

"A LIGHT FOR OUR TIMES — TITUS BRANDSMA*

Thirty years ago, on 26 July 1942, the Dutch Carmelite Titus Brandsma passed away, "helped to die" with a mortal injection, offering his testimony to God and men. The heritage was thus added to the countless other heritages that had come to the militant Church in the course of the centuries. In this perspective, past and present no longer count: in the variety of situations, circumstances and ways, the testimonies merge into one light that illuminates the world even when it is not perceived or is deliberately ignored. Today the media of social communication, convinced that they are expressing and interpreting a widespread common sense, speak of the Church and of her itinerary in contemporary times, lingering over the shadows rather than the lights because what is normal "is not news". But does not this emphasis presuppose the indirect and unconscious recognition that there are no shadows without light?

The anniversary we recall beyond a darkness so thick as to seem, sometimes, impenetrable, helps us to find a radiance nearer to us than is thought.

A few weeks ago, on the completion of the preliminary acts laid down by the canonical procedure, the cause of the Carmelite religious was "introduced" and will begin with the ascertainment of martyrdom. That is, it will be necessary to establish whether the case of the Dutch Carmelite is really that of a martyr in the Christian sense of the term, as seems quite clear if we recall the life and the "passio" of Titus Brandsma.

What does canonical recognition add to the holiness of a Christian soul? Those who in the Church, live the Church, have the consoling certainty of the communion of saints, which unites with an unbreakable bond the Christian generations of

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the past, those of the present and those of the future. In this perspective, "holy" are all the souls that really and sincerely follow Christ and have given and are giving all their enthusiasm in living his message. The saints are around us, walk with us; and we all certainly remember souls that came into and went out of our lives, silently leaving us their light, souls whose names will never be inscribed in calendars. Canonical recognition, which is reached after a long, careful, detailed investigation, is an ecclesial act which completes or replaces our personal, subjective judgment with the judgment of the whole Church. The latter recognizes that a person was really and authentically Christian and, as such, holds him up as an example to the People of God. That person is holy, not because a decree declares him such, but because he was, intrinsically, holy and indicated to us, in addition to faith in the doctrine, the way or ways to live it and practise it in our daily works.

THE VOCATION

Anno Brandsma was born in 1881 in Dutch Friesland, in a hamlet attached to the commune of Wonseradeel, of a staunch Catholic family. After the primary school, he went, for secondary studies, to the Franciscan Institute at Megel, in north Brabant, and in the six years he spent there, he developed the religious vocation that had taken shape in his early boyhood. It seems he wished to enter the Franciscans. When advised not to do so for reasons of health, he asked and obtained admission to the Order of Carmelites, to which he was attracted also by an open and sincere devotion to the Blessed Virgin. A novice at Boxmeer in 1898, he took the name of Titus and in the seven following years he studied philosophy and theology in Holland, and was ordained priest in 1905.

The year afterwards he was sent to Rome to perfect his philosophical studies at the Gregorian University, where he graduated in 1909, after recovering from a serious illness from which he had already suffered years before but which now caused concern for his life.

His first awakening to social problem goes back to this period. He conceived them in a Christian way as the necessary projection in the world of Christian conscience animated by charity and urged to operate in time according to justice. In Rome, in fact, he attended Mons. Pottier's sociological courses,

which inspired him to write the articles that later appeared in the "Katholiek Sociaal Weekblad".

On his return to his country, he taught philosophy and the history of the Church in the convent of Oss for many years. At the same time, according to the spirit of the Order, to which he belonged and following its traditions, he founded the Marian review "Carmelrozen". He also promoted the translation into Dutch of the works of St. Teresa of Avila: the first volume, published in 1918, was edited entirely by him.

The year afterwards he became editor of the local paper "De Stad Oss" which flourished under his guidance and increased its circulation. Thus there began to appear in Titus Brandsma the journalist, and more than the journalist the man convinced of the importance of the modern media of social communication. This conviction was to become more and more deep-seated in him: the reflection of a life and a religious vocation understood as a mission to communicate to the world the present and latent riches of the Christian faith. And he would have liked to be a missionary in distant countries, too, if his conditions of health, still uncertain, had made it possible. Disappointed in this aspiration of his, common to the whole of Catholicism and the clergy in Holland, he was missionary in his own country.

