

WITNESS

“No Greater Love....”

In our last narrative we wrote about the heroic witness of St Maximilian Kolbe to the Faith during World War II. Many priests and religious gave their lives during that conflict. Of the 21,000 German Catholic priests in 1932 over one third spoke out against Nazism and many hundreds died. Over 2,500 from all over Europe were incarcerated at Dachau, so much so that it became known as “The Priests’ Camp”. We would like to tell the stories of just a few of these priests, some of whom have been beatified in recognition of their witness to the Faith.

Blessed Titus Brandsma

Father Titus Brandsma hailed from Friesland in the north of Holland. He was born on 23rd February 1881. His family were farmers and he was one of 6 children, of whom five entered religious life. His parents Titus and Tjitsje were staunch Catholics. Titus had declared his desire to become a priest at a young age and attended first the Franciscan junior seminary in Megen. His health was poor, however in 1898 he moved to the Carmelite Order since he was attracted by its spirituality and love of Our Lady. He possessed significant literary and language skills and received his doctorate from the Gregorian university in Rome in 1909. He took up a post back in Holland at the Catholic seminary at Oss. He worked tirelessly teaching and writing and in 1923 he helped found the Catholic university at Nijmegen where he became professor of Philosophy and the History of Mysticism. He was recognized as an international expert in mysticism and lectured in many European countries and in the US.

By 1935 he was famous as a writer and journalist and was appointed by the Dutch hierarchy as spiritual advisor to the Catholic journalists. Holland had some 30 Catholic newspapers at the time. Fr Titus was alarmed by the Nazi ideology, which he saw as anti-Christian, and by their attempts to hijack Catholic

newspapers for propaganda purposes. He was instructed by his bishop to inform the editors of the newspapers that they must resist Nazi demands. This was a dangerous assignment and Fr. Titus was closely watched by the Gestapo as he travelled around Holland. They regarded this frail little friar as “the most dangerous man in Holland.” Titus was quoted as saying, “He who wants to win the world for Christ must have the courage to come into conflict with it.”

In 1942 he was arrested and taken to Scheveningen prison near the Hague. Here he composed a poem about his experience of the presence of God, and he spent a great deal of time in meditation. Since he would not relent in his views concerning church opposition to the Nazis he was sent to Amersfoort concentration camp near Utrecht. Cruelty and degradation was the order of the day at Amersfoort and prisoner no 58 suffered these humiliations with astonishing love and kindness. So much so that the other prisoners sought him out for comfort. He spoke of the passion of Christ and in spite of their starvation and illness he was able to give them some spiritual insight into their meaningless imprisonment.

In the middle of 1942 Fr Titus was transported to Dachau. By this time he had become very ill. The day began at 5am and finished at 7pm, though the priests were forced to do extra labour until 9pm, so much were they hated by their captors. In their inconsistent and often unpredictable manner the Nazis allowed German priests but no others to say Mass. Once when Fr Titus was secretly carrying the Blessed Sacrament for distribution among the prisoners an SS guard went berserk for no observable reason and began to beat him furiously. He ended up in the dreaded camp hospital. Even here other prisoners came to him for solace and he prayed with them and blessed them.

Eventually in July 1942 this wonderfully talented and holy priest was executed by lethal injection. He was 61 years old and was proclaimed a martyr of the Catholic Church. He was beatified by John Paul II in 1985.

Fr Alfred Delp SJ

Alfred Delp was the second child born to Maria Bernauer in 1907. Maria was a single mother and her two children's father was Friedrich Delp, an office worker and a Lutheran. Her older child Justina had been sent to her childless sister to raise. Friedrich married Maria after the birth of Alfred and the couple went on to have four more children. They settled near Frankfurt and although Alfred was baptised into the Catholic faith his father insisted that he be raised as a Lutheran.

When he was fourteen a strange thing happened. Alfred had become friendly with Fr Unger the local Catholic parish priest. One day he arrived late for a lesson with his Lutheran pastor. Whether it was his visits with Fr Ungar or the insolent way in which he explained his lateness – for he was known to have a somewhat insolent attitude – the pastor slapped his face. Declaring that he would not return Alfred crossed the road to Fr Unger and in 1921 he became a Catholic. He was intellectually bright and went on to study at the Germanicum in Rome. He was much taken with the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and decided to join the Society of Jesus instead of training for the diocesan priesthood.

