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Nuns unleashed Battle of Gettysburg's most powerful weapon

Tony Magliano | Jul. 8, 2013 Making a Difference

A little more than 150 years ago -- July 1-3, 1863 -- the bloodiest battle of the American Civil War was fought at Gettysburg, Pa. In that three-day period, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the opposing Union Army of the Potomac suffered more than an estimated 43,000 combined casualties.

About 10 miles south of Gettysburg is the Emmitsburg (Md.) Province of the Daughters of Charity, where foundress Elizabeth Ann Seton, America's first native-born canonized saint, is buried.

Living two hours away, I have had several opportunities to pray at the tomb of Mother Seton, as she is affectionately known. The provincial grounds, nestled amidst Maryland's Catoctin Mountains, are both beautiful and peaceful.

But 150 years ago, these grounds were anything but peaceful. They shook from the heavy bombardment of cannon fire at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Not content to safely sit out the battle, about 16 Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph, as they were then known, headed to Gettysburg to nurse the wounded.

As they arrived, they encountered the horror of war. Sr. Marie Louise Caulfield wrote that she saw "thousands of guns and swords lying around. ... further on we saw many soldiers on horseback as silent almost as the dead who lay there ... The rain had filled the roads with water, and here it was red with blood. Our carriage wheels rolling through blood! Our horses could hardly be made to proceed on account of the horrid objects lying about them."

On the battlefield, and later in area hospitals, the sisters cared for the medical and spiritual needs of both Catholic and non-Catholic Confederate and Union soldiers.

According to Denise Gallo, provincial archivist for the Daughters of Charity, the care from the sisters was so good that many of the soldiers actually cried when they learned they were going to be transferred to other hospitals.

The love shown by the sisters melted even the most hardened hearts. In the context of anti-Catholic sentiments of the time, Gallo reported that some of the soldiers said, "And these are the people that we insult" who are being so kind and loving to us.

In a recent general papal audience, Pope Francis remarked the grace of Christ gives people "a heart that loves, a heart that suffers, a heart that rejoices with others, a heart full of tenderness for those who bear the wounds of life and feel like they are on the periphery of society."

At the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic bishops of the world, reflecting on the horror, perversity and indiscriminate destruction of modern war, wrote, "All these considerations compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude."

Sadly, nations of the world, and even millions of Catholics, have yet to undertake an entirely new attitude

toward war.

What are we waiting for?

Modern warfare is more destructive and deadly than ever before, even compared to the devastation of the Battle of Gettysburg.

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 2006 to attack its enemy, Hezbollah, Pope Benedict XVI said the only way to respond to violence is with love. "The humble way to let God win" is through nonviolence and love, "not with the stronger empire."

Like the nuns at Gettysburg, may we finally learn to unleash the most powerful weapon of all: unconditional love.

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