In his life, in fact, a pattern is clearly visible, with an exemplary logical thread running through all his acts. If the Christian vocation is to live faith and communicate it to others, strengthening its content, what better place is there to seek its roots than in the school, particularly the secondary school, on which it is incumbent to bring to fruition the seed already sown in the primary school, so widely diffused? The first of the nine high schools run by the Carmelite Order in Holland today were founded thanks to his efforts between 1923 and 1925. At the same time he reanimated the culture of Friesland, which had been deeply Catholic before the Protestant revolution; this culture was neglected, after the break, by the Catholics themselves, now a small minority. This return to the light of the past, to riches unearthed from oblivion, was not and did not intend to be a mere act of charity towards his native land; but a re-evaluation of glorious traditions dominated by the apostolate of St. Willibrord, the founder of Christianity in that region, and by the witness of blood paid at Dokkum by

St. Boniface, the "Christopher", the bearer of Christ, to the Germanic world.

THE TEACHER

On 27 June 1953, Fr. Titus Brandsma was called to the chairs of natural philosophy, theodicy, and history of philosophy, philosophy of history and history of Dutch mysticism at the University of Nijmegen. Ten years later—in the two years from 1932-33—he was chancellor of this centre of higher studies. We will have the opportunity to return later to the spirit of renewal that animated him in this other aspect of his mission. It will be enough to recall here the impetus he gave, at this period, to scientific research on the history of Dutch spirituality, with a thoroughness that links him with a great French researcher Henri Bremond, in the field of higher studies. In this framework he was also a convinced upholder of the reasons for the unity of Christians, making a special study of the Eastern sister Churches. At his suggestion, a chair in Oriental Theology was set up at Nijmegen in 1937.

"Contemplate tradere": this can be said to be Brandsma's motto: and the more he contemplated, in the spirit of his order, the more there grew in him the imperative need to communicate and testify. It is difficult, in fact, to transmit to others just in words, without showing, humbly and without ostentation, the desire and the capacity to live according to the words. This spirit of testimony had been very strong in him ever since he answered the Lord's call. He did not appeal just to the minds of intellectuals; among the less known but equally radiant pages of his Biography there is a humble long and intense preaching to inmates of an old people's home.

Meanwhile, in 1935, the archbishop of Utrecht had nominated him ecclesiastical assistant of the Union of Catholic journalists. He worked very hard at raising the spiritual level of the Christian journalist; but he was also extremely interested in the technical and organizational problems of printed social communication. It seemed to some people that his action, at some moments, might lead to an excess of feverish activism: as a matter of fact his works were prompted and actuated by a deep spirituality centered on Holy Eucharist, and in devotion to Our Lady. In the apparent agitation of his days he was able to find the pauses of silence and concentration for the meditation that renewed his life of relations: his apostolate.

FOR TRUTH

Then the war, the attack on a peaceful, hard-working nation, the occupation. The Nazi invasion, as we all know, was not just the occupation by a foreign force violating the right of peoples to live according to justice and freedom. It was also the obstinate attempt to oppress consciences, to constrain their inner freedom, and to force apostasy on them, replacing God with a man-idol.

It was a war against Christianity; not declared openly and bluntly, at least in exterior manifestations; but it was real, conceived as a conscious refusal, as an involuted return to paganism and its rites, in the name of an alleged primacy of the Germanic race endowed with all rights; and of a supposed inferiority of all other races, for which only death or slavery was in store. A Christian might undergo this oppression, but not accept it, far less support it, without betraying his name and his vocation. The Episcopate, in a pastoral letter of 25 July 1941—another anniversary to be remembered—denounced and condemned the vexations to which Christians in Holland and, particularly, Catholics, were exposed. But from the preceding January, after affirming the impossibility for a Catholic to belong to the National Socialist movement, the ecclesiastical authority had excluded from the sacraments all those who gave their support to this movement; “this movement not only threatens to prevent the Church from carrying out her functions freely; it also represents a grave danger for the Christian sentiments of those who belong to it...”

Of course the oppressors accused the Bishop of “political” interference; but those who know the features of ideological racialism, those who know that it was not a question of an abstract aberrant philosophy but of an ideology that sought fiercely to embody itself in history without hesitating even at extermination, are fully and clearly aware that the accusation was quite unfounded and was one of the pretexts to which modern persecutors resort with regard to the persecuted, perhaps even more than their ancient precursors did.

In this dramatic situation, Fr. Titus Brandsma was the gentle but firm defender of the Catholic schools and press. He did not align himself against anyone or anything; but, with all his moral force, he rose up in defense of Christian religious conscience and its inviolable rights. The martyrs of the early

centuries did not deny the tyrant obedience but refused when the worship due only to God was claimed for him. The attitude of Christian to modern tyrannies, is not dissimilar: it obeys the civil power until Caesar claims God's part.

The Carmelite religious was a strenuous defender of the freedom of Catholic teaching. To begin with, when by order of a local authority in the service of the oppressors, ecclesiastics were forbidden to teach, he was the soul of the protest. In August 1941 the order came to expel Jewish pupils from Catholic institutes. Fr. Brandsma, as president of the Federation of scholastic institutes, decreed that the reasons of principle should be firmly maintained.

