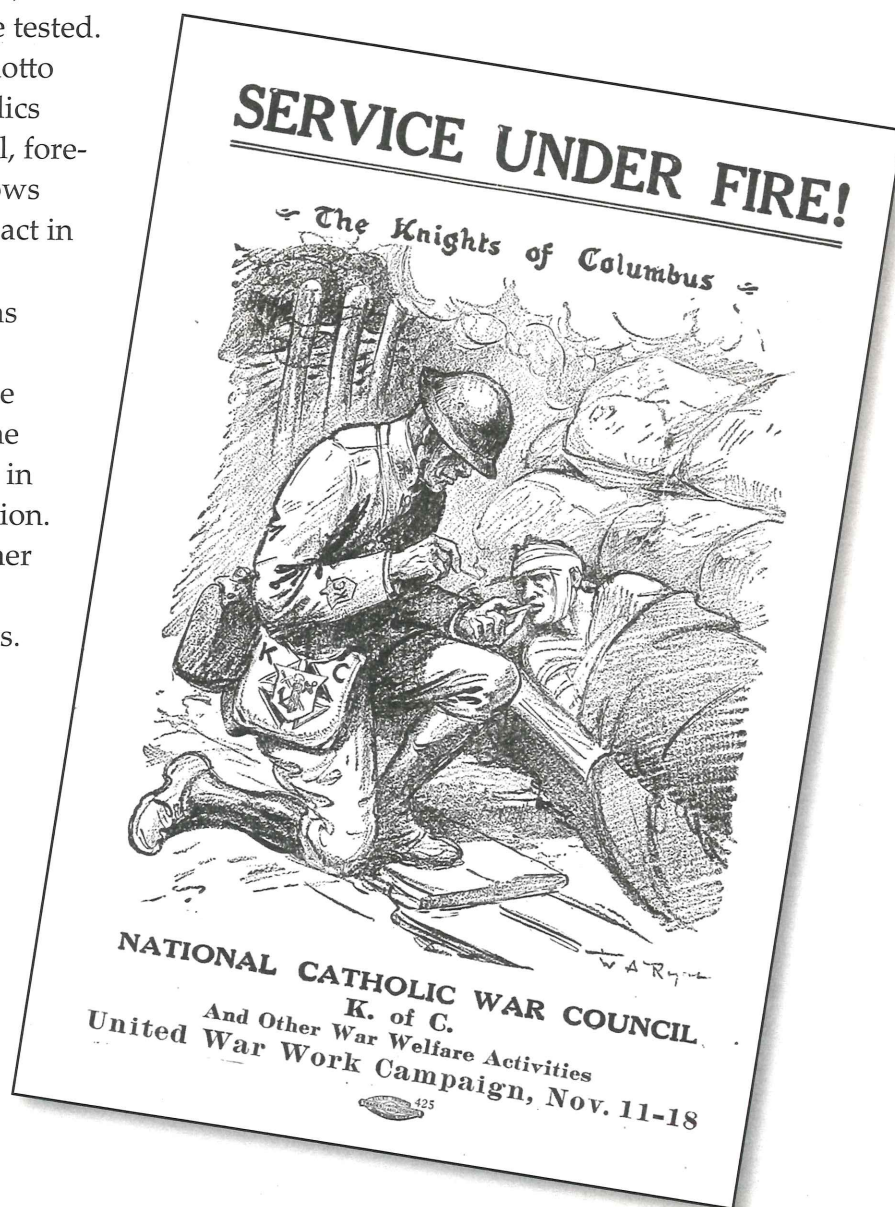
By William John Shepherd

When the United States entered the First World War in 1917 it relied heavily on private individuals and volunteer organizations to support the war effort. Among these was the Catholic Church, which was still widely viewed as an immigrant institution, its patriotism suspect and certainly not battle tested. Responding to this challenge under the motto "For God and Country," American Catholics created the National Catholic War Council, forerunner of an organization that, today, allows their Church to speak with one voice and act in unison.

Historically, the American Church was not unified, though its bishops did meet occasionally in plenary councils during the nineteenth century. The organization of the American Federation of Catholic Societies in 1901 did little to encourage national cohesion. Many in the American hierarchy were either indifferent or hostile to the Federation, which was also troubled by ethnic conflicts.

There was, however, a growing trend toward organization on the national level. Advances in transportation and communication combined with the growing power of the federal government induced many groups to organize nationally to promote their interests. The mainstream Protestant churches formed the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, and many Catholics, divided by region and ethnicity, were concerned about being ignored in the great national debates. Some progress was made regarding

education and charity with the establishment of the Catholic Education Association in 1904 and the National Conference of Catholic Charities in 1910, but otherwise progress toward creating a more effective national voice before the First World War was limited.



