

# ONCE A SOLDIER....

Brother Aloysius J. Howlin “Papal Zouave and Patrician Brother”

by Br Linus Walker

In 1977 the Patrician Brothers, Galway published a pamphlet by Brother Linus H. Walker on the life of Brother Aloysius John Howlin, an extraordinary man. (Headings have been added for ease of reference.)

## BY WAY OF EXPLANATION

*For many years in diverse places interested persons have questioned the Patrician Brothers about their distinctive green sash and its historical background.*

*An answer required that research be focused on Brother Aloysius J. Howlin from County Wexford, for to him goes the credit for the existence of the sash. The present pamphlet serves a dual purpose. It answers the question about the distinctive green sash and gives an outline history of the development of the Congregation of Patrician Brothers during the lifetime of Brother Aloysius.*

*One learns from “Once A Soldier...” that Bro Aloysius John Howlin was one of the most dynamic back-room men to have entrusted his life and talents to the Patrician Brothers. He brought a new dignity – and urgency – to everything he undertook. A man of virile spirituality, boundless energy and scholarly accomplishments he inspired confidence by the strength of his convictions and the open sincerity of his heart.*

*In his efforts to assist in winning Papal Approval for his Institute he learned how the balm of soft words can prove ineffective against the harshness of reality, A man of vision, he raised his eyes beyond the boundaries of his native Ireland to Australia and India. To many weary confreres he symbolized strength, to those who experienced confusion he pointed a way, for those drifting he set a course, to those despairing he was a dynamic figure of promise. One might truly say his life was routine and unspectacular, yet his impact on those he met and on the history of his Congregation was truly remarkable.*

*Brother Aloysius was a man of God, totally dedicated to the ideal of serving God through the Brotherhood. No labour was too great for him, no burden too heavy, no distance too remote when the work of the Congregation was concerned.*

*We are deeply indebted to Brother Linus Walker for reincarnating Brother Aloysius in this carefully written historical pamphlet which necessitated much painstaking research and documentation. Hopefully through his efforts we may be inspired to steel our wills for accomplishment, undaunted by faults and failures, as Brother Aloysius shows, seeming to thrive in adversity, yet always remaining in the background, content to do the hard work.*

*As you peruse this pamphlet you will discover the openness of the response of Brother Aloysius to the Divine call; you will discover the loyal, stouthearted, cheerful Wexfordman; you will discover ‘the true believer’.*

*Brother Robert J. Ruane,  
Superior General,  
Patrician Brothers’ Generalate,  
Tullow Hill, Tullow, Co. Carlow,  
July 9, 1977*

---

## **Brother Aloysius - Background**

Brother Aloysius John Howlin was born in 1837 and raised in Mulrankin, County Wexford where he had an all too short primary education followed by six years behind a drapery counter in Wexford town. There he had the good fortune to be involved with the O'Connell Debating Club, membership of which taught him many things of which he must otherwise have remained ignorant. There had been further shop service in Dublin, then a never to be forgotten half year's soldiering "for the Pope".

He had enlisted in Dublin in April 1861 and with 20 others had travelled via Liverpool and Hull to Antwerp, the very first contingent of 'The Battalion of St. Patrick' to embark on the papal service. They had a week in Rome, then on to Spoleto. John Howlin's company of 120 went with General Schmidt to the defence of Perugia and its archiepiscopal palace. Overwhelming forces forced the surrender of the garrison. Two months of captivity followed, first at Leghorn and then at Genoa. The war ended after Castelfidardo and Pius IX had voluntarily become 'the Prisoner of the Vatican'. The prisoners of war had been declared free, but a Liberal government at Whitehall had refused to be interested, saying any that of its subjects who had gone to fight for the Pope had thereby forfeited his British citizenship. As a result 'The Battalion of St. Patrick' belonged nowhere, until those who had sent it out in the first place organized its return. Money was collected and they were returned to Cork. From there John Howlin had gone to Dublin to seek employment.

From the train he had gone to a little eating-house he knew. There he shared a table with Brother Patrick McCrystal from a small monastery in the Queen's [Laois] County. This chance meeting had been for John Howlin the beginning of a new adventure. Because of it, at the age of 24, he transferred from 'The Battalion of St. Patrick' to the 'Brothers of St. Patrick'.

In January 1872, Aloysius would find himself charged with the senior classes at Mountrath College and so virtual head of the school. In the Congregation he had had the minimum terms as postulant and novice and since profession had filled the last place on the college staff. He had learned his mathematics under Brother Augustine Marnell and had been coached in the modern and classical authors by Brother Bernard Kennedy. He had never had any formal training for teaching and, he was quite sure could never have been considered a possible headmaster. What he knew he had learned from observation and an early-days apprenticeship to Brother Patrick McCrystal.

