

Today's Martyrs

Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom

Document

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Homily of July 20, 1941

Munster, Germany

Today the collection which I ordered for the inhabitants of the city of Münster is held in all the parishes in the diocese of Münster which have not themselves suffered war damage. I hope that through the efforts of the state and municipal authorities responsible and the brotherly help of the Catholics of this diocese, whose contributions will be administered and distributed by the offices of the Caritas, much need will be alleviated.

Thanks be to God, for several days our city has not suffered any new enemy attacks from without. But I am distressed to have to inform you that the attacks by our opponents within the country, of the beginning of which I spoke last Sunday in St. Lambert's, that these attacks have continued, regardless of our protests, regardless of the anguish this causes to the victims of the attacks and those connected with them. Last Sunday I lamented, and branded as an injustice crying out to heaven, the action of the Gestapo in closing the convent in Wilkinghege and the Jesuit residences in Munster, confiscating their property and possessions, putting the occupants into the street and expelling them from their home area. The convent of Our Lady of Lourdes in Frauenstrasse was also seized by the Gau authorities. I did not then know that on the same day, Sunday 13th July, the Gestapo had occupied the Kamilluskolleg in Sudmühle and the Benedictine abbey of Gerleve near Coesfeld and expelled the fathers and lay brothers. They were forced to leave Westphalia that very day.

On 15th July the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Vinnenberg, near Warendorf, were expelled from their convent and from the province. On 17th July the Sisters of the Cross were driven out of their convent, Haus Aspel in Rees, and forced to leave the district of Rees.

Had not Christian love shown compassion for all these homeless ones, these men and women would have been exposed to hunger and the rigors of the weather.

Then a few hours ago I learned the sad news that yesterday, 19th July, at the end of this second terrible week in our region of Munster, the Gestapo occupied, confiscated and expropriated the administrative center of the German province of the Holy Heart of Jesus, the great missionary house at Hiltrup, which is well known to you all. The fathers and lay brothers still living there were given until 8 o'clock yesterday evening to leave their residence and their possessions. They too are expelled from Westphalia and the province of Rhineland.

The fathers and lay brothers still living there: I do emphasize these words, for, as I happened to learn recently, 161 men from the ranks of the Hiltrup missionaries are serving as German soldiers in the field, some of them directly in face of the enemy; 53 fathers are caring for the wounded as medical orderlies, and 42 theologians and 66 lay brothers are serving their country as soldiers, some having been decorated with the Iron Cross and other distinctions. The same can be said of the Kamillus fathers of Sudmühle, the Jesuits of Sentmaring and the Benedictines of Gerleve. While these German men are fighting for their country in accordance with their duty and in loyal comradeship with other German brothers, at the risk of their lives, they are being deprived, ruthlessly and without any basis in law, of their home, their parent monastery is being destroyed. When, as we hope, they return victorious they will find their monastic family driven from house and home and their home occupied by strangers, by enemies!

How is this going to end? It is not a question of providing temporary accommodation for homeless inhabitants of Münster. The religious orders were very ready to reduce their own accommodation requirements to the minimum in order to take in and care immediately for those made homeless. No: that was not the reason. I have heard that the convent of the Immaculate Conception in Wilkinghege is occupied by the Gau film unit. I am told that a maternity home for unmarried mothers is installed in the Benedictine abbey. I have not yet learned what is happening to Sentmaring, Sudmühle and Vinnenberg. And no newspaper has so far carried any account of the safe victories won by the Gestapo in recent days over defenseless men and unprotected women, of the conquests made at home by the Gau authorities of the property of fellow Germans.

On Monday 14th July I called on the President of the Regional Council and asked for protection for the freedom and property of innocent German citizens. He told me that the Gestapo was a completely independent authority with whose actions he could not interfere. He promised, however, that he would at once convey my complaints and my requests to the Senior President and Gauleiter, Dr. Meyer. To no avail. On the same day I sent a telegram to the Führer's Chancellery of the Reich in Berlin, in the following terms.

“After a series of terrible nightly air attacks from 6th July onwards, in which the enemy has sought to destroy the city of Münster, the Gestapo began on 12th July to seize religious houses in the city and surrounding area and to make them over, along with their contents, to the Gau authorities. The occupants, innocent men and women, honorable members of German families, whose relatives are fighting for Germany as soldiers, are robbed of their homes and possessions, thrown into the street, driven out of the province. I ask the Führer and Reichskanzler, in the interest of justice and the solidarity of the home front, for the protection of the freedom and property of these honorable German men and women against the arbitrary actions of the Gestapo.”

I addressed similar requests by telegram to the Governor of Prussia, Marshal Göring, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs and the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht. I hoped that, if not considerations of justice, at any rate a recognition of the consequences for the solidarity of the home front in wartime would move these authorities to put a stop to the action taken by the Gestapo against our brothers and sisters, and that innocent German women would not be refused chivalrous protection. It was a vain hope. The action continued, and the situation which I had long foreseen and of which I spoke last Sunday has now come to pass: we are faced with the ruins of the inner national community of our people, which in the last few days has been ruthlessly shattered.

I urgently pointed out to the President of the Regional Council, the ministers and the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht that these acts of violence against blameless German men and this brutal treatment of defenseless German women, which make a mockery of all chivalry and can arise only from deep-seated hatred of the Christian religion and the Catholic Church, that these machinations are sabotaging and destroying the national community of our people. For how can

there be any feeling of community with the men who are driving our religious, our brothers and sisters, as easy victims out of the country, without any basis in law, without any investigations, without any possibility of defense and without any judgment by a court? No! With them and with all those responsible for these actions I cannot possibly have any community of thought or feeling. I shall not hate them; I wish from my heart that they may gain a new insight and mend their ways.

In this spirit I also at once said a prayer for the soul of Ministerialdirigent [Assistant Secretary] Roth, who died suddenly on 5th July. He was a Catholic priest, originally in the archdiocese of Munich, who worked for years, without the permission and against the will of the bishop, as an official in the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, composing and signing many documents which encroached on the Church's rights and injured the Church's dignity. And now he has been drowned during a boat trip on the river Inn. May God have mercy upon his poor soul! Thus, in accordance with our Savior's command, we will pray for all who persecute us and slander us. But as long as they do not change, as long as they continue to rob and banish and imprison innocent people, so long do I refuse any community with them.

No: the community of convictions and aspirations in our people has been irreparably destroyed, against our will and regardless of