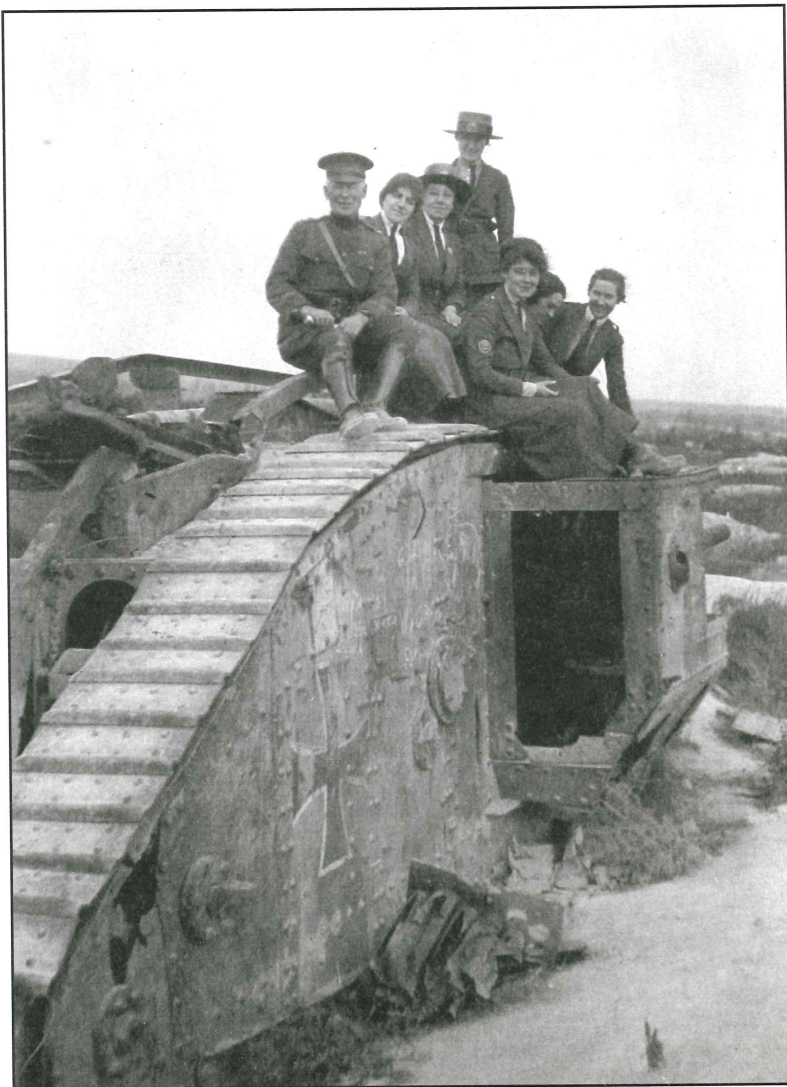
WAR ON THE HOME FRONT

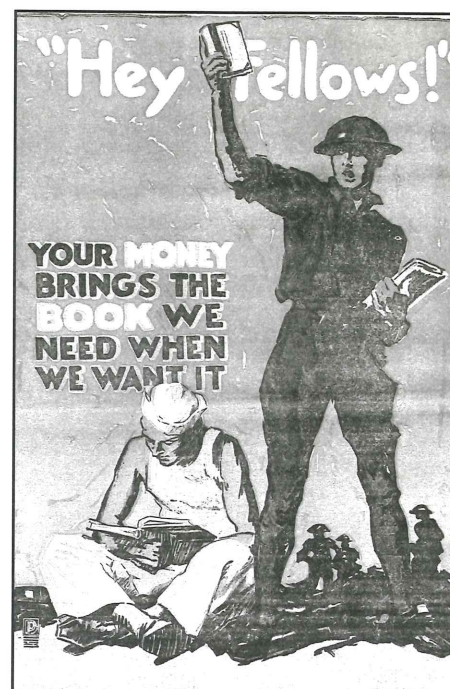
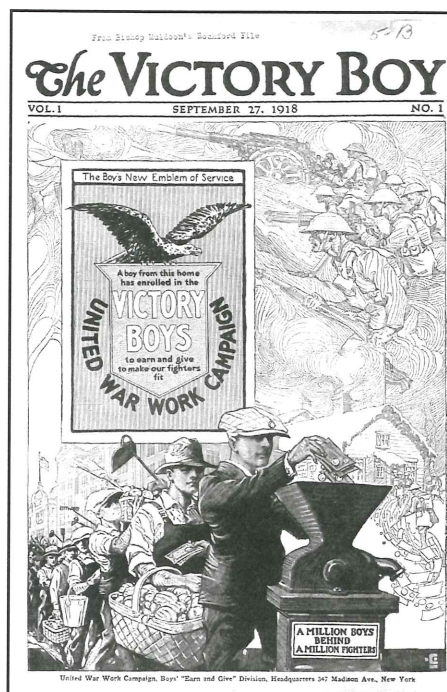
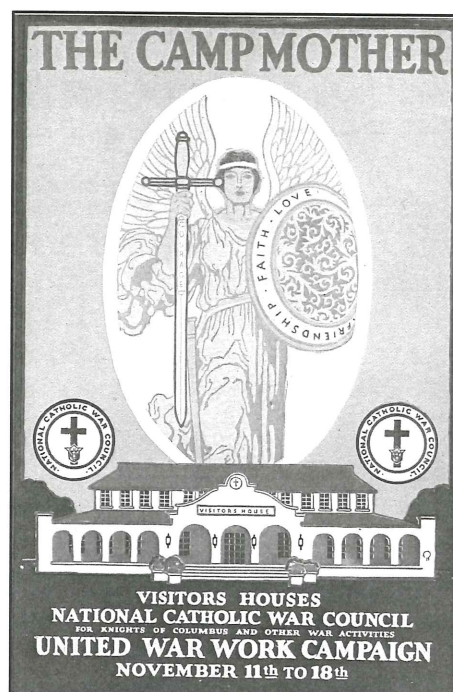
The country entered into the war on April 6, 1917. This was a seminal event for the American Catholic Church. Its leaders were concerned about being excluded from the national mobilization effort and hoped to demonstrate Catholic loyalty. Two weeks later, at the annual meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Catholic University of America, the bishops pledged President Woodrow Wilson the support and cooperation of American Catholics in the war effort. Several Catholic societies, including the Knights of Columbus and the Chaplain's Aid Association,