At the Jesuit novitiate near Feldkirch in Austria he studied under Karl Rahner who was an up and coming young theologian at the time. Alfred was by all accounts an independent thinker and he could be dismissive of others' thoughts and feelings. This led his superiors to wonder if this lack of discipline would allow him to fit into the Society.

After 1934 many Catholic organisations were disbanded in Germany and priests' sermons were monitored, all in contravention of the 1933 Concordat. Along with other Jesuits Alfred published a book called "The Rebuilding", which outlined a programme for regeneration after the fall of Nazism.

Alfred was ordained priest in 1937 in Munich. After the publication of *Mit Brennender Sorge*, the famous papal encyclical which criticised National Socialism, persecution of the Catholic Church began in earnest. The activities of the Jesuits were particularly monitored because they were well educated and were

efficacious educators. Alfred continued working among the people, writing and preaching. His sermons were reported to be stunning because he was able to impart something meaningful to his congregation in those difficult times.

On one occasion the Nazis sought to ban crucifixes from Munich schools. Fr Delp blessed replacement crucifixes when Catholic families took the matter into their own hands. His own house was said to be a refuge for Jews escaping to Switzerland.

In 1942 he became involved with the Kreisau Circle. This group sought to plan for a new Germany, because they saw an end in sight after the disastrous opening of the Russian offensive on the Eastern Front. The group was made up of Catholics, Protestants and Socialists. They were not involved in the July 1944 bomb plot led by Colonel Claus Von Stauffenberg, but many of the Kreisau Circle agreed with its aims.

With Fr Delp's extensive knowledge of the Catholic encyclicals on social justice he, along with others, became a liaison between the Kreisau Circle and the Catholic bishops. He hoped to establish common ground between them. By 1944 many of the leaders of the Circle had been arrested and no further progress was made.

Alfred had been a Jesuit for 18 years now but had still not taken his final vows (normally taken after 14 years). It was scheduled for 15th August 1944. Frustrated by the dissolution of the Circle he decided to visit Claus Von Stauffenberg in June of that year. Stauffenberg was apprehensive about Alfred's visit because he felt it endangered his family. Only a few weeks later on 20th July 1944, the failure of the bomb plot to eliminate Hitler led to thousands of arrests and executions, including some leading members of the Circle. Fr Delp was arrested on the 28th July, eight days after the bomb plot.

It was claimed that he knew of the assassination plot and anyone with such knowledge and failing to have reported it was subject to the death penalty. He was taken to Tegel Prison in Berlin. His cell here measured only three steps to the left and three to the right. The Gestapo stated that they would give him his freedom if he left the Jesuits and joined the Nazis. He of course refused. Two ladies, both called Marianne, had known Fr Delp for

a year before his arrest, and these two Good Samaritans brought him generous aid in his captivity. His hands were constantly chained. They smuggled into him not only food, cigarettes and writing materials, but also communion hosts and altar wine. He used to knock on each side of the wall and the other prisoners did likewise when Mass was about to start. Thus the whole prison joined in. Religious differences here in the silence behind the prison walls, disappeared.

During this time Fr Delp achieved his long awaited goal on 8th December 1944. He was permitted to take his final vows. Another Jesuit priest brought him the authorised documentation which Alfred read aloud as was required. With tears he was formally incardinated into the Society of Jesús.

In January 1945 he was taken before the infamous Nazi judge, Roland Freisler, whose fanaticism has been well recorded. Such show trials produced a verdict of guilty no matter what. Judge Freisler revelled in abusing and humiliating the defendant before him. The death sentence was handed down. Fr Delp, now starved and hollow-eyed, was visited by the prison chaplain, Fr Peter Bucholz. With a half smile Fr Delp said to him, “In half an hour I’ll know more than you do.” He was then taken and hanged from a meat hook. This involved slow strangulation.

Fr Delp was executed for his opposition to Nazism, his ministry as a Jesuit priest and his belief in Catholic social action. In his cell were left behind his reading glasses, his rosary and a copy of The Imitation of Christ.

