



Titus Brandsma Teaches Us about Truth

'The Truth Will Set You Free (Jn 8: 32):

Catechesis on Titus Brandsma 13 May 2002
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For our reflection tonight I took a well-known line from Chapter 8 of St John's Gospel, where Jesus addresses those Jews who believed in him, saying: 'If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' (Jn 8:31-32) As Titus witnessed, this freedom in Christ is something neither imprisonment, nor degradation, nor even a death sentence can take away or contain.

Titus Brandsma teaches us a lot about truth by word and by example. Truth was for him a unity. But truth is also something which, in our human way, we can consider from different points of view. In this way, Titus teaches us five things about truth.

1. Truth – Jesus Christ – The Way, The Truth, and The Life

The first thing Titus teaches us is that truth is primarily Jesus Christ himself. As a philosopher, Titus was an 'ideas man'. But truth for him was no mere idea. Truth was ultimately a reality, a person, Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the

life (Jn 14:6). As a Carmelite, Titus knew well the words of the Carmelite Rule: ‘everyone – whatever be their state in life or the religious life chosen by them – should live in allegiance to Jesus Christ and serve him zealously with a pure heart and good conscience.’¹ Christ is at the centre of the Carmelite life. And from the saints and spiritual writers of Carmel, Titus learned what this means. He learned that our relationship with God is really a love affair, that even before we look for God he is already looking for us. Titus learned that in the person of Jesus Christ truth is something intimate. If we want an insight into Titus’ understanding of truth we can look at his famous poem, written in his cell at Scheveningen (12-13 February, 1942), before a picture of *Christ Crucified* by Fra Angelico. Titus had been locked up, imprisoned, but the truth was setting him free. Truth was a person. It had a face which Titus had before him. The face of Christ. And, for Titus, the act of looking at the image of Jesus in his cell was not one-sided. It was based in friendship. It was a look that was returned, from the Beloved to the one loved, a gaze that travels back and forth in mutual understanding, support, and love. As Titus puts it in his poem:

‘O Jesus, when I look on you,
My love for you starts up
anew,
And tells me that your heart loves me,
And you my special friend would be.’²

So, truth was, for Titus, primarily a person, Jesus Christ, who set him free in a way no earthly means could contain.

2. Truth and Human Dignity

The second thing Titus teaches us is that when we speak of Truth we are also speaking of the inalienable dignity of each and every human being, of you and of me, made in the image and likeness of God. Nothing that anyone says or *does to us* can take this away from us. Titus spoke this truth and witnessed to it in so many ways. One book on Titus describes him as a ‘Master of Humanity’.³ Titus understood human nature, especially as an educator and a communicator. For Titus, it was important for the educator to respect the wonder and dignity of each student individually. He said: ‘...people are not simply all alike... The human being, and even the child, is in each person different in nature and it does not help us when we would like to see beyond all the differences... We must take young people as they are.’⁴ Above all, and in relation to truth, it was important for Titus that students thought for themselves, saying to one group: ‘We do not impart philosophical knowledge to you, because you must first and foremost develop it in yourselves... We do not ram the truth or knowledge of the truth into you, we only draw on the wondrous passion for knowledge of what is true, which lies hidden in you.’⁵ As a ‘Master of Humanity’ Titus understood our human way of needing to relate to things in images. At one point he says, for example, ‘We like to act and speak in images. We like examples and memory helps.’⁶ And so we find Titus’ writings are full of relatable images which help to teach us about ourselves and our relationship with God and with his creation: Niagara Falls, the dark tunnel, the

garden, the busy bee, the sunflower, the fountain. And he develops this further in his work as a journalist. With Titus, we have a saint who engaged not only in print media, but also in radio broadcast, and in video journalism. Titus understood the power of the printed word, of broadcast sound, of the image. And in confronting the Nazi distortion of the truth, Titus understood all too well how such media, such human means of communication, can be used for good or bad, either contributing to the flourishing or the degrading of human beings.

