



72-1993

CHATAIGNON, MARIUS S.

PAPERS, 1904-1976; 2½ inches, MS, printed, pictorial.

Known as Father Chat to those who knew him, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Marius Stephen Chataignon (1886-1957), was pastor of Sacred Heart Church of Galveston for thirty-three years and served as a chaplain in both World Wars. He held the rank of Colonel in the United States Army.

A native of France, Father Chataignon was ordained to the priesthood at St. Mary's Cathedral in 1911. In 1924 he became pastor of Sacred Heart. Throughout his career he remained a community leader in ministering to the military and veterans groups and in the education of young people.

Holdings include letters from Chataignon to his sister in Galveston during World War II, clippings and photographs, military records, honors, certificates and awards, notes and telegrams at the time of death, and letters and notes to Father Chataignon.

Rt. Rev. Msgr. Marius S. Chataignon

Rev. M. S. Chataignon, or Father Chat, as he was affectionately called, was a native of Cellieu, Loire, France, where he was born Sept. 17, 1886. He was the second of four children born to Etienne and Benoite Cancade Chataignon.

His parents, members of the farming class were intensely religious and from early childhood Father Chat felt the call to the priesthood. He was educated in a school taught by the Brothers and later attended St. Jodard Petite Seminaire.

Upon completion of his college courses, Father Chat volunteered in the French Army in 1905, serving a year, where he developed a love for military service, in which he later distinguished himself in the service of his adopted country.

Following the year of military service, conditions in France were turbulent between the church and state and determined to seek religious tolerance where he might pursue his studies for the priesthood, he came to America.

Father Chat arrived in Baltimore in 1907 where he attended St. Joseph's Seminary, and met one of his special priest friends, Father Gately, who later beckoned him to join him in the Oleander City.

Father Gately was named head of the Holy Rosary Church and school here, and Father Chat transferred to St. Mary's Seminary at La Porte where he completed his theology studies.

He was ordained to the priesthood at St. Mary's Cathedral on Christmas Eve, 1911, by the late Bishop N.A.Gallagher. He said his first mass at the Cathedral the following morning and the bishop immediately assigned him to the Galveston diocese as assistant at the Cathedral to the late Msgr. James M. Kirwin.

There he served until 1917 when he answered the call of his country and joined the United States Army with the rank of first lieutenant.

He was named chaplain of the 41st Infantry serving in cantonements in San Antonio and Fort Worth. He was later appointed assistant liaison officer, an especially distinctive honor for it was not customary for a minister of the Gospel to participate in in frontline duty.

His knowledge of French and the French locale made him particularly valuable for this type of work, and in 1918 Lieut. Chataignon sailed for France where he saw action in the

Champaign and Meuse Argonne Offensives with the 36th Division.

Upon his return he was given a hero's welcome with thousands of Galvestonians crowding the station to welcome back the soldier priest. A parade of organizations and individuals was formed leading to the Cathedral where Msgr. Kirwin was waiting for his assistant.

Father Chat resumed his pastoral duties and organized two troops of boy scouts and got together one of the finest choirs ever to sing in Galveston. It was during this time that he caused the magnificent organ to be installed in the cathedral.

In 1923 he was assigned as chaplain of the 36th Division of the Texas National Guard with the rank of major and later was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel in 1931. He served as chaplain of Maco Stewart American Legion Post 20 all these years.

In 1924 the Jesuit priests who had staffed Sacred Heart college and church at 14th and Broadway returned to New Orleans, and the late Bishop C.E. Byrne appointed Father Chat as pastor of Sacred Heart.

The school was in a bad state of repair and the church needed remodeling both inside and out.

Father Chat set up his rectory in a corner of the decadent college, and set about establishing a parochial school. Part of the Jesuit college was torn down and another building erected in its place to create Sacred Heart School, which he staffed with Dominican Sisters.

After the church was remodeled Father Chat had the rectory built adjacent to the church where it stands today.

With the closing of the Jesuit School Father Chat felt concern for the education of Catholic boys and was a dynamic figure in the establishment of Kirwin High School which is now taught by the Christian Brothers. He served as its first principal when it was known as Odin High School and the name later changed to Kirwin in tribute to the late Msgr. Kirwin, who died in 1926.