Blessed Clemens August Cardinal Graf Von Galen

Clemens August Von Galen was born in 1878 into an aristocratic German family at Dinklage Castle near Oldenburg. He was one of thirteen children and his ancestors numbered among them, bishops, theologians, priests and religious. Both he and his siblings had a strict, disciplined upbringing in a strongly Catholic family, which prepared him well for the title given to him later – “The Lion of Munster”. He stood six foot six inches tall, strong,

reserved and unyielding in his faith. Clemens August was sent to study philosophy and history at the Catholic University of Friburg in Switzerland in 1897. The following year he attended the Canisianum, the Jesuit Theological college in Innsbruck. He appeared to have been a natural leader and though he mixed in all levels of society, he maintained all his life a great love of the poor and marginalised especially. He was ordained in Munster in 1904. His manner of life was simple with little possessions and plain food. His one indulgence was his long pipe which he never gave up even in times of fasting.

With the rise of National Socialism in Germany things began to change and after the death of the local Bishop, Clemens August was named the new Bishop of Munster. Hermann Goring informed the new bishop that he ought to support the Nazi ideals. Bishop Von Galen ignored his request and instead he began writing and preaching against the Nazis ideology with its worship of racial purity which he found distasteful to say the least. He knew exactly where the Nazis were headed and it was not for the good of the German people. Time and again he was denounced by the Nazi leaders but the Catholic population in large numbers rallied in support of their bishop. He preached against totalitarianism as a form of slavery and against the euthanasia programme which sought to kill the disabled and mentally ill members of society. Bishop Von Galen had a close bond with his priests, who were constantly harassed, persecuted and offered bribes to give up their vocation. When these failed they were sent to the concentration camps. At one stage the Nazis began raiding Catholic institutions and evicting the priests and nuns. Bishop Von Galen spoke out and these raids eventually ceased. At this time, he made his famous sermon where he described the Nazis as a “hammer” and the people as the “anvil” and concluded that the anvil is harder than the hammer, thus reinforcing his resistance. He would withstand the blows of National Socialism; his sermons were widely distributed throughout Germany and he became a thorn in their side.

The Allied bombing in 1943 led to the severe damage of the Cathedral in Munster and the bishop was bombed out of his home and wounded in his left leg. It was an irony that this resulted from

the Allied bombings, whose own countries had broadcast bishop Von Galen's sermons around the world. Nevertheless, he now shared the same privations as his flock. Himmler, head of the Gestapo described him as the "traitor Galen" – but for reasons of foreign policy they were unable to arrest him. By March 1945 the Allied tanks arrived, but still the bishop continued working tirelessly to alleviate the chaos which followed the end of the war, because refugees and poverty were evident everywhere.

Just before Christmas 1945 the whole of Munster was overjoyed to hear that their bishop was being made Cardinal. On his return from Rome on 16th. March 1946 this giant of a man was met by many many thousands of his flock assuring him of their love and loyalty. He addressed them thus: The following is a moving excerpt from his speech.

"But my right and duty was to speak out and I spoke out for you, for the countless persons gathered here, for the countless people of our beloved country of Germany and God blessed my words and your love and your fidelity kept me from what could have been my end. But perhaps they also prevented me from receiving the more beautiful reward, (in a voice choked with tears) the glorious crown of martyrdom. Your fidelity prevented it because you were behind me and the powerful knew that the people and the bishop in the diocese of Munster formed an unbreakable unity and that had they struck at the bishop, all the people would have felt stricken."

Cardinal Von Galen died only six days later. He was already weakened by the long journey to Rome and back and he was not able to fight down an appendix infection which had been diagnosed too late. The "Lion of Munster" was loved for his outstanding courage against an evil regime, his simplicity of life and his compassion for his flock.

Clemens August Cardinal Graf Von Galen was beatified on October 9th 2005 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Blessed Karl Leisner

Fr. Karl Leisner's story was the amazing tale of a priest who said only one Mass, never gave any sermons or heard a confession, but was imprisoned for making a simple remark.

Karl was born in 1915 and along with his brothers and sisters was brought up in Cleves. He quickly displayed leadership qualities and became a youth leader. He soon came up against the other Hitler Youth movements of the time. So much so that in the 1930's he took his youth groups out of Germany for summer camps in order to protect them from the racist teachings of the Nazis. At nineteen years of age he decided to become a priest and studied philosophy at the University of Freiburg. While there he stayed with a Catholic family who had twelve children. Karl became very fond of one of the daughters of the house and struggled with the idea of getting married. However, by 1937 he had made his decision to follow a vocation to the priesthood. He was then called to do six months compulsory labour service where he again came up against Nazi abuse with regard to his Catholic faith. But he persisted in talking to his fellow workers about the faith and organizing Mass attendance for them. All this brought him to the notice of the Gestapo and they raided his home in Cleves at the end of 1937 and took away his diaries and personal papers which actually survived the war.

