

CARMELITE NUNS OF COMPIÈGNE (d. 1794)

Blessed, martyrs (D)

The community of Discalced Carmelite nuns had been established at Compiègne (Oise, France) in 1641, a foundation of the monastery of Amiens. Within seven years, the convent with the church dedicated to the Annunciation were functioning. The community always flourished in fervor and was known for its regular observance and for its fidelity to the Teresian spirit. It enjoyed the affection and esteem of the French court. At the outbreak of the revolution the nuns refused to lay aside their monastic habit; and when, between June and Sept. of 1792, the disorders began to increase, all of them, following the inspiration received from the prioress, Teresa of St. Augustine, offered themselves to the Lord as a holocaust «to placate the anger of God and so that divine peace, brought to earth by His beloved Son, would return to the Church and to the state.» This act of consecration, also made by two of the older Sisters who at first were frightened by the thought of the guillotine, became the daily offering of the nuns until the day of their martyrdom, which occurred two years later.

Driven from their monastery on Sept. 14, 1792, the nuns continued their life of prayer and penance. They divided into four groups in various parts of Compiègne, but remained united by affection and correspondence under the watchful direction of Teresa of St. Augustine. They were soon discovered and denounced by the revolutionary committee and on June 24, 1794, were captured and herded together at Sainte-Marie, formerly the monastery of the Visitation, but now transformed into a prison. From Compiègne the sixteen nuns were transferred to Paris, where they arrived on July 13 and were immediately shut up in the terrible prison of the Conciergerie, already filled with priests, religious and other persons condemned to death. The nuns were

examples of tranquility and serene confidence in God and, at the same time, models of total attachment to Jesus and to the Church. They also knew how to spread around themselves a ray of joy, as happened on July 16, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. One of the sixteen calmly asked a prisoner with more freedom for something to write with; then, using charred twigs, she composed a song of jubilee and of petition, in anticipation of martyrdom. She wrote it to the melody of the Marseillaise.

On the following day, in a summary judgment, in which they had an opportunity to show their courage, the sixteen Discalced Carmelite nuns were condemned to death by the revolutionary tribunal for their fidelity to religious life, for their «fanaticism» (especially for their admirable devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary), and for their attachment to constituted authority. While they were being transferred in a cart to the Barrière-du-Trne for execution, accompanied by the silence of the throng and even of the Ôsans-culottes, the nuns sang out the Miserere, the Salve Regina and the Te Deum. Upon arrival at the base of the guillotine, they sang the *Veni Creator*, and one by one renewed their religious profession to the prioress and then were beheaded. The last one to be slain was Mother Teresa of St. Augustine, who had prepared her daughters so well for martyrdom and who had realized in a marvelous way what she had been accustomed to say: «Love will always be victorious. When someone loves, he can do

everything.» The martyrdom, which occurred on July 17, 1794, showed again the insuperable power of the love of Christ.

From existing documents and from the precious testimony of the three Carmelite nuns of the community of Compiègne who escaped martyrdom, we can make a fairly complete list of the sixteen martyrs with their respective names in religion and, in parenthesis, their names in the world:

Teresa of St. Augustine (Mary Magdalen Claudina Lidoine), prioress, born in Paris on Sept. 22, 1752; Sister St. Aloysius (Mary Anne Frances Brideau), sub-prioress, born in Belfort on Dec. 7, 1751; Sister Anne Mary of Jesus Crucified (Mary Anne Piedcourt), born in Paris on Dec. 9, 1715; Sister Charlotte of the Resurrection (Anne Mary Magdalen Thouret), born in Mouy (Oise) on Sept. 16, 1715; Sister Euphrasia of the Immaculate Conception (Mary Claudia Cypriana Brard), born in Bourth (Eure) on May 12, 1736; Sister Henrietta of Jesus (Mary Frances de Croissy), born in Paris on June 18, 1745; Sister Teresa of the Heart of Mary (Mary Anne Hanisset), born in Rheims (Marne) on Jan. 18, 1742; Sister Teresa of St. Ignatius (Mary Gabriella Trezel), born in Compiègne on April 4, 1743; Sister Julia Louise of Jesus (Rose Christiana de Neuville), born in Evreux (Eure) on Dec. 30, 1741; Sister Mary Henrietta of Providence (Mary Annette Peiras), born in Cajarc (Lot) on June 16, 1760; Sister Constance (Mary Genevieve Meunier), novice, born in Saint-Denis (Seine) on May 28, 1765; Sister Mary of the Holy Spirit (Angelica Roussel), lay sister, born in Fresne-Mazancourt (Somme) on Aug. 3, 1742; Sister St. Martha (Mary Dufour), lay sister, born in Bannes (Sarthe) on Oct. 2, 1741; Sister St. Francis Xavier (Elizabeth Julietta Verelot), lay sister, born in Lignieres (Aube) on Jan. 13, 1764; Sister Catherine Soiron, extern sister, born in Compiègne on Feb. 2, 1742; Sister Teresa Soiron, extern sister, born in Compiègne on Jan. 23, 1748.

The bodies of the sixteen martyrs were thrown into a common grave, together with the bodies of other condemned persons, in a place which later became the present-day cemetery of Picpus, where a stone records their martyrdom. Some of their clothes, which the Carmelites were washing in the Conciergerie when they were taken before the tribunal, were saved and given, two or three days later, to the English Benedictine nuns of Cambrai, who were also imprisoned, but later freed. These precious pieces of clothing are kept today in the abbey of the Benedictine nuns of Stanbrook in England. Other precious relics are the writings of the martyrs: letters, poems, notes. These are treated, together with other documentation of great value, by Father Bruno of Jesus Mary in his fundamental work (see Bibliography).

The martyrs were beatified by St. Pius X on May 13, 1906, with a pontifical brief, although the decree *de tuto* /of safety/ for preceding to the declaration of martyrdom had been made public on the preceding Dec. 10. Their feast is celebrated July 17 by both branches of the Carmelites and by the archdiocese of Paris.

Recently the sixteen blessed martyrs have attained unexpected notoriety, due to literary works of indisputable value. In 1931 Gertrude von De Fort drew on the historical account of the life and martyrdom of the Carmelites of Compiègne for her novel *Die*

letzte am Schafott (Engl, vers., *Song on the Scaffold*; in Italian, *L'ultima al patibolo*, Brescia, 1939). This book inspired Father R. Bruckberger to produce a film on the subject; in 1937 he entrusted the writing of the dialogue to Georges Bernanos. Ten years later, in 1947-48, Bernanos composed a work that death prevented him from perfecting. Published in 1949 as a literary work on its own, *Les Dialogues des Carmelites* had an enormous success in all of Europe. It was immediately reworked for the theater by A. Beguin and encountered unexpected success when staged. In Jan., 1957, *Les Dialogues des Carmelites*, put to music by Francis Poulence, was presented at the Scala of Milan, thus extending the divulgation of the work by Bernanos. Finally, in 1959, Father Bruckberger was able to realize his dream of putting *Les Dialogues des Carmelites* on the screen, under the direction of Philip Agostini, in a film of Italo-French co-production. Thus the epic story of the sixteen martyred daughters of St. Teresa of Avila was made known to the whole world.

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Paris 1954 (a fundamental work, composed after years of research on the documents some of which are photographically reproduced. There is an important bibliographical introduction on the published and unpublished sources, a documentary study of each of the martyrs, their characters, their writings. Also in English.); Claude Saint-Yves, *Il vero dialogo delle Carmelitane*, Rome 1961 (an Italian version. The author bases his work on that of Father Bruno of Jesus Mary, but the text has a preface of no value.) About Bernanos see B. Baragli, *Una storia, una novella, un dramma e un film*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, CXII (1961), 4, pp. 383-95.

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