

Titus Brandsma

Thanksgiving Mass

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Middle Park

Sunday 31 July 2022

In his homily at the Canonisation of Titus Brandsma and nine other men and women renowned for their saintly lives in St Peter's Square on 15 May, Pope Francis remarked that, at times, we have "turned holiness into an unattainable goal. We have separated it from everyday life, instead of looking for it and embracing it in our daily routines, in the dust of the streets, in the trials of real life and, in the words of (another great Carmelite Saint) Teresa of Avila to her Sisters, "among the pots and pans".

In his homily the following day at the Carmelite family's special Mass of Thanksgiving for Titus' canonisation, the Cardinal Archbishop of Utrecht in Titus' native Netherlands, who had previously been Bishop of Titus' home district of Friesland, remarked that "Titus didn't become a Saint because he was a Martyr, but he became a martyr because he was already a saint".

Both the Pope and the Cardinal in their respective remarks reminded us of something that I think is fundamental to appreciating Titus' relevance for us as we celebrate his canonisation today and give thanks for the gift that he is to the world, the Church and the Carmelite Order.

Throughout his life, whilst exercising and sharing his intellectual gifts through his studies and his teaching, preaching and writing, he was also down to earth, connected with people in their everyday struggles, and keen to assist them in whatever practical ways that he could. After his ordination as a Priest and the

completion of his Doctoral Studies in Rome, Titus returned to the Netherlands and was appointed to teach at a school in Oss. At that time, there was great poverty and lack of employment in this city and thus a lack of opportunity for young people to advance in life. Not only did Titus and other young Carmelites organize various social activities to engage young people and help give them a sense of connection, belonging and self-esteem, but he very determinedly advocated for their greater access to a good education. He was the prime mover in the establishment of what I think we would now call a Vocational Training school in Oss and its founding Principal. Subsequently, he was very influential in the establishment of another secondary school in the town of Oldenzaal. His determination to give young people a good start in life through a good education underpinned by Christian and Catholic values extended beyond these two schools with which he was personally involved. He took the case for appropriate funding to ensure the ongoing success of these and all Catholic schools in the Netherlands to the Dutch Parliament which made the historic decision in 1926 to grant funding to these schools. Furthermore, for much of the rest of his life, Titus was Chair of the national Catholic High Schools Boards and, as such, advocated at the highest levels for their rights and those of their students. One of the things that ultimately contributed to his imprisonment and death was his leadership of the resistance by Catholic schools in 1941 to the Nazi government's edict that Jewish children be expelled.

As a University Professor from 1923, Titus wasn't just an Academic in the disciplines of Philosophy and Mysticism, very committed to sharing his insights into God's love for us, God's life in us and our life in God. He was also very relational with his students, attentive in a very pastoral sense to their needs and anxieties, sharing in their joys and open and available to listen to them and assist them as best he could as they grappled with the big and the small challenges of life. He deeply respected the freedom of each person and encouraged in his students enquiring minds, the development of their unique gifts and exploration of the meaning, purpose and direction of their lives.

As a journalist and, ultimately, as the Bishops' representative to spearhead the resistance to the Nazi's directive that the Catholic Press promote Nazi ideology, Titus was fearless and determined in his search for, promotion of and fidelity to the Truth as contained in the gospels. However, in his dealings with his students, his family, his fellow Carmelites, his professional colleagues, the people he met in the street or in the course of his travels and many professional and social encounters and ultimately with his fellow prisoners, guards, interrogators and persecutors and those with whom he disagreed most vehemently, he remained, whilst steadfast in his beliefs and his commitment to the truth of the gospels, respectful, courteous and as helpful and supportive as circumstances allowed.

Titus had a deeply contemplative spirit, by which I mean he had a strong faith in and an intimate and personal loving relationship with God, particularly as revealed in the person of Jesus. This contemplative spirit was nourished by times of silence, solitude, religious practice and deep reflection and prayer. However, this contemplative spirit didn't lead to his disengagement from the world and the people around him, but rather to a deeper engagement with them and service of them in the circumstances of their lives. Titus led an extraordinarily busy and productive life but what shines through in recounting all his involvements, commitments and encounters in life is how calm, peaceful and deeply contented and joyful he seemed to be in spite of whatever difficulties he found himself immersed.

Titus' contemplative disposition amidst all the activities and all the challenges of his life marked him as a faithful and exemplary Christian and Carmelite – one immersed deeply in the contemplative spirit of which the great Carmelite icons, Mary and Elijah, are such exemplars, along with other Carmelite "heroes" by whom he was greatly inspired, namely Saints Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Therese of Lisieux. Ultimately, Titus' deeply contemplative spirit shone through in the great trials of his imprisonment, interrogation, persecution and death in Dachau concentration camp on 26 July 1942 on account of his spirited opposition to Nazi practices and ideology. There are countless stories of his calmness, his inner

peace, his kindness to fellow prisoners and even to his guards and captors, extending even to the nurse who administered the lethal injection which killed him.

His contemplative spirit, though, didn't spare him the deep hurt, pain and inner turmoil one would expect in someone who endured the sorts of trials that he did – rather it was tested by them and ultimately grew stronger through them. We hear from one of his biographers how in the Kleve transit camp, as he was being transferred to Dachau, after several months in other prisons, “The specter of exhaustion and a lonely death drew threateningly closer. He was now crossing a dark threshold ... (with) the injustice of his situation (was) all the more striking. He lost his deep inner peace. Fear attacked him, fear that rendered him powerless. The protective power of a well-ordered inner life no longer functioned. The spring within no longer produced living water.”ⁱ We hear that he entered into a battle with himself and tried to fend off a violent death in a concentration camp. Quite reasonably and understandably he sought a mitigation of his death sentence on the grounds of ill health, which was something he had lived with all his life but which was greatly exacerbated in the circumstances of his imprisonment. This attempt failed, forcing him to make a choice between ending his life bitterly bemoaning his fate or relinquishing himself to his fate in the spirit of Jesus in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross when he surrendered himself to persecution and death with utter faith and trust in God in spite of his feelings of abandonment. Titus drew on his deeply contemplative spirit, cultivated over a life time, and although weak and racked with pain, he faced his final days with deep peace and love. As he was administered the lethal injection which killed him, he looked lovingly on the nurse and gave her his rosary, uttering in his own way, the words of Jesus on the cross ... “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

In our First Reading today from the First Book of Kings we heard how Elijah had become discouraged and disillusioned by the difficult circumstances he found himself in as a result of being faithful to what God had asked of him in his battle

with the Prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah sought to escape from anything more God was asking of him. In his stricken and dispirited state, however, he was strengthened by God's "angel", the instrument of God's presence, to carry on and ultimately come to full peaceful communion with God on Mount Horeb. As a faithful and exemplary Carmelite, a "son of Elijah", Titus Brandsma drew deeply on the contemplative spirit which he had cultivated and expressed through his whole life in the way he went about his mission and related to others. As Titus lived, so did he die, putting into practice, even to his last breath, the injunction of Jesus we heard in the Gospel Reading today: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly ... Give to everyone who asks you ... Treat others as you would like them to treat you ... Love your enemies and do good ... Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.*

We give thanks for the life and example of Saint Titus Brandsma and reach out to him to pray for us that we too might cultivate a deeply contemplative spirit and express it in the circumstances of our lives, giving witness to God's love for us and for all his creation.

Paul Cahill, O.Carm.

ⁱ Constant Dolle, *Encountering God in the Abyss*. Peeters 2002 p.152