

Chronicling the U.S. Catholic Experience in the First World War

The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives houses an especially rich collection of materials related to Catholics and the First World War in the United States. As America nears the 100th anniversary of the United States' entry into the First World War, the Archives is making hundreds of pages of photographs, letters, scrapbooks, and other documents available online to the public free of charge via a new web page: [Chronicling the U.S. Catholic Experience in the First World War](#).

When the wheels of the war machinery were set in motion with the United States' declaration of war on April 6, 1917, 5 million Americans were mobilized for victory. Among those were over 800,000 American Catholics, an often unwelcome religious minority in the U.S. during these years. The American bishops, hoping to provide comfort and service to Catholic servicemen as well as demonstrate Catholic loyalty to the nation, created the National Catholic War Council. The War Council became the precursor of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, an institution that has served to minister to the needs of Catholics nationally ever since.

Here is a record in correspondence, photographs, objects, and printed material that expresses Catholics' enthusiastic participation in wartime activities. Notably missing, however, is much evidence of Catholic dissent toward the war. There was a strong, if minority, opposition to the war that included Irish American Catholics wary of allying with Britain, and German American Catholics sympathetic to their homeland, but few Catholics opposed the war on grounds of their faith. Instead, most American Catholics seemed to embrace the war, and continued to celebrate their many contributions to the effort afterward to prove their loyalty to the U.S., confounding anti-Catholic enemies who questioned their patriotism. In 1928 when the Catholic Al Smith ran for president, for example, the KKK and other non-Catholics expressed their venom toward his religion through public mockery and cross-burning. The commencement of the publication of the Catholic Heroes series in 1929, digitized here, appears to be no accident: Catholics proudly recorded their efforts to win the war in Catholic newspapers during a time of anti-Catholic resurgence. Other records here recount the founding of the Bishops' Conference, Catholic soldiers' on the ground experiences, Catholic women's work during the war, as well as individual parish participation in the war. We hope these records offer insights into Catholics' unique participation in "The Great War."