

Willie Doyle Talk

Good evening, I'd like to reiterate the earlier welcome extended to all and express my own personal gratitude to everyone for being here this evening to learn a bit more about the life of Fr. Willie Doyle. As a brief note of introduction, my name is Jack Engelmann and I'm a graduate student in theology at the University of Notre Dame, and I have been working here in Mullingar for the last two years. Like many of you, I was first introduced to Fr. Willie when the Diocese opened his cause for canonization in the Fall of 2022, and since then have been fortunate enough to contribute in a small way to that cause by transcribing some of his old journals and written reflections.

As you may know, Fr. Doyle left behind a fairly large collection of writing in the form of journals, letters, homilies, and retreats, some of which have already been edited into an excellent volume by Pat Kenny (*To Raise the Fallen*). Part of the work involved in promoting a person's cause to sainthood involves looking for sources that can testify to their personal holiness and fervent pursuit of perfection in their Christian vocation, and for people who died some time ago like Fr. Doyle, extant writings like his provide particularly important testimony. Indeed, it has been my experience that Fr. Willie's writings only seem to further emphasize the reality already communicated in his biography: that Fr. Doyle lived a life marked by deep devotion to Christ, service for others, and unfailing good humor.

However, I am of the belief that simply hearing the biography of a holy person, no matter how compelling, sometimes cannot do justice to the significant role that the saints play in our Christian lives. Pope Francis, at a Vatican Symposium on Christian holiness, referred to the saints as "precious pearls; always alive and timely, and who never lose their importance". The communion of saints cannot be relegated to the category of impressive and commendable

history, but rather must be understood to be in constant dialogue with us today, ever encouraging us to draw closer to God. The enduring value, for example, of works like St. Therese's "Story of a Soul" comes not from its ability to tell us what a holy person she was, but rather from the fact that it tells us that we can live that life too.

It is on this premise that I have constructed the brief talk that I would like to share with you all tonight. Fr. Willie Doyle died over a hundred years ago, on the 16th of August 1917, a time when the world, and the Church, were very different than they are today. Indeed, his biography is so heroically compelling that in some ways I think it risks being unrelatable; we might think ourselves unable to make a sacrifice like his. However, throughout the last year, as I have made my way through the corpus of Fr. Doyle's work, I have come to find his writings to be filled with a wisdom that is utterly timeless and universally applicable. Beyond that, he himself had a deep devotion to many different saints, and went to great effort to exhort all who would listen of the necessity of allowing ourselves to be in constant dialogue with Church's diverse communion of holy men and women. As a complement to Pat Kenny's excellent biography of Fr. Doyle that was just presented, and granting me a small degree of editorial license, I would therefore like to share with you all some reflections and thoughts on Christian holiness and "becoming a saint" directly from the pen of Fr. Doyle himself. Given how industrious he was in life, even to the point of spending his sole week on leave from the war preaching a retreat for a convent of nuns, I like to think that he would enjoy the opportunity to address you all in this way.

Fr. Doyle believed that every single saint throughout history, regardless of the time and circumstances in which they lived, was formed by the observance of one simple rule. That rule, which he seems to get by paraphrasing Galatians 6, is that a person never boasts except of the

cross of Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to the self, and the self has been crucified to the world. Put another way, amidst all their diversity, the reality all saints share is the desire to deny oneself in order that Christ crucified on the cross might be proclaimed. While both aspects of the rule are undeniably connected, it is worth analyzing both dimensions in turn.

Regarding the first, despite Jesus' own words in the Gospel that proclaim the importance of denying oneself and following him, the subject of self-denial can often be challenging. However, while some of Fr. Doyle's personal penitential practices were the product of his historical era, his theological understanding of self-denial was not premised upon an understanding of the human person as something flawed or broken, something in need of constant correction. Indeed, if there is anything that Fr. Doyle could be said to be irrevocably convinced of, it would be the dignity, worth, and inherent goodness of every human person. He writes that "we can understand the value of a soul very clearly from the efforts that our Lord makes to save it".

Fr. Doyle believed very deeply that God made humanity to be good, and while sin undeniably pulls us away from the loving communion it was originally intended for, Christ's loving sacrifice has the last word, by which He reaffirms the dignity and worth that we humans possess. His understanding of self-denial should therefore not be understood as a warrant to overindulge in mortification or penance. Whatever his sense of the pervasiveness of sin, he proclaimed that the one attribute of God that towers over all of the others is His mercy. Thus, for Fr. Doyle a saintly sense of self-denial is one that takes us outside of ourselves and leads us to more deeply understand God's love for us and Christ's sacrifice on the cross. To use Fr. Doyle's

words, self-denial done properly serves only to “stir up in our hearts as strong, personal attachment to our Blessed Lord, to stir up enthusiasm for his cause”.

