

“The Angel of the Trenches”



John B. DeValles

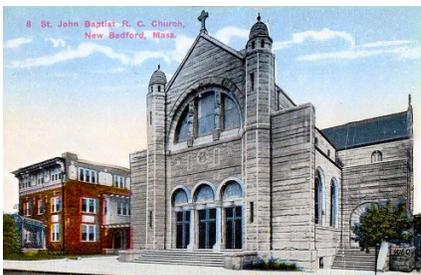
(1878-1920)

*“Over there, we knew no racial or religious lines.
We were all Americans”* – Fr. J. B. DeValles

Reverend John B. DeValles was born August 29, 1878 in São Miguel, Azores, of Azorean and Cape Verdean heritage. Christened João Baptista DeValles, his family immigrated to New Bedford in 1880 where he attended the public schools and was a graduate of New Bedford High School. He later studied stenography and bookkeeping at Benton’s Business School in New Bedford before his acceptance to St. Charles College, Baltimore, to study law and “where he won a large number of prizes for high scholarship.”¹

An accomplished linguist, scholar and musician (violin and piano), Fr. DeValles was fluent in six languages.

Deciding on a religious life of service to others, he entered the seminary at Montréal, Canada, to study for the priesthood. From there, he transferred to St. John’s Seminary at Brighton, Massachusetts, to complete his vocational education. Reverend Father DeValles was ordained June 21, 1906 at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Fall River, Massachusetts, by Bishop William Stang.



St. John the Baptist Church, c1920

Father DeValles celebrated his first Mass in New Bedford at St. John the Baptist Church, oldest Portuguese Catholic church in North America (est. 1871). He was then assigned to Santo Christo Church in Fall River before returning to New Bedford to serve at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. In 1908, he was assigned to Espiritu Santo parish in Fall River, where he established the first Portuguese parochial school in the United States. In 1913, he returned to his home city, accepting the pastorate at St. John the Baptist.

In 1917, Fr. DeValles volunteered with the Knights of Columbus Chaplains Corps. In 1918, he enlisted as a chaplain in the regular army with the rank of First Lieutenant. The first of five

American Catholic chaplains to serve overseas at that time, he was attached to the 104th Regiment of the 26th Division, known as The Yankee Division.²

Chaplain DeValles served eighteen months in the war spending much of that time in the frontline trenches and “No-Man’s Land” of France, searching for wounded and dying soldiers “beyond where the rescue squad was allowed to go”³ due to the extreme crossfire. He attended to the needs of both Allied and German soldiers. Despite wounds and near exhaustion, he carried on. “When he could no longer carry the stretcher to bring in wounded men, he tied wires to his wrists until they cut deep into his flesh.”⁴ To lift the men’s spirits he purchased an old piano in a nearby village, had it repaired and brought it to the front.



WWI trench warfare (public domain)

One night when he did not return from No-Man’s Land, searchers later found him next to a dead soldier he had been tending. Badly wounded, he was unconscious, his skin blistered – his eyes, throat and lungs burned from sulfur mustard gas. A cellular poison, mustard gas was subsequently recognized as an aggressive carcinogen and banned in the 1925 Geneva Protocol.

Following military hospitalizations, Fr. DeValles continued to serve even though his injuries caused his health to deteriorate. In April 1919, he returned to New Bedford on a brief furlough before several hospitalizations, including surgery for cancer in Minnesota. He spent the remaining months of his life in and out of hospitals.⁵

“Father John,” as he was known to the troops, risked his life many times and his exploits became legendary on both sides of the Atlantic through many published accounts of his heroism. They called him “the Angel of the Trenches.”⁶ France awarded him the Croix de Guerre and inducted him into the Legion of Honor, the highest French order of merit, both military and civilian. The United States Army awarded him the Distinguished Service Cross – the first Catholic chaplain decorated for bravery.⁷ The citation of his Distinguished Service Cross reads:

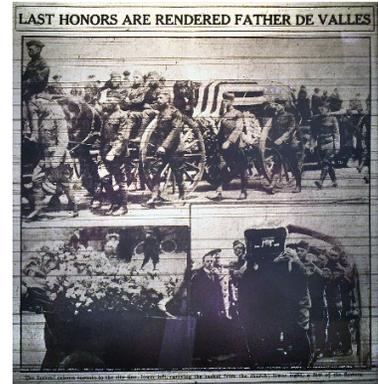


For extraordinary heroism near Apremont, Toul sector, France, April 10 to 13, 1918. Chaplain De Valles repeatedly exposed himself to heavy artillery and machine-gun fire in order to assist in the removal of the wounded from exposed points in advance of the lines. He worked long periods with stretcher-bearers in carrying wounded men to safety. Chaplain De Valles previously rendered gallant service in the Chemin des Dames sector, March 11, 1918 by remaining with a group of wounded during a heavy bombardment.

On May 12, 1920 at Luke’s Hospital in Fr. DeValles’ final hour, his friend, Major General Clarence R. Edwards, telephoned the attending physician that Congress had just voted to award the priest the Distinguished Service Cross. The physician immediately called the hospital, “requesting the chaplain’s nurse to tell him of the conferring of the honor, if he were still conscious. A few minutes later, the nurse reported that she had found Fr. De Valles conscious and told him the news. Upon hearing it, Fr. De Valles raised both arms aloft as if giving thanks

to God, and began to weep.”⁸ Thirty minutes later, he was dead at the age of 41 of abdominal cancer, likely brought on it was surmised, by the chemical attacks he endured in the war.

