
How It All Came About

Today is the Feast of St. Martin of Tours. His name is often used by the French peasants to identify the warm weather that might come this late in the year in France; they call it "St. Martin's Summer."

Some Irish, who refuse to spoil a good story for the want of a few facts, will tell you that St. Patrick was related to St. Martin. But there is some semblance of evidence pointing to the following story:

Martin, a military tribune's son, went with the Roman army to Amiens in Gaul in 330. He was, along with many of his fellow soldiers, interested in the new Christian religion. And he began to take instructions.

One day at the gates of the city, Martin met a beggar who was shivering with cold. For pity, Martin cut his cloak in half. He gave part to the beggar, and kept the other half for himself, wrapping it around his shoulders like a little cape.

The following night in his sleep Martin witnessed a heavenly vision. He saw Christ dressed in the garment that he had given to the beggar. Christ turned to His angels and said: "Martin, while yet a catechumen, has covered Me with his cloak."

Martin lived to be the Bishop of Tours and the most beloved prelate in Gaul. Immediately after his death he was venerated as a saint, and the cloak was held by the Franks to be a most precious relic. The warrior kings of that nation bore it with them into battle against their enemies.

The cloak was kept in a special tent during the wars, and priests were appointed to care for it. The priests celebrated Mass there, as they did at the oratory of the palace, where the cloak was kept during times of peace.

In time both the tent and the oratory became known as capella, from the Latin word for cape; and the priests were called "capellani." As custom would have it, soon any place not a Church where Mass was celebrated came to be called a capella.

Millions of tongues since then have word the word down to its present pronunciation -- chapel; and the capellani have become chaplains. So it is today, chaplains in the armed services are the direct descendants of the Frankish clerics -- guardians of the military cloak.

It just so happens that here at Notre Dame we have four chaplains for the local troops. They hold forth in the chapels at Dillon, Howard, Sorin and Cavanaugh halls. They are assigned to the four class-divisions of the student body. They, too, wear capes; and have been known to be of help to the local troops in the various ramifications of student life -- by both their prayers and sound advice.

Many seasoned veterans will tell you that some of the toughest battles ever encountered have been with themselves; that they often sought out the chaplains to exchange their scarred and stained cloak for a new and spotless one, woven of sanctifying grace -- given freely in the confessional; that they felt stronger, and fought much better in the new raiment. Other veterans rarely go near the chaplains for help of any kind. They are a sorry sight before God and man and their own worst enemy. At first, they don't fight so well. Later, they don't fight at all. Indeed, they all but capitulate. A new uniform, spun of God's mercy, can do wonders for them -- if they will but seek out the chaplain in the confessional!