He assumed the same attitude in defense of the Catholic press, at once threatened with a "synchronization", more dangerous perhaps, than suppression. He was convinced that to hold out better the newspapers should unite. Throughout 1941 these papers refused to publish the announcements of the Nazi party and its organizations. At the end of that year Fr. Brandsma visited all the editors to find out what they thought and to bring the directives of the episcopate to their knowledge. In assuming this task, he was fully aware of the dangers to which he was exposed. The Bishop of Harlem says in a written statement on the circumstances of this mission that both he himself and the Carmelite religious were fully aware of the danger of death that the latter was faced with.

Yet he proceeded, with his usual serene courage; and in the evening of 17 January 1942 he was arrested in the convent of Nijmegen. He knelt before the Prior Fr. Verhallen, asked him for his blessing, took off his religious habit and put on a black suit, put a few personal objects together, and followed the security police.

THE LAST TESTIMONY

So the painful itinerary began: the prison of Arnhem, that of Scheveningen near the Hague, then the Amersfoort camp then again Scheveningen, Cleve and, finally, on 18 June 1942, Dachau. One interrogation after another: and always the same attempt to make him admit that his opposition was due not to religious but to political reasons. He could not be concerned about Christianity because no one — the Dutch and

German questioners claimed — threatened it; but with National Socialism and Germany. Serenely, without formally heroic tones, Father Titus always maintained his attitude, rejecting every accusation. The records consulted in a preliminary investigation of the canonical cause are unanimous in this connection. With the same serenity he passed from a prison where he was allowed to meditate in the isolation cell, to other jails, to the hell of the concentration camps, particularly Dachau. He always maintained the same serenity, the meekness of the strong, aware of being in God with God.

His condition of health, uncertain from early youth, made it likely that he would not survive the extremely harsh conditions in the camp. But everyday he was able to receive Holy Communion, brought to him by a lay brother who in his turn received the host from a German priest. He divided the host into two parts, kept one for the whole day in a kind of silent and secret adoration, distributed the other divided into tiny fragments to as many prisoners as possible.

It was his great support. Admitted to the camp hospital on 18 July, his conditions declined rapidly. On 22 July he lost consciousness; two days later the camp doctor ordered the nurse to inject phenic acid into the dying man.

This woman, who gave evidence, "sub secreto", at the canonical process recalls that moment: "The doctor himself prepared the injection; he always did so personally. Then I made the injection in the Servant of God's wrist. For this reason the patients hated us so much. I was therefore greatly impressed by the fact that Father Titus had always been so kind and cordial. I made the injection about ten minutes to two . . . All that day I felt ill . . ."

Thus Titus Brandsma's martyrdom took place thirty years ago.

It seems that someone considers, and has said so, that it is superfluous — perhaps even "triumphalistic" — to canonize this Dutch religious who has left us such a precious heritage. Superfluous expense — it has been said — which could be turned to purpose for more "useful" for Christianity and for the Christians of our time than knowledge and the permanent memory of a religious and of his testimony, so relevant today, so much in keeping with the historical conditions we live in.

Father Titus Brandsma felt keenly, with the problems of our times, the necessity of an "aggiornamento". He is a "modern" Christian, and the witness he bore with his life and his death, tends in this direction, has a sense and a value of real renewal, because it is inspired, prompted and nourished by an open, sincere and certain faith in God. Such is the significance of the Carmelite's missionary impetus, of his thirst to communicate the "depositum fidei" through the modern media.

On 17 October 1932, when as Cancellor of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, he delivered an address that deserves to be remembered, today, after Vatican II, when many uncertainties trouble the consciences of not a few faithful. He was already aware of the phenomenon of "secularization" which was spreading over the world and men.

"I believe — he said — that it is our duty, our commitment of honour to look around us, at the phenomenon of the denial of God. But in the first place, not to shut ourselves up in an attitude of defence but to take it into account and make the concept of God known in new forms, more understandable for modern culture: in order that, from the riches of this concept, there may be seen more clearly, with its magnificence and grandeur, a new fascination in keeping with our times. . . . There is such a wealth of aspects that we must take care not to rely too much on the old and not to consider traditional images sufficient. New times call for new forms. . . . It is not enough to insist on the necessity of putting our faith in God into practice and to commit ourselves in this direction. Something more is necessary; we must understand our times, not live estranged from them. . . .

So Titus Brandsma was an apostle of renewal. He conceived it, however, not as the destruction of the past but as the enrichment of an inalienable patrimony; not as the dissolution of the Church in the world, but as the presence of the Church in the world, with the inviolated treasures of the deposit entrusted to her by Christ. And when the very substance of that deposit was threatened, he said no: for this he gave his life.

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