Father John was buried with full military honors at St. Patrick’s Cemetery, Fall River, as local cities and towns lowered flags to half-staff. One year later, a large monument with a bronze bas-relief of his likeness was unveiled at his gravesite.



Soon thereafter, the School Committee determined to rename the Katherine Street School in honor of New Bedford’s heroic chaplain. The school stood adjacent to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church where Fr. DeValles had served as pastor for a time. Many parish families sent their children to the newly built school.

Katherine Street School was erected in 1911-1914 under the administration of Mayor Charles S. Ashley. The two-story brick schoolhouse had 20 rooms and 895 seats. It was completed and fully occupied by 1914 at an estimated value of \$171,225 (approximately \$5.3 million in 2023 dollars).⁹



KATHARINE STREET SCHOOL.



On October 12, 1920, five months after Fr. DeValles’ death, the city assembled for an impressive dedication of the school “attended by fully 10,000 citizens.”¹⁰ An enormous parade made up of New Bedford’s veterans groups, fraternal organizations and service clubs marched in the 2-mile procession from Common Park to Katherine Street. About 200 Knights of Columbus from throughout the region marched in full regalia, including the Grand Knight of the order, Eugene F. Phelan. Portuguese organizations included the Monte Pio Society, Micaelense

Society and the Gremlo Social Caboverdeanno, of which Fr. DeValles was a member. The newspaper complained, “if anything, there were too many bands.” City and state leaders participated, including Superintendent Allen P. Keith. Fr. Boucher’s solemn invocation exhorted “John B. DeValles, our brave, sincere and boy-like hero chaplain, the well-loved Father John of our victorious American soldiers... His name he leaves unto this school. Therefore do Thou protect it! May all its years be years of usefulness and honor for Thee and for America!”

Harold Winslow, Clerk of Committees of the Common Council, commissioned Castagnoli to sculpt a bust of Fr. DeValles as a presentation to the school. The bust remains ensconced in the school auditorium.



News accounts of the valiant cleric and the DeValles School dedication prompted notice at the Massachusetts Statehouse. Governor Channing H. Cox, appointed a Special Commission “to Provide for a Suitable Memorial in the State House, In Recognition of the Services of Certain Chaplains in the American Expeditionary Forces During The World War.”



On the report’s recommendation, the Statehouse Arts Committee commissioned in 1922 a large bas-relief memorial tablet in bronze by Bashka Paeff, “an eminent Boston sculptor.”¹¹ It was unveiled at the Statehouse July 19, 1922. It remains there in the 3rd floor corridor by the main staircase. A duplicate of the work is encased in DeValles School’s central foyer above the main staircase.¹²

On October 10, 2017, the Massachusetts National Guard presented DeValles School a bronze bas-relief of Fr. DeValles from their collection. A duplicate cast of the bas-relief that surmounts the graveside monument, it was presented during a large outdoor ceremony, which included students, school committee members, city and religious leaders, military personnel, and DeValles family relatives. The proceedings were embellished by flanking howitzers and the landing of a Black Hawk helicopter, which students toured afterwards.¹³



DeValles family relatives, Major General Gary Keefe and Mayor Jon Mitchell with the Fr. DeValles bronze, Oct. 10, 2017. (NBPS photo)



Of his time in the trenches and the work he did with fellow chaplains of all faiths, Fr. DeValles said, “Over there, we knew no racial or religious lines. We were all Americans.” The Boston Globe noted, “Hebrew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, united in working side by side to minister to their men... Where shells burst and men fell torn and bleeding they calmly ministered, heroic witnesses of the power of the faith they preached.”¹⁴

*Respectfully submitted,
Arthur P. Motta, Jr., M.A.
New Bedford Public Schools
March 19, 2024*

¹ “Rev. J. B. De Valles, Heroic Chaplain, Died Last Evening.” New Bedford Morning Mercury. May 13, 1920, p. 10.

² Father DeValles’ military uniform, medals and his violin are on permanent exhibit at the National Museum of the Knights of Columbus/Blessed Michael McGivney Pilgrimage Center, New Haven, CT, donated by the DeValles family.

³ “War Chaplains’ Memorial First for State House Hall of Fame.” Boston Globe, June 8, 1922, p.12.

⁴ “Rev. J. B. De Valles, Heroic Chaplain, Died Last Evening.” New Bedford Morning Mercury. May 13, 1920, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid. p. 15.

⁶ Ibid. p.12.

⁷ “Memorial to Chaplains Includes Three Priests.” N.C.W.C. News Service: The Catholic Standard and Times, Vol. 27, No. 37, July 22, 1922.

⁸ Rev. J. B. De Valles, Heroic Chaplain, Died Last Evening.” New Bedford Morning Mercury. May 13, 1920, p. 10.

⁹ City Documents. “Annual Report of the School Committee for the Year 1920.” New Bedford, Mass.: New Bedford Printing Co., 1921. p.21.

¹⁰ “Dedication of the John B. De Valles School.” New Bedford Morning Mercury. October 13, 1920, P. 10.

¹¹ “War Chaplains’ Memorial First for State House Hall of Fame.” Boston Globe, June 8, 1922, p.12.

¹² Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Chapter 45 of the Resolves of the General Court for 1921. Report of the Special Commission Appointed to Provide for a Suitable Memorial in the State House, in Recognition of the Services of Certain Chaplains in the American Expeditionary Forces during the World War. HOUSE No. 1760, Executive Department, Boston, May 27, 1922.

¹³ <https://wbsm.com/john-b-devalles-elementary-holds-rededication-ceremony/>

¹⁴ “War Chaplains’ Memorial First for State House Hall of Fame.” Boston Globe, June 8, 1922, p.12.