In 1939 he was ordained deacon but his health began to fail suddenly and he was diagnosed with TB in both lungs. So he was sent to a sanatorium in the Black Forest to recuperate. While he was there an attempt was made on Hitler's life at the Burgerbraukeller in Munich. The Fuhrer survived the attempt and the news quickly spread around the sanatorium. Karl made a comment to the effect that it was a pity Hitler was not there at the time. One young man in the sanatorium who was somewhat mentally retarded and not realising the danger, ran about the place quoting Karl's remarks.

In Germany at this time there were many thousands of Gestapo informers and undoubtedly there were some at the sanatorium. Within the hour Karl was being interrogated and

since he admitted to having made the remark and since the Gestapo had previous knowledge of his activities, by the afternoon he was taken to Freiburg prison. Many months in a freezing cell did not improve his health but he looked forward to visits from his mother who tried to keep his spirits up. Though he was never charged with any offence he was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1940 and then transferred to Dachau at the end of the year. He remained there for the rest of the war. In Dachau death generally came about not by direct extermination, but by hard labour, disease and starvation. Karl had somehow managed to bring his guitar and he tried to help his fellow prisoners by organizing sing-songs and keeping a cheerful Christian outlook in the midst of their misery. He gave away his sparse food rations and constantly encouraged others, including the priests who were imprisoned there. When this was noticed by the SS guards, they took to beating him mercilessly. As a result, he began coughing blood and was sent to the infirmary where there were as many as 150 other people with TB. It was clear that the disease was spreading through his body and by 1943 he was very ill. He was only 28 years old.

At times he became depressed and wept with despair. He was befriended by a Jesuit priest, Fr. Otto Pies who tried to lift his spirits. Karl had never been ordained but when it was discovered that Bishop Picquet from France was also incarcerated in Dachau, it was decided to ask him if he would ordain Karl. The most amazing plans were then laid for the ceremony. The local market garden near the camp became the route through which the necessary liturgical documentation and other items, were obtained from Bishop Von Galen. These were smuggled in to the camp. The other prisoners in their workshops managed to make a mitre, vestments, a wooden crozier and a ring. On 17th. December, Gaudete Sunday, 1944 Karl was ordained but he was so ill that he had to be taken back to the infirmary. Only after ten days was he able to say his first Mass on 26th December, the feast of St. Stephen the Martyr. Someone made his ordination card which stated "Sacerdotum oportet offerre" – a priest must offer up.

All this happened secretly under the nose of the SS guards who were too concerned about the closing in of the Russians and

the Allies. A small party was even arranged with coffee and cake somehow obtained by the supreme effort of some Lutheran ministers who were prisoners also. In May 1945 Dachau was liberated and Fr. Karl, though he was terminally ill, was overjoyed to be free after five and a half years in prison. He was looked after by an order of nuns in Munich and he continued to give his blessing to the many visitors who came to visit him. His happiness was complete when his parents managed to make their way to his bedside before he died. His good friend Fr. Pies administered the last sacraments at the end of May 1945 and Fr. Karl Leisner died on 12th August. Before his death he was to write,

“Poor Europe return to your Lord Jesus Christ.....let me contribute to this in however small a way”.

How true these words can be seen today as Europe seems to be losing its soul. Perhaps the intercession of such as Fr. Karl Leisner can bring about a new dawn of faith for Europe. Fr. Karl was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1996 in Berlin in the Olympic Stadium. The stadium built by Hitler for the 1936 Olympic games, was meant to show the power of the Nazi regime, but the lasting power of God’s grace had triumphed in the end. Pope John Paul held up the wooden crozier which had been fashioned for the Bishop in Dachau for Fr. Karl’s ordination and he gave these words,

“Karl Leisner encourages us on the way that is Christ. We must not grow weary even if sometimes this way seems dark and demands sacrifice. Let us beware of false prophets who want to show us other ways. Christ is the way that leads to life.”

These four short stories give witness to the power of love for one’s fellow man and an undying trust in God, demonstrated by these heroic priests, who like their Master came to serve rather than be served.

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