3. Truth and Creation

The third thing Titus teaches us is that to speak of truth is to speak of the integrity of creation. This is to look at the world, not just as the world, but as God looks at the world, as his creation, God who created all things and who holds all things in being. For Titus, God is the ground of each and every human and is everywhere present and at work.⁷ No one has the right to debase humanity or to deface creation. For Titus, Mary, Mother of Carmel, is our great teacher here. He writes: 'Once there was a Virgin who became the Mother of God made human, who gave us God as the Emmanuel... She is called to direct our gaze to God... may she lead us through our minds to the contemplation of God in all he has created, so that, as he lived in her, he may also live in us.'⁸

4. The Apostolate of Truth in Love

The fourth thing Titus teaches us is the importance of truth in love (to borrow a phrase from St Paul (Eph 4:15)).⁹ This is something Titus learned from his Carmelite tradition of spirituality, above all from St Teresa and St John of the Cross (but also from St Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, Venerable John of Saint Samson, St Thérèse of Lisieux, among others). Titus witnessed to truth in love within his family, in his dedication to community life and prayer, in his building up of the Carmelite family, in his inclusivity (particularly reaching out to the vulnerable and marginalised), in his fostering of academic community at the university, in his care for the community of journalists in the Netherlands, in his work as an ecumenist to bring Christians together in communion. Titus was engaged in nothing short of *an apostolate of truth in love*. This has something powerful, something challenging, to say to our world today. Against a fragmented view, Titus believed in the unity of truth. For him, it was not possible for truth in one discipline to contradict the truth in another, if indeed it was truth. This influenced Titus' thinking from his early days. He was not afraid to seek the truth where the truth was to be found. He read widely and read deeply. Titus supplemented his reading of philosophy, theology, and spirituality, with serious study of the social sciences. He wrote a highly technical paper on the concept of space, showing an impressive grasp of mathematics and physics.¹⁰ In our day, there are negative forces who try to drive a wedge between science and religion, between faith and reason. Titus would have none of this. And we should have none of this. We should all of us commit, following the example of Titus, to seeking the Truth where it is to found, seeking the truth in love, with our brothers and sisters.

5. *Speaking the Truth – Arma veritatis*¹¹

The fifth and final thing Titus teaches us is that speaking the truth, will challenge untruth. Titus was Frisian. And Frisians are known for plain speaking. Titus was a ‘reconciling figure’ for sure. But he famously declared ‘The one who wants to win the world for Christ must have the courage to come into conflict with it.’ Titus was aware of the ‘call to arms’ in the Carmelite *Rule* where those who follow the Carmelite way are called to put on the armour of God – the belt of chastity, [the tunic of] holy thoughts, the breastplate of justice, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.¹² Speaking the truth for Titus, was to put on the armour of truth and he saw the church and journalism as key here. Truth is what is at stake. Titus says: ‘The press, second only to the churches, is the principal pulpit for teaching truth. It holds the power of the word against the violence of arms.’¹³ Elsewhere, again, Titus says: ‘The press is our most powerful arm in our battle for truth... should the Catholic press abandon this ideal of being a weapon of truth, its very existence would make no sense either for us journalists, or for the Church. It would become worthless. Its steadfast witness to the truth alone constitutes its power and its glory.’¹⁴

And so, with the example of Blessed (soon to be Saint) Titus Brandsma before us, and benefitting from his teaching, may we remain in Christ, so that that we may know the truth, and the truth may set us free.

NOTES

¹ Carmelite *Rule*, Chapter 2 (transl. Christopher O’Donnell, O.Carm. in *The Irish Carmelites*, ed., *Meeting God: Carmelite Reflections and Prayers* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008) p. 61)

² Translation by Joachim Smet, O.Carm.

