

## BLESSED TITUS BRANDSMA (1881-1942)

**A**nno Sjoerd Brandsma was born on February 23, 1881, in Oegeklooster, in the province of Friesland in the Netherlands. Attending a high school run by the Franciscans of Megen, he began to experience his vocation. He entered the Carmelite monastery of Boxmeer on September 22, 1898, and took the name Titus. In 1901, he published his first book, an anthology of the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, translating her works from Spanish into Dutch. After being ordained a priest in 1905, he was sent to Rome and attended the Pontifical Gregorian University. Back in the Netherlands, he taught, wrote, and published translations of the works of St. Teresa in Dutch.

Shortly before the establishment of the National Socialist Party in Germany, he was appointed president of the University of Nijmegen. A few years later, he was named an advisor for the Association of Catholic Journalists. In his university courses on the ideology of National Socialism, he spared no criticism and openly denounced the system. As a Carmelite, teacher, journalist, and president of the Association of Catholic Schools, he firmly opposed Nazi pressure.

Arrested in his monastery, Titus was taken to the Scheveningen prison where he underwent a harsh interrogation but held fast to his convictions. In prison, he translated the life of St. Teresa of Avila into Dutch. He was transferred to the concentration camp of Amersfoort, where he was forced to work and live in very harsh conditions. Brought back to Scheveningen for further interrogation he was later moved to a camp at Cleves, where he found greater dignity and relief, both human and spiritual.

In June 1942, he was transported with other prisoners by cattle car to the Dachau concentration camp, where living conditions were harsh to the extreme: forced labor, lack of food, and bizarre scientific experiments using prisoners as guinea pigs, including Titus. Sick and worn out by this inhumane treatment, he was consigned to the camp hospital where he was put to death by an injection of carbolic acid administered by a nurse to whom he gave a rosary. The same nurse underwent a profound conversion and, years later, was a primary witness for Titus' beatification. His liturgical memorial is celebrated on July 27.

“Prayer is not an oasis in the desert of life; it is all of life.” In this beautiful expression this Carmelite priest, journalist and university professor indicates the intensity of his prayer life, which gave him the strength to carry out his apostolic activity with great balance and which nourished his courage to bear witness to the truth and to defend religious freedom during the time of Nazi brutalities. It allowed him to accept all kinds of poverty and deprivation by living out the commandment to love to the fullest. Quoting the words of Jesus, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” (Jn 14:27), Titus proclaimed: “I would like to repeat these words, to make them resound all over the world, without worrying about who will listen. I would like to repeat them so often that those who have turned their heads the first time will have to listen to it, until everyone has heard and understood.... Our vocation and our happiness consist in making others happy” (Peace and Love through Peace Conference, St. Nicholas Church in Deventer, Netherlands, November 11, 1931). Titus also had a generous missionary heart. The international experiences of his religious family, especially during his time spent studying in Rome fueled his dream of being sent out as a Carmelite missionary to proclaim the Gospel *ad gentes*. Alas, this dream would never be realized, because his health was poor and so his religious superiors were reticent to send him abroad.

Although he could not leave for mission lands, he always maintained an attitude of universality, availability, dialogue, and openness to create bonds of fraternity in Christ. Life truly led him to live a special mission, because

his natural inclination to be a consoler of the afflicted found massive and heroic expression in the concentration camps. He died in the Dachau camp as a “missionary” in an “impossible” place, where he succeeded in bringing happiness and inspiring courage. Having reviewed numerous testimonies, St. John XXIII described Titus Brandsma as “a victim of his charity and of his constant defense of the truth.” While he was subjected to insults and beatings, he endured his torments with patience and treated his persecutors with sincere compassion, exhorting his companions to resistance and prayer for those who showed so much ruthlessness towards their neighbor. He was animated by the conviction that the divine light could shine through the priests of the camp, by their fraternity, hope, and trust in God, in whom they dwelt secure. Intimately united to God, he became a vessel overflowing with hope in places seemingly most distant from the divine gaze.

In fact, the mission fields he worked became his monastery, his place of prayer and welcome of the most disadvantaged. He made the university where he taught a place where the Gospel resounded by the example of his life. Drawing from the strength of his faith, he even made the printing house where he published and the concentration camps where he was imprisoned, places of profound encounter among people beyond all social distinctions united under the gaze of God. He was able to transcend and help others overcome situations of profound inhumanity. In the camps, he had words of consolation that expressed a deep certainty: “Entrust everything to the Lord. Do your best, and God will do what remains!” Because his only perspective was God, he was able to adapt to very different people and difficult situations. His solicitude in providing spiritual help enabled him to perform a precious service by administering the sacrament of confession and making himself available for spiritual direction.

To the nurse who administered the injection that killed him, he said, “Good priests are not those who say beautiful words from the pulpits, but those able to offer their pain for men. For this reason, I am happy to be able to suffer.”