Character and leadership were now being asked of him, Augustine would be in charge of mathematics, Patrick would continue to look after some of the classics and he would have the benefit of their guidance and advice.

## **The Question of Self-government**

As far back as 1869 a conference of the three monasteries which comprised the Brotherhood of St Patrick had adopted certain resolutions calculated to meet the long-term needs of the Congregation. In December 1871, 16 delegates had assembled at Mountrath where they repeated their adherence to these ideals and pledged themselves to seek a form of self-government and a common novitiate for all the

monasteries. Some held very strongly for 'loyalty to the Bishops' and would have the Brothers remain a diocesan Congregation. Most would agree that a central novitiate was to be desired, but opinions differed as to whether such an establishment was possible without a general superior who would be independent of the Bishops.

In September 1872 a conference of Superiors, Brothers Paul Palmer of Tullow, John Lynch of Galway and Augustine Marnell of Mountrath was held at Tullow. The result was that the three men went together to see the Coadjutor Bishop of the diocese and proposed to him three steps which seemed necessary for the common good of the Congregation. These were a common novitiate, the appointment of a general superior with power over all the monasteries and an approach to Rome seeking the status of a pontifical Institute. They were unsuccessful.

In 1873 the Brothers, at the invitation of the Dean of Cashel, established a primary and classical school in the parish of Fethard in Co. Tipperary. This foundation represented the first attempt at expansion since the failure of an endeavour in the United States in the mid-forties.

In 1879 the four communities co-operated in establishing a new foundation at Mallow in Co. Cork.

### **Missionary Hopes**

In March 1880 took place the election to find a successor for Brother Dominic O'Neill as superior at Mountrath. Aloysius found himself elevated to that most unwanted office, but he applied himself to his duties.

The single most important development was the acceptance into the monastery of 15 young postulants to be trained for the Australian dioceses of Maitland, Bathurst and Goulburn. In this project Aloysius had the keenest interest and his secret hope was that he might be one of the advance guard which was to be sent to prepare the way for these young men. In this he was to be disappointed, for when the time came Dominic and Fintan, both O'Neills though unrelated, were the men selected. Four months after the departure of these pioneers in 1883 his term of office ended and he was not re-elected. Far heavier responsibilities were in the offing.

### **Papal Approbation - A Slow Business**

The same summer of 1883 saw Brother Paul Hughes back in Ireland, the very first visit home of a Brother from overseas. But Brother Paul was not on holidays; he was on a questing tour for the benefit of his orphanage at Madras, India and on his way through Rome had somehow managed an interview with the Cardinal Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Discussion of the work at Madras had led Cardinal Simeoni to suggest that since the Brothers now had foundations on three continents it was scarcely consistent or convenient for them to remain an entirely diocesan Congregation. His Eminence thought that steps should be taken to seek recognition of a fully-fledged pontifical institute with its own central government. The Cardinal's recommendation rekindled old fires and revived hopes long dead in the dust, directing the Brothers to take up plans left in abeyance nearly a decade earlier.

In July 1883 a general conference met at Galway and Brother Paul was invited to be present. A document was drawn up for circulation to the monasteries and after it had been approved in each a second conference assembled at Mountrath in the week before Christmas. It was agreed that someone must go to Rome in order that the Galway document and all other necessary papers should be cast in proper canonical form and entered for approval by Propaganda. For this labour of supreme importance and altogether unknown difficulty Aloysius was nominated, with Paul as a kind of part-time, unofficial, assistant to aid him in negotiating the uncharted channels of Roman procedure. Alphonsus [Delaney] and Paul [Hughes?] were dispatched to Tullow to seek permission of the Bishop, Dr. Lynch. They returned with the laconic instruction that the Brothers were “to do whatever Cardinal Simeoni recommended.” Thus armed, Aloysius set out on Christmas Eve with the intention of joining Paul in Rome and being back in Mountrath in time for the resumption of classes after Twelfth Day.

Aloysius had not been prepared for the many complexities of procedure and the snail’s pace, it seemed, progress was to be made at Rome. A consulter in Canon Law, Dr Gualdi, would see to the preparation of the documents and the presentation of their case before the Sacred Congregation. The Constitutions needed to be translated into Italian. An immediate revision of the entire Rule was required. Propaganda would set up an expert commission before which the petition must be presented and which would scrutinize everything. Everything. The beginnings, aims, history, procedures and proposed Constitutions of the Brotherhood would all come under review. It was most thorough and it was all laid down. So much for a speedy disposal of their business.

### **Permission to Wear the Green Sash**

Towards the end of February 1884 Aloysius obtained an introduction to Signor Mellata, secretary to the Pope’s Major Domo. Thanking the Father Secretary for his kindness in affording the interview he had thought to end the business with a joke, remarking that if the Holy Father knew who sought the interview things would be different. “After all” he concluded, ‘he wouldn’t be Pope at all only for me.’ He had to explain this reference to his guard duty at Perugia, but there the conversation had ended.