³ Santino Scapin, O. Carm. and Bruno Secondin, O. Carm., *Tito Brandsma: Maestro di umanità, martire della libertà* (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1990)

⁴ Titus Brandsma, O.Carm., Anniversary speech, St George’s School, Eindhoven, fragments from the anniversary speech made on the occasion of the twelve-and-a-half-year existence of St George’s School in Eindhoven, on Wednesday 30 April 1930, transl. Susan Verkerk-Wheatley and Anne-Marie Bos: <https://titusbrandsmateksten.nl/fragments-anniversary-speech-saint-george/> (accessed 10th May, 2022)

⁵ Titus Brandsma, O.Carm., ‘The Concept of Philosophy’ [original title: ‘Het begrip Wijsbegeerte’], fragments from the opening lecture of the Week of Philosophy, 13-15 June 1932, in Nijmegen, transl. Susan Verkerk- Wheatley and Anne-Marie Bos: <https://titusbrandsmateksten.nl/fragments-the-concept-of-philosophy/> (accessed 10th May, 2022)

⁶ Titus Brandsma, O.Carm., ‘The Concept of God’ [original title ‘*Godsbegrip*’], transl. Joachim Smet, O.Carm. (text given to author by translator), discourse on the occasion of his investiture as *Rector Magnificus* of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, 17th October 1932

⁷ Titus Brandsma says: ‘We must see God first of all as the deepest Ground of our being... We must be found in continuous contemplation of God and adore him not only in our own being, but just as much in all that exists, first of all, in our fellow human beings, but also in nature, in the universe, as he is omnipresent and permeating everything with the work of his hands.’ (Titus Brandsma, O.Carm., ‘The Concept of God’ [original title ‘*Godsbegrip*’], transl. Joachim Smet, O.Carm. (text given to author by translator), discourse on the occasion of his investiture as *Rector Magnificus* of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, 17th October 1932)

⁸ Titus Brandsma, O.Carm., ‘The Concept of God’ [original title ‘*Godsbegrip*’], transl. Joachim Smet, O.Carm. (text

given to author by translator), discourse on the occasion of his investiture as *Rector Magnificus* of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, 17th October 1932

⁹ The term ‘apostolate of truth in love’ is the author’s. It was inspired by reading the words of former Prior General of the Carmelite Order, Most Revd John Malley, O.Carm., who drew out the aspect of ‘truth in love’ in Titus Brandsma’s teaching in his homily given at the second Mass of thanksgiving for the beatification of Blessed Titus Brandsma on November 5, 1985, at the Carmelite Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Traspontina, reprinted in Miguel Arribas O.Carm., *The Price of Truth: Titus Brandsma, Carmelite* (Darien, IL: Carmelite Media), pp. 286-289

¹⁰ Titus Brandsma, ‘*De ruimte*’ in *De Katholiek*, 149 (1916) pp. 81-106. From 1909 to 1923, Titus taught philosophy and mathematics to Carmelite students at Oss.

¹¹ Titus Brandsma cites Pope Pius XI who spoke of the Catholic press as an *arma veritatis* (‘weapon of truth’). See Miguel Arribas O.Carm., *The Price of Truth: Titus Brandsma, Carmelite* (Darien, IL: Carmelite Media), p. 105 ¹² See Carmelite *Rule*, Chapter 19 (transl. Christopher O’Donnell, O.Carm., in The Irish Carmelites, ed., *Meeting God: Carmelite Reflections and Prayers* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008), p. 77): ‘Your loins are to be girded with the belt of chastity; your breast is to be protected by holy thoughts, for the scriptures says, holy thoughts will save you. Put on the breastplate of justice, so that you may love the Lord your God from your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole strength, and your neighbour as yourselves. In all things take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the darts of the evil one; without faith, indeed, it is impossible to please God. The helmet of salvation is to be placed on your head, so that you may hope for salvation from the one Saviour, who saves his people from their sins. The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, is to dwell abundantly in your mouths and hearts. So whatever you have to do, is to be done in the word of the Lord.’

¹³ Quoted in Miguel Arribas O.Carm., *The Price of Truth: Titus Brandsma, Carmelite* (Darien, IL: Carmelite Media), p. 116

¹⁴ Quoted in Miguel Arribas O.Carm., *The Price of Truth: Titus Brandsma, Carmelite* (Darien, IL: Carmelite Media), p. 105