



Titus Brandsma: Responding to Crisis

Catechesis on Titus Brandsma 13 May 2002
Chiesa di San Patrizio, Via Boncompagni 31, Roma
Sanny Bruijns, O.Carm.

Good evening. It is wonderful to be here as pilgrims for the canonisation of blessed Titus Brandsma. Over the years, Titus has become for me a witness to God's loving presence in a broken world. During this talk I would like to reflect on two questions:

- How did Titus respond to the various crises which marked the time in which he lived in the 20th century?
- How did Titus face his own personal crisis after his imprisonment in January 1942?

So, how did Titus respond to the various crises which marked the time in which he lived in the 20th century?

From 1903 to 1923 Titus Brandsma lived and worked in the Carmelite community in the city of Oss. After his doctorate in philosophy, he was lecturing philosophy to the Carmelite students in their study house in Oss. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there

was great poverty and a lack of employment in the city of Oss, in the region of Brabant, the Netherlands. The young Titus and the other friars in his community were deeply affected by the needs of the people. As a contemplative community in the very midst of the people, they organised various social activities for the poor to improve their lives and their circumstances.

Aware of the importance of good communication, Father Titus Brandsma injected new life into 'De Stad Oss', a local newspaper. As its chief editor, he wrote about a range of social issues such as child mortality, alcoholism, unemployment, criminality, the dangers of National Socialism and women's suffrage.

Titus was very much aware of the need for and importance of good information and good education. So he founded a public library to help promote the spiritual and social development of those in Oss who were suffering under the burden of poverty.

His next step involved the founding of a high school with the aim of offering good education to the young people.

1914 saw the outbreak of the First World War. Titus was then thirty-three. He was touched by the suffering of the refugees and the soldiers who died on the battlefields across Belgium and France. This inspired him to write his first series of meditations on the stations of the cross for the artist Albert Servaes. With images of real-life victims of war in his mind, Servaes depicted Jesus' way of the cross in the most graphic and striking manner. Inspired by these paintings, Titus wrote his first series of meditations on the pain and suffering of Jesus on his way of the cross.

The decade that followed the First World War is often referred to as the Roaring Twenties. It was during this decade that the Catholic University of Nijmegen was founded, an important event which was part of the emancipation of Catholics in the Netherlands and the Low Countries. It was at this new university, that Titus was appointed to the Chair of the history of philosophy and the history of mysticism.

The end of the so-called roaring twenties was then suddenly marked by the Wall Street Crash. This heralded the period known as the Great Depression which impacted profoundly on all of the Western industrialized countries. It was during this challenging time that fascist ideology began to flower. Titus Brandsma was very much aware of the dangers of National Socialism. He lectured on this topic in his course on the philosophy of national socialism.

In 1932, at the University of Nijmegen, he delivered his famous speech on 'The concept of God'. I will now quote the opening lines:

*Among the many questions which I
ask myself, none occupies me more
than the riddle (the puzzle),
that the evolving human being, proud and spirited
in his progress, turns away from God in such great
number...*

*And yet...There is in these dark times a special light in the
developing concept of God. And this is the idea, that God dwells
within us,
and in the whole of our life, that divine indwelling can become a
bright radiance.*

It is during times of crisis that Prof. Brandsma experiences God's indwelling, as a ray of light in a dark night. The darkness of 1932 became even darker in the years that followed Adolf Hitler's appearance as Chancellor of Germany, and Führer of his nation. During the years of growing Nazi tyranny, the Carmelite Titus Brandsma responded to this dark movement in a determined and focused, and yet non-violent way. He was an active member of the Roman Catholic Peace Union. During his philosophy lectures at the University of Nijmegen, he explored the dangers of National Socialism. During his courses on Dutch mysticism, he focused on the mysticism of suffering. With hindsight, we can look back and say that these experiences were preparing him for what was to come: imprisonment in Scheveningen, Amersfoort, Cleve and finally his death in Dachau.

This brings me to my second question:

How did Titus face his own personal crisis after his imprisonment in January 1942?

