

Titus Brandsma Carmelite and Martyr

A TALE OF TWO CELLS

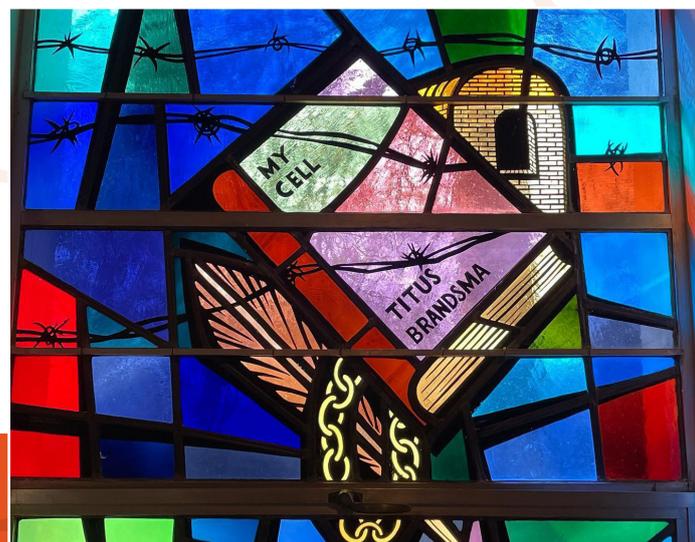
Anno Brandsma was born in the Dutch province of Friesland in 1881. He joined the Carmelite Order in 1898 taking his father's name, Titus, as his religious name. He made his First Profession in October 1899 and was ordained priest on 17 June 1905. As an academic Titus specialised in philosophy and mysticism. 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.

When Titus Brandsma was arrested by the Gestapo on 19 January 1942, he was locked into a solitary cell. Like many other Dutch patriots, he was taken to a prison nicknamed the "Orange Hotel" in Scheveningen so called because of the royal House of Orange, and the Queen's government in exile. Many fellow prisoners may have sunk into despair that their normal lives were at an end. But for Titus, it was just a beginning.

Titus had lived his life in total faithfulness to the Carmelite Rule. One essential element of that Rule stated that the individual should *"stay in his own cell, or near it, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty."*

Titus had always been a joyful model of regularity in prayer with his community. No matter how busy his life was, he tried to be present at all prayer and community activities. But his "other duties" were electrifying! In addition to his University activities, he worked for the reunification of the Eastern Churches, and



▲ *Painting of Titus in his cell, by Colette Mills
Courtesy of the Irish Province of Carmelites.*

organized a Marian congress, and one on Dutch medieval mysticism. He contributed to activities honoring St. Boniface and Frisian saints. He went on a lecture tour of Ireland, Canada, and the United States in 1935. His lectures were published as "Carmelite Mysticism: Historical Sketches." At the request of the Dutch bishops, he was also spiritual liaison for the Catholic schools and their delegate for the Catholic journalists.

The seven weeks Titus spent at Scheveningen were relatively easy, as prisons go. It was a normal civilian facility which had been taken over by the SS, and was home to Titus during his interrogation by SS Sergeant-Major Paul Hardegen. It was a stark existence, but not actively cruel, as the concentration camps would be later in that year. He was allowed to have books, writing materials and tobacco. The meals were simple, but fairly healthy. He was allowed to wear his own clothes. In fact, it seemed to be such an "ordinary" prison that he never let go of the idea that he might be released any time.

Titus immediately went to work turning his prison cell into a monastic cell. All of his busy, frantic activity in the service of church and state had come to a sudden end. There was nothing that he had to hurry off to do. There was nowhere to go. So with his traditional optimism Titus decided to embrace the more spiritual side of Carmelite life, if only to catch up with the prayerful reflection that he had been "too busy" for.

◀ *Photo: Carmel Catholic High School @cchsministry*



Prayer before an image of Christ

O Jesus, when I gaze on You
Once more alive, that I love You
And that your heart loves me too
Moreover as your special friend.

Although that calls me to suffer more
Oh, for me all suffering is good,
For in this way I resemble You
And this is the way to Your Kingdom.

I am blissful in my suffering
For I know it no more as sorrow
But the most ultimate elected lot
That unites me with You, O God.

O, just leave me here silently alone,
The chill and cold around me
And let no people be with me
Here alone I grow not weary.

For Thou, O Jesus, art with me
I have never been so close to You.
Stay with me, with me, Jesus sweet,
Your presence makes all things good for me.

Written by Titus Brandsma on
12-13 February 1942 while
a prisoner at Scheveningen.

Translation: Susan Verkerk-Wheatley / Anne-Marie Bos
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He set up a simple prayer altar using holy cards from his breviary. He displayed cards of the Sacred Heart, St Teresa, and St John of the Cross. His breviary was open to a beautiful picture of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. He remained conscious of what his brother Carmelites were doing at any hour, and tried to match his activity with theirs. He coordinated his times for liturgical and devotional prayers with those of his community. Times for eating and sleeping were beyond his control, but he managed to schedule regular times for prayer, meditating, exercise, study and writing, relaxing, and tidying up his cell. He even worked on a biography of Teresa of Avila.

With all this in mind, Titus was able to write: *“Blessed solitude! I am already quite at home in this small cell. I have not yet become bored here, quite the contrary. I am alone, certainly, but never was Our Lord so close to me. I could shout for joy because he made me find him again entirely, without me going to see people, nor people me. Now he is my only refuge, and I feel secure and happy. I would stay here for ever, if he so disposed. Seldom have I been so happy or content.”*

In his next prisons, circumstances would not be so pleasant, but his days at Scheveningen may have been God’s blessing as a spiritual preparation for what was to come.

‘Blessed solitude! I am already quite at home in this small cell. I have not yet become bored here, quite the contrary. I am alone, certainly, but never was Our Lord so close to me.’

- Titus Brandsma

*Bust of Titus Brandsma next to a relic
containing cloth from his clothes.
St John’s Cathedral, Den Bosch, Netherlands*



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