

Titus Brandsma Carmelite and Martyr

WITNESS OF FORGIVENESS

Anno Brandsma was born in the Dutch province of Friesland in 1881. He joined the Carmelite Order in 1898 taking his father's name, Titus, as his religious name. He made his First Profession in October 1899 and was ordained priest on 17 June 1905. As an academic Titus specialised in philosophy and mysticism. He helped to found the Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1923 and later served as *Rector Magnificus*.

In the years before the Second World War Titus was openly critical of the Nazi ideology. During the occupation of Holland, he defended the freedom of the Press and of the Catholic Press in particular. Titus was arrested in January 1942 and sent to Dachau Concentration Camp where he was killed by lethal injection on 26 July 1942. He was beatified as a martyr in 1985 and canonised on 15 May 2022.



Seeking dialogue

Throughout his life, Fr Titus Brandsma was a man of forgiveness and reconciliation, including in the most complicated situations and contexts. When he was Assistant Press Officer of the Catholic Press, he had to face complex situations (political instability, tension, labour struggles, radicalisation, etc.) and always demonstrated a willingness for dialogue, open to the pleas of all. Through this, he earned the nickname “the reconciler.”

Similarly, during the year he held the position of Chancellor of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, Professor Brandsma tried to create an atmosphere of dialogue and always sought to find opportunities for encounter and understanding. It was not easy, since the Central European universities at the beginning of the 1930s found themselves in an atmosphere of extreme tension between radicalisms of various types (communists, fascists, nationalists, etc.).

Given this context, perhaps we can understand better his fondness for Esperanto, the artificial language created by Ludwig Zamenhof, to avoid so much division (including violence) provoked by the uneasy coexistence of languages, and to fend off the linguistic colonialism that often imposes itself. He saw Esperanto as an instrument of understanding, a way of overcoming the linguistic barriers that can feed racial, supremacist, and discriminatory divisions.

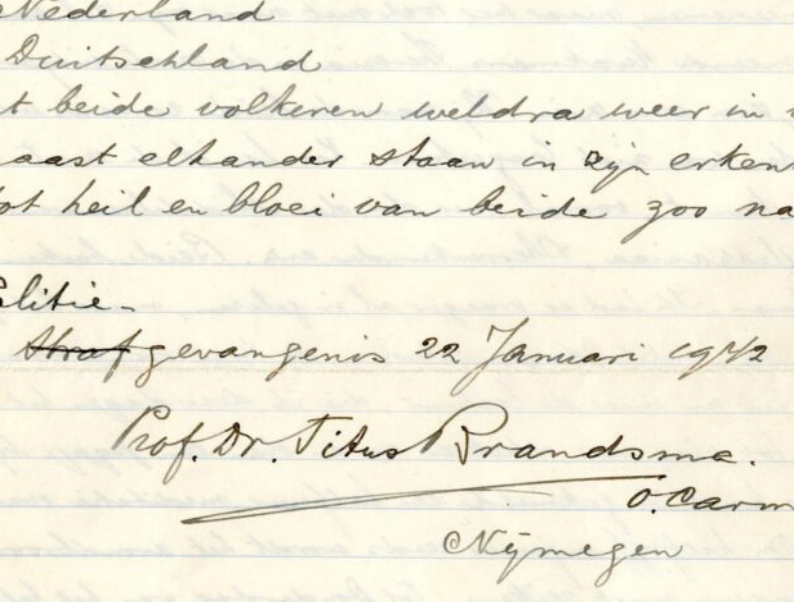
Ecumenism

At the same time, from this point of view, the ecumenical attitude of Titus is understood in all its depth. Our Carmelite was a true pioneer of ecumenism in Carmel. He formed, with great enthusiasm, the so-called “Apostolate of Reunification”, oriented to the better knowledge and rapprochement of Catholics with the eastern churches. In addition, he always showed a very respectful attitude and was close to the Protestants (mostly in the Netherlands) and always pursued frank and fraternal dialogue with the separated brethren.

In the face of conflict

During the long months of imprisonment in various prisons and concentration camps, Fr Titus lived together with several Protestants, some of whom would later testify during the beatification process, emphasizing his generosity, kindness and deep trust in the Lord.

This does not mean to say that he was a “diplomat,” nor that he lacked strong ethical and religious principles. Indeed, after the Dutch invasion Professor Brandsma would show his firm opposition to some of the Nazi government's measures. For example, when he refused to comply with the obligatory order to expel Jewish children from schools, and when he told the directors of Catholic newspapers that they must refuse to publish Nazi propaganda. However, despite his firm rejection of National Socialist ideology, he never showed any hatred toward the guards of the Lager for what they did to him.



▲ Blessing written by Titus Brandsma

Moreover, our Carmelite invited the religious whom he met in Dachau to pray for them. Deep down, he believed that yielding to hatred would be the true victory of evil.

Fr Titus never hated the Germans either as a people, as a nation. When the Gestapo sergeant Hardegen asked him to write a small essay about the reasons why the Dutch, and especially Catholics, opposed National Socialism, the prisoner developed a brief composition in which he elaborated on the philosophical, ethical and religious motives (a theme about which he had spoken frequently in his university classes). Despite the head-on opposition, the text concluded with a beautiful blessing: *God bless the Netherlands! God bless Germany! May God grant these two peoples to return to the path of peace and freedom, and to recognise His Glory for the good of these two nations that are so close.*

Today

In a world like ours, full of divisions and conflicts, Fr Titus appears before our eyes as an example, as a witness that reconciliation and forgiveness are possible, despite the difficulties, and as a true martyr for those most authentic Christian values.

Icon of Titus Brandsma & Edith Stein at the National Shrine of St Jude at Faversham, Kent. Courtesy of the British Province of Carmelites.

Prayer

We ask you, Lord, that by the example and intervention of Saint Titus Brandsma, who endured the torments of martyrdom with joy and full confidence in Your Divine Will, we too, Carmelites of the 21st Century – friars, contemplative nuns, religious of the active life, Third Order members, lay people of various groups – may always testify to the radical nature of Christian love and the values of the Gospel, and that our lives may be seeds of reconciliation and forgiveness. Amen.

Mary, Mother of Carmel, pray for us. Titus Brandsma, Carmelite martyr, intercede for us.



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