We all know that Father Titus was arrested in January 1942 as a political prisoner because of his resistance to the Nazi propaganda. This arrest marks the moment when he began to walk his own way of the cross. Because his life was rooted in contemplation he was given the strength to face his enemies. In the prison of Scheveningen he was interrogated by the German captain Hardegen. Hardegen asked Titus Brandsma to explain why the Dutch were against the National Socialist Movement. He set out his response to this question in what is called his 'Last writing'. In the prison of Scheveningen, he explains in his 'Last writing' his own resistance to the Nazis and the resistance of the Dutch nation. He writes that by denying the Christian roots and free spirit of the Dutch people, the National Socialist Movement was in reality an anti-Dutch movement. Titus said, and I quote:

*the love of liberty in our people is great, truly great.
The Dutch people will assume and accept more from the German*

people in complete freedom and independence, than they shall ever accept by force and terror.

After reading what Titus wrote the German Captain Hardegen concludes, and I quote:

Brandsma is genuinely a man of character with firm convictions, who wants to "protect Christianity" against National Socialism. He is anti-Nazi in principle and shows this everywhere.

Hardegen advised to eliminate this dangerous Little Friar and to send him to the transit prison camp at Amersfoort because of his firm convictions. The firm convictions of Titus Brandsma can be felt in his well-known poem that opens with the lines:

'O Jesus, when I look on you, My love for you becomes more true. And yours, I know, will never end, moreover as your special friend.

In these lines we sense an atmosphere of contemplation during which we see Titus gazing lovingly at Jesus on the cross, feeling a mutual love, experiencing a 'special friendship' with Jesus. The political setting where this poem was written is 'in prison'. The spiritual setting is 'in union with his special friend Jesus'. After a life of prayer and study, of lecturing and writing, Titus Brandsma seemed to be someone whose whole being was rooted in contemplation. It was his friendship with the Lord, that gave him the strength and inspiration to love his Lord, to love his fellow prisoners, and to remain friendly to those who imprisoned him. The source of his inner strength was his union with the risen Jesus and with Mary, our mother and sister.

After seven weeks in his private prison cell in Scheveningen Professor Brandsma was transferred to the transit prison camp of Amersfoort, where he shared a barrack with other prisoners. Whilst in Amersfoort he was invited by a protestant political prisoner to speak about the mysticism of the Passion. Several people who were listening to him at that time, testified after the Second World War to what happened during that moment when Titus spoke from his very depths. One of them wrote, and I quote:

*The conference became – and it couldn't be otherwise on Good Friday – a meditation on the Passion of Christ, of which his heart was full.
... there, heart touched heart. The words sprang up spontaneously in his heart from the love for his Saviour which burned there and they hit the mark.*

You could hear a pin drop in the barracks. Even the Communists were listening with interest. Had love ever been preached to them with so much ardent conviction? (Summarium p.293-294, Staring p.181)

It was during that moment in a prison barrack in Amersfoort, when Titus spoke about the meaning of the Passion, that he witnessed to his deep faith, and to his resolute determination to resist the Nazi ideology.

Whilst reading, translating and meditating on a text entitled *'The meaning of Geert Groote in our spiritual literature. The specific character of the Dutch 'Mysticism of Suffering'*, I myself have also been struck by the way in which Titus, the professor of Dutch mysticism, summarizes his wisdom, which circles around the mysticism of suffering.

For Titus, mysticism is not about the divine hiding away in the human being. Rather, it is about the divine shining and radiating in and through the human being.

It is about us, as human persons, becoming more transparent by that divine presence, which radiates through our earthly flesh.

When Titus spoke those words on suffering in that prison barrack the external circumstances of those who were present did not change. What did change was the perception of their situation. By listening attentively to the words of Titus, the hearts of the prisoners in Camp Amersfoort were deeply moved, we might say 'strangely warmed'. At that moment in Amersfoort, Titus Brandsma was physically very fragile. And yet, mentally, he was unbroken. Spiritually, he knew himself to be united with the Crucified Lord. May Titus' model of contemplative resistance remain a great source of inspiration for all who find themselves facing a personal crisis.

And for all of us today, who are now facing crises that are clearly 'global', may Titus be for us a sign that points to that resolute hope and trust in the 'indwelling God'. Just like Titus, may we become 'a bright radiance' in the midst of a broken world.