



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on April 15, 2022

## Prayer of a Soldier in France

Today is the annual commemoration by Christians of the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ more than 2,000 years ago. It is a somber holiday known by the seemingly ironic name “Good Friday” — the unfamiliar even call the label sadistic. Yet according to the Christian creed, the day is “good” because mankind’s redemption was born out of the horror of what their Savior endured for them that day.

This was the firm belief of a young U.S. soldier who fell by sniper’s bullet at the Second Battle of the Marne, fewer than four months before the November 11 armistice ended the Great War in 1918. The 31-year-old sergeant in New York’s “Fighting 69th” Irish infantry regiment left behind a young widow and four children. He also left a legacy of poetry that immortalized his name.



Joyce Kilmer

“He didn’t have to enlist,” reports Robert Schmuhl for *Notre Dame Magazine* about Joyce Kilmer, the poet best known today for his simple and oft-parodied 12-line verse “Trees,” which begins: “I think that I shall never see / a poem lovely as a tree.” But he was no cowardly tree-hugger, for “his belief in the rightness of a cause shaped his thinking ... and he was willing to risk one of the most promising writing careers of the early 20th century to take a personal stand.”

Kilmer eclipsed his own established fame as a poet, journalist, and lecturer by bravery on the battlefield. John Hillis’ 1962 account, *Joyce Kilmer: A Bio-Biography*, relates that he turned down safe desk work for hazardous intelligence duty, and quotes some companions’ remembrances from a 1918 memoir by Robert Cortes Holliday: “He would always be ... getting much nearer to the enemy’s position than any officer would ever be inclined to send him. Night after night he would lie out in No Man’s Land, crawling through barbed wires, in an effort to locate enemy positions, and enemy guns, and tearing his clothes to shreds.” Another fellow soldier wrote: “He was worshipped by the men about him. I have heard them speak with awe of his coolness and his nerve in scouting patrols in No Man’s Land.”

France awarded Kilmer its *Croix de Guerre* for valor. Schmuhl notes that in New York’s 69th Infantry it “remains regimental tradition to recite ‘Rouge Bouquet’ at memorial services involving slain comrades,” referring to Kilmer’s heart-stirring lyric poem of death on the battlefield.

Amid the danger, Kilmer never stopped writing, producing some of his most poignant verse as he faced death daily. One of his many poems from the front lines is particularly appropriate for Good Friday and sheds light on what inspired the sacrifices he made:

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by Joyce Kilmer



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*My shoulders ache beneath my pack  
(Lie easier, Cross, upon His back).*

*I march with feet that burn and smart  
(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart).*

*Men shout at me who may not speak  
(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy cheek).*

*I may not lift a hand to clear  
My eyes of salty drops that sear.*

*(Then shall my fickle soul forget  
Thy agony of Bloody Sweat?)*

*My rifle hand is stiff and numb  
(From Thy pierced palm red rivers come).*

*Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me  
Than all the hosts of land and sea.*

*So let me render back again  
This millionth of Thy gift. Amen.*



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