Sacred Heart parish grew and flourished under the leadership of Father Chat and he took particular delight in the boy's choir which is a special feature of the Midnight



Mass on Christmas Eve.

When World War II began, Father Chat again temporarily changed his black cassock and Roman collar for the uniform of a lieutenant colonel with the 36th Division and set out to defend his country against aggression.

It was in 1942 while stationed in Florida that Gen. Mark Clark selected Father Chat to be sent overseas for the invasion of North Africa with the Army Second Corps. He served in England and landed with the American troops in Algiers at the beginning of the campaign. He was soon promoted to colonel.

The following year Col. Chataignon received the Legion of Merit medal on Command of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, for "exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service as Corps chaplain throughout the operations in North Africa and Sicily."

The citation explains that "realizing its importance as a morale factor he saw to it that the solace of religious worship was made accessible to as many individuals as possible by arranging services for units under the most difficult battle conditions."

"Serving as graves registration officer in addition to his other duties, he led searching parties into mine-infested areas for the purpose of recovering the bodies of men who died on the battlefield. He exerted himself to the utmost to insure a fitting burial for the dead of both our own and enemy forces."

He also received a special commendation from General George Patton and General G. Keyes for his work with the Second Corps.

It was on Christmas day in 1943 that Bishop Byrne announced here the elevation of Father Chat to the rank of domestic prelate, making him a member of the Papal Household with the rank and title of monsignor. The bishop cabled Father Chat, but war came first, and the investiture ceremonies had to wait.

Father Chat participated in the landings in Sicily and later in Italy proper. It was while in Sicily that he earned the title of "Chaplain York" when 55 Italian soldiers surrendered to him.

On June 5, 1944, the day before the historic Normandy invasion, Father Chat drove down



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the streets of Rome in his jeep, the first chaplain to arrive in the Holy City, and said mass at St. Peter's Basilica.

Father Chat received a special letter of commendation from Cardinal Maglione, Cardinal secretary of state, at the request of the Pope, thanking him and his men for the generous offering which all so thoughtfully and devotedly contributed for His Holiness.

Francis Cardinal Spellman said he considered Father Chat "perhaps the best chaplain in the whole army."

Wide recognition was given the soldier priest for his services overseas. He was awarded the Cross of Merit by the Italian government in recognition of his services with the Italian soldiers who fronted the bitter battle for Cassino and who joined with him in the final drive for victory.

For his chaplaincy in the Tunisian and Italian fronts he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and a Bronze Star in addition to the Legion of Merit

World War II over, Father Chat returned to Galveston and his beloved parish in October, 1945.

Shortly thereafter Bishop Byrne named him diocesan consultor, whose privilege and duty was extended by the present Bishop Wendelin J. Nold.

Finally in Dec. 1947, Father Chat donned the crimson robes of a monsignor at investiture services in his Sacred Heart Church.

When Father Chat celebrated his 25th anniversary as pastor of Sacred Heart, his parishioners, who knew of his desires for his church marked the occasion by a gift of new stained glass windows, enhancing the pure white walls with the red and blues of the windows which filtered the sunlight.

Then came his 30th anniversary on Aug. 15, 1954. Ill health had already begun to take toll of his physical vigor and energy, but his indomitable will kept him at work with his people and his church. He had already undergone two operations for throat cancer.

On this date he saw the realization of a dream, which he had envisioned when he first took over the parish.

His "little children" to whom he had always given love and kindness, were to have a new

school, and the Dominican Sisters who had worked so diligently with Father Chat in operating the parochial school, were to have a home right on the school grounds.

The modern \$150,000 parochial school and convent for the Sisters were dedicated, and the buff brick two-story structure was as a monument to the unselfish and loving service which he had so willingly given to his flock for three decades.

It was to be the first unit in a long-range building program for Sacred Heart School. On that occasion the silver-haired priest, who had served three generations of Galvestonians said that among the many facets of his work, the parochial school is nearest his heart.