It was with real surprise and immense pleasure that he received from the office of the Major Domo and delivered by hand a gilt-edged, red-ribboned and red sealed missive inviting him to a ‘private audience’ with His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII, Successor of St. Peter, Patriarch of the West. A smiling chamberlain had presented him with the words “Holy Father – The Irishman who says you would not be Pope but for him.” In the act of going on his knees, Aloysius had halted thunder-stricken and embarrassed, but Leo had laughed and enquired as to the nature of his “Irish friend’s” influence in the conclave. For a while then they discussed Perugia and the papal war, before going on to matters of more immediate concern to the Brothers of which the Pope expressed warm approval. Leo had signalled the end of the audience by asking if there was anything Aloysius desired for himself personally, but Aloysius had been so happy that he was on the point of saying there was nothing when he noticed the robes of the papal officials in the chamber. On an impulse, and scarcely able to frame the request, he had asked if His Holiness would be pleased to grant...on his own initiative and as a mark of special favour.... since it was not in the Constitutions. .... that the Brothers should have... should be allowed to add to the garb prescribed by the Rule a green

sash. In honour of St. Patrick, he added hastily. The favour granted and the apostolic blessing imparted, “for you specially, for your brethren and your countrymen”, Aloysius withdrew. Before he left Rome the Brothers’ petition had been lodged and the Constitutions readied for presentation. The rest remained in the hands of God.

### **Temporary Approbation Granted - Green Sash Worn**

In 1887 Alphonsus [Delaney] travelled to Rome and arrived a few days before Christmas to be advised by the now Monsignor Mellata ‘your business here is complete.’ Monsignor Mellata arranged for the decree of confirmation to be executed. Alphonsus was more than agreeably surprised to have a parchment, signed sealed and approving his Congregation for an experimental period of five years, delivered to him on Christmas Day.

The first great event thereafter was the holding of a convocation to elect a Superior General. On April 3, 1888, the Tuesday of Easter week, the professed Brothers resident in Ireland assembled at Mountrath under the presidency of Dr. Lynch and chose as their first Superior General Brother Alphonsus M. Delaney with Brothers Aloysius J. Howlin, Anthony M. O’Neill, John P. Lynch and Malachy E. Barr as Assistants.

**On August 15 1888, at the close of their annual retreat, the Brothers donned for the first time the green sash obtained for them by Aloysius five years earlier.**

### **Final Approbation**

The Brothers in Australia had not been included in the decree of temporary approbation because of the financial arrangements entered into with their Bishops in 1880, but they were included by special indult in 1891. [At the annual retreat held at St Charles Villa, Ryde in January 1892, the Brothers in Australia first donned the green sash. KS.]

Both Aloysius in the company of the Superior General, Brother Alphonsus, went to Rome in 1892 seeking the final approbation. After five months the two returned, their efforts successful. On September 8 1893 the decree of final approbation was signed and with it an indult permitting the resignation of the Superior General and his Council. In accordance with the indult the First Chapter reassembled in October, but this time at Woodstock on the outskirts of Mountrath. The first business on its agenda was the election of a Superior General and the new man was Brother Anthony O’Neill with Aloysius, Alphonsus, Malachy and John his advisers. The new General personally proposed and the assembly agreed that the novitiate be transferred to Tullow and the 70 year old boarding school there closed. Tullow, place of foundation, was also fixed upon as official residence of the Superior General and his Assistants. For Aloysius this meant a severance of a 33 years connection with Mountrath, where he had lived since Patrick brought him to the Congregation in 1861.

At Tullow he continued teaching for the next eight years and though then 65 he had no thoughts of retiring.

## **Final Years**

In 1902 he transferred to Mallow and for the next 15 years he worked seven hours a day in the Academy there, as well as attending to the duties of headmaster. When urged to take things easier because of years and increasing asthmatic trouble he would say that he long prayed to be allowed to die in harness. In those years he rarely left the monastery, except to attend morning Mass at the Convent of Mercy. For recreation he took a stroll in the garden or along the tree lined avenue, telling his beads over and over with the rosary concealed beneath his soutane. Though it was his known custom to follow the Way of the Cross every evening, with his arms extended, he always picked a quiet time for this devotion, since the Stations hung in the monastery corridor.

Age and infirmity finally forced a retirement from school duties. On the night of January 9, 1917 Father Aherne was summoned, administered the Last Sacraments and spoke a little with his old friend.

The next morning, after the convent Mass, Father Madden came to give Absolution and within the hour death dropped silently by to find an old man, soldierly to the end, seated in an armchair and expecting his visitor, fully conscious and lucid, still able to raise his rosary to his lips and tell the Brothers about him:

“Pray for me and take me out of Purgatory.”

oo000oo