



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

BL. TITUS BRANDSMA: "DANGEROUS LITTLE FRIAR"

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Although diminutive in stature and quiet and shy in disposition, Blessed Titus Brandsma, a Dutch Carmelite, struck fear into the hearts and minds of the Nazis who had conquered Holland in the dark days of World War II. So great was this fear that the Nazis labeled him "the dangerous little friar."

Currently his cause for canonization is well underway and making positive progress at the Vatican. But who is this Carmelite who lived a relatively short life and ended his days on earth in the dreaded confines of Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany in 1942?

Birth in Holland

Born in 1881 in The Netherlands into a very devout Catholic farming family, Titus early in life perceived his vocation as serving the Lord as a priest. Attracted by a life of prayer and contemplation and Marian devotion, he joined the Carmelites in 1898 and was later ordained a priest in Rome in 1905. He then began a life of teaching and scholarship and directing people in the spiritual life. He later became rector of the Catholic University of Nijmegen and was among its founders.

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As early as 1935, soon after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Bl. Titus Brandsma spoke out against the evils of Nazism. And when all of Europe spoke of war, he wrote: "I would like to repeat Christ's message of peace, resound it through the world regardless of who is listening to me. I would like to repeat it, so that they who first turned their heads away will have to listen, until all have heard and understood. The very fact that peace is being despaired of everywhere forces me to proclaim the message of peace all the more loudly."

He was also one of the first to denounce the persecution of the Jews, and was reported to be involved in plans to help Jewish refugees escape to Carmelite missions in Brazil. "We live too much our own individual lives and think much too little of how we are united with each other in and through God and all together with God. And yet therein lives our supreme worth and strength, our dignity...."

When Holland fell to the Nazi onslaught in 1940, the Dutch Catholic Bishops chose Bl. Titus Brandsma as their spokesman to faithfully defend the freedom of the Catholic Press. He did his work very well, and became a marked man, and on Jan. 19, 1942 was arrested by the Nazis. But alone in his cell, he had time for prayer, meditation and writing.

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Ever the champion of Christ and truth, Bl. Titus Brandsma wrote the following from his prison cell: "The Nazi movement is regarded by the Dutch people not only as an insult to God in relation to his creatures, but also a violation of the glorious traditions of the Dutch nation. If it is necessary, we, the Dutch people, will give our lives for our faith."

On March 12, 1942, he was transferred to the notorious Amersfoort Prison in Holland where prisoners were systematically brutalized, starved, maimed and often murdered. But even here, Bl. Titus Brandsma is remembered as reaching out to alleviate the sufferings of others, even organizing prayer and meditation groups to focus on the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. He administered the sacraments and ministered to the sick and dying in the prison's hospital. He even urged the prisoners to forgive their brutal captors. "Pray for them, too," he would urge." When the prisoners would object that such prayer was too hard for them to do, he would counsel, "Well, you don't have to pray for them all day long!"

In late April of that year, the dreaded Gestapo questioned ¹Bl. Titus Brandsma once again to see if he would change his mind and his opposition to the Nazis. When he refused, they informed him that he would be transferred to the dreaded Dachau in Germany itself. Here he continued to minister to all who were in need: Catholics, Protestants and Jews.

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All, captors and prisoners, seemed to be more than impressed with his cheerfulness, enlivening spirit, and care for all in need. His great spirit was never really conquered in spite of all his sufferings but his never robust body, bruised, broken and near death, could offer little resistance to the horrors of this death camp.

His words spoken years earlier at a retreat came to be prophetic: "We have to teach others to die and consider our own life as a slow death. Death is the way to God."

The hospital at Dachau to which Br. Titus Brandsma was taken, was literally a "hell within a hell." Prisoners were used for cruel medical experimentation. He, as were others, became a human experiment in pain and suffering.

Yet in this hell on earth, the gentle Carmelite friar continued to bring spiritual peace and consolation to others, in spite of his own terrible sufferings. On July 26, 1942, the doctor in charge of his case ordered that he be injected with a lethal drug. Within 10 minutes Br. Titus Brandsma was dead. But even in the moment of death, he gave his rosary, the handiwork of a fellow inmate, to the nurse who gave him the lethal injection. She never forgot the incident and later returned to her Faith and was a witness to his martyrdom and his great holiness, gentleness, courage and faith.

Three days later, his body was cremated and his ashes buried in "The Grave of Unknown Thousands." He lived and died for Christ and others.