also offered assistance to address war needs. It soon became clear, however, that a cooperative effort was necessary, and Paulist Father John J. Burke, founder of the Chaplain's Aid Association and editor of the *Catholic World*, suggested to Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore that a general meeting of all Catholic societies be organized to coordinate their war work.

Cardinal Gibbons, as well as Cardinals John M. Farley of New York and William O'Connell of Boston, approved Burke's suggestion. On August 11-12, 1917, a gathering at Catholic University of representatives of 42 dioceses, 27 national Catholic societies, and 18 publications created the National Catholic War Council (NCWC). This effort was the latest attempt by Catholic leaders to unify Catholic war activities, represent Catholic interests in the U.S. Congress, address the needs of soldiers at home and overseas, promote the Americanization of recent immigrants, and develop a plan for the social reconstruction of American society after the war. The emergency group elected Father Burke the first president of the

Below: Workers of the Overseas Committee of the National Catholic War Council touring the front, ca. 1918, with an unknown officer. They are posing on a British tank that had been captured by the Germans, then re-captured by the Americans, on the Hindenburg Line near Reims, France. The ladies are Loretto McBride, Drusilla Matthews, and Nellie Welch in front and Mary Furlong, Mrs. Markey, and Gertrude Skelton in back.





NCWC with an executive council composed of all the country's archdioceses, the Knights of Columbus, and the American Federation of Catholic Societies to direct this ambitious work.

One of Burke's first acts was to invite other religious agencies to join his new group in advising the U.S. War Department on religious and moral matters. This so-called Committee of Six, of which Burke was named permanent chairman, was thereafter designated by federal authorities an official advisory body to the Secretary of War.

Burke was well aware of the political implications in the Church of all this new activity, and he quickly had the new NCWC reorganized to give the nation's bishops more direct operational control by installing a board of four bishops to supervise the whole operation. This Administrative Committee met for the first time at Catholic University on January 18, 1918, to determine the work plans for the new and enlarged NCWC, now with its myriad of

sub-committees, each involved in one of the many aspects of the proposed war work.

The work to be done by these various sub-committees was led by Father Burke's section of the NCWC called the Committee on Special War Activities. Burke served as liaison with the government's Commission on Training Activities and the Morale Division of the War Department. In turn, in August, 1918, the War Department recognized the NCWC as an official government agent in war welfare work. This recognition enabled the NCWC to participate in the United War Work Campaign of 1918 where it received 36 million dollars as its share of the fund drive, most of which went to the work of the Knights of Columbus and the NCWC overseas units.

OVERSEAS WORK

In early 1918 the NCWC had outlined a program for war relief and overseas reconstruction and appointed Alfonso de Navarro and his assistant, Vincent O'Sullivan, to study conditions from a Catholic viewpoint. Between July and October



Catholic chaplains, newly graduated and commissioned May 24, 1918, probably taken at the Chaplain's Training School, Camp Zachary Taylor, Louisville, Kentucky.

1918 Navarro reported on conditions in France and on the state of its welfare organizations, especially the controversy surrounding its Fatherless Children of France. O'Sullivan, for his part, reported on the need for a Catholic club for military officers in London. In reply, the NCWC promptly appropriated \$15,000 for the task.

On the basis of the Navarro reports and a request from the U.S. Commissioner on Training Camp Activities, the NCWC formed a commission (eventually known as the Paris Sub-Committee), with Navarro as chairman to investigate French charities and make recommendations on the use of allocated reconstruction funds. Burke and others were also considering a more active role for American Catholics overseas and suggested sending women war workers to Europe for

reconstruction work. The Secretary of War had also asked the NCWC to send women workers abroad trained especially for hospital work, visitor house service, and the entertainment of wounded soldiers. As a result, Charles I. Denechaud, chairman of the NCWC's Men's Committee, went to France in January 1919 to supervise all overseas work with one million dollars to support such endeavors. Promptly thereafter the NCWC began to secure and operate centers for women volunteers throughout the industrial centers and war devastated areas.

NCWC women workers were sent abroad with Mrs. Stocks Millar appointed to serve under Denechaud as their leader. Almost immediately Mrs. Millar called for establishment of a Catholic club in Paris, and in January 1919 the Etoile Service Club

opened, quickly becoming one of the most popular American clubs in Europe. Between January 1919 and March 1920 the NCWC organized 28 houses in France, Belgium, Italy, and Poland. They also set up lodgings for nurses and other allied women war workers, along with canteens, playgrounds, boarding houses for unmarried working women, women's clubs and social centers that offered English language classes, along with a whole range of stenographic subjects.

In March 1920, however, the NCWC closed down its overseas operations with 21 of its houses turned over to local committees in the various countries. The Paris Committee continued, however, to operate the French-American Welfare Center as a general information center for American visitors. The Committee also assumed management of the Liaison de le Montagne Ste. Genevieve as a woman's student center and boarding house.

Back home in December 1919, the Reconstruction Committee—one of the NCWC's original standing sub-committees—had listed those areas that called for immediate attention. Its report called for cooperation with both the U.S. Employment Service and the federal Board of Vocational Training. It also recommended the establishment of clinics for the care of wounded or invalided soldiers and extensive Americanization programs for immigrants.

For their part following war's end the American bishops came to appreciate the effectiveness of a joint Catholic endeavor. They decided to make the NCWC a permanent organization in the American Church. On September 24, 1919, they established the newly named National Catholic Welfare Council which formally assumed the duties and operations of

the National Catholic War Council. This change immediately affected the structure of the old Reconstruction Committee, the only one of the old organizations still in active service. A certain functional streamlining took place as the old committee established five departments based on the postwar activities of the newly named Welfare Council. (The National Catholic War Council itself was officially dissolved as a cooperation on April 30, 1931.)

CONCLUSION

The National Catholic War Council of 1917 represented the first coming together of the American bishops in voluntary association to address great national issues affecting the Church. It was able to deal successfully with such problems as meeting the spiritual and material needs of soldiers preparing for war and women and youth drawn to the cities and factories. The bishops realized that this united and coordinated wartime effort was crucial to effective protection of Church interests in peacetime and resulted in the creation of the permanent national Bishops' conference being engaged at the federal, state, and local levels of activity regarding legislation, education, publicity, and social action. Success in providing leadership for the growth and development of the Catholic Church in the United States induced the hierarchies in many other countries to replicate the organization and methods of the Americans.

William John Shepherd is a senior archivist in the archives of the Catholic University of America and frequent contributor to this magazine.

Potomac Catholic Heritage

THE CATHOLIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON



From our President

Times change, but in many ways they remain the same. We will continue serving the Archdiocese of Washington as we enter our 38th year.

Unfortunately, the historical society did not offer any lectures or programs in 2013 (apologies), but I envision that we will offer at least two, perhaps more, in the New Year. As well, the *Potomac Catholic Heritage* will continue to provide articles pertaining to the rich history of the archdiocese.

Did you know that you belonged to a one-of-a-kind historical society? Yes, our society is the only one in the United States designed to serve a Catholic archdiocese. Yes, there are some other Catholic history journals, but we are the only one serving the Nation's Capital and the five Maryland counties which make up the Archdiocese of Washington.

There is a pressing need for more contributors to our magazine. If you have a particular topic you would like to write about, please let me know. There are obviously some guidelines, so please contact me if you are open to writing an article. Also, if you have any suggestions for articles, please contact me.

Blessings upon you and yours during the season of Advent and for a holy and happy Christmas. And happy New Year.

~ William (Bill) Richardson

richardson4645@yahoo.com



The Catholic Historical Society of Washington

Established 1976

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TEMPORARY MAIL ADDRESS

The Catholic Historical Society
c/o W. Richardson
1200 Varnum St., NE
Washington, DC 20017

EDITORS

Morris J. MacGregor
Rev. Paul Liston
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OUR MISSION

The Society was established to preserve and promote awareness of our Catholic history in the area that comprises the Archdiocese of Washington. The Society sponsors lectures, special tours, and this publication on local Catholic history.