This brings us quite neatly then to the second component of Fr. Doyle’s “saintly rule”, if we may call it that, the proclamation of Christ crucified. Somewhat ironically, for Fr. Doyle this idea of proclamation has very little to do with actual words. In a retreat he gave to diocesan priests, he exhorted them to focus far less on their words and far more on their actions, saying that “it is not what you say that appeals to people, but what you are”. For Fr. Doyle we are not meant to merely speak of God with our words, but rather make our entire existence a testament to his love for us. As we know from Fr. Doyle’s biography, he understood from a very young age that this meant reaching out to any and all of those around us who might need our help.

In reading his writings it is hard to overstate how deeply convicted Fr. Doyle was of the importance of proclaiming Christ through the action of loving other people, the ultimate sacrifice of his life for his fellow soldiers being the most compelling example. But even beyond the actions that precipitated his final moments, Fr. Doyle’s entire life was marked by the conviction that making Christ’s love known to others was of greater importance than anything else. By way of example, Fr. Doyle was a deeply pious man and I have read no less than 50 pages of his writing that talk about the importance of devotion to the Eucharist and proper behavior at mass. Nevertheless, he concludes a sermon given at a retreat for priests by saying that if jumping onto the altar and standing on his head would help just one person to see how much God loves them, he would do it without a second thought. Unfortunately, his notes from that retreat make no mention whether he actually did, but I tend to doubt it; rather I think he was trying to communicate, with his characteristic mischievous humor, that important reality that the supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls.

Powerfully, one of Fr. Doyle's favorite examples of someone living this saintly rule was St. Patrick. He wrote that so internalized was St. Patrick's love for Christ and love for the people that he encountered in Ireland that ultimately, he had no more of a choice to return to Ireland and proclaim the Gospel than he did to come in the first place. When we consider that St. Patrick was first brought here in chains, I think we can all be struck by the magnitude of what Fr. Doyle wants to say about how self-denial and the proclamation of Christ's love are carried forth in actions. Yet importantly, for Fr. Doyle, living this saintly rule of self-denial is not the privileged domain of a few, but rather the fundamental purpose of the Christian life. He wrote that "to become a saint it is not necessary to leave one's present occupation, to go into a cloister or the desert, or to do anything extraordinary. All that is needed is to consecrate our daily actions to God and do them for His sake. It strikes me, in the context of Pope Francis' words on holiness and the saints, that few messages are more eternally applicable, and yet at the same time more applicable to our current age, than that.

Since at least the late medieval period, the term "island of saints" has been applied in various ways and by a multitude of people to Ireland. The Christian heritage of this country is one that Fr. Doyle in his writings clearly held very dearly, and I was therefore somewhat surprised to read in one of his retreat texts the line that "Ireland can hardly be called the island of saints". In one sense, perhaps Fr. Doyle was pointing to the fact that Ireland has had comparatively few saints canonized in the modern period. Yet when one reads on, the point that Fr. Doyle was making to the group of priests attending the retreat is that he has noticed a distinct lack of love in the Church communities he had visited. Sacraments were being administered, mass was being attended, but Fr. Doyle seemed to think that the joy of Christ and the desire to

bring His love to all people was missing. Even outside of the Irish context, I think that is a message that our Church today needs to hear.

The question of whether or not Fr. Doyle will become a canonized saint is a decision not up to any of us present here tonight, if only wishing made it so. What is possible, and indeed is the fundamental baptismal vocation of our Christian lives, is to heed his words and work to make Christ's love known to all around us. The cause of Fr. Doyle needs miracles, and please do pray for those. But what the cause, and indeed our Church and world, need even more urgently is witnesses. The biography of Fr. Doyle shows quite clearly a life lived in pursuit of paying constant witness to the transformative love of the crucified Christ, and we are called to do the same.

I'd encourage you therefore to not simply think of Fr. Doyle's life as an impressive piece of Christian history, but rather use it as a model for your own life. St. Paul, in one of his letters to the Corinthians, talked about the saints not in the canonized sense we understand them now, but rather in a more general sense of all of those who are sanctified in Christ and striving for holiness. While Fr. Doyle had a deep devotion indeed to the canonized saints of our Church, it is quite clear from his writings that he also had a deep conviction of Paul's sense of sainthood. In that vein, I like to think that if we all followed Fr. Doyle's saintly rule and virtuous witness a bit more in our lives, regardless of whether our Church will count him among her saints, he would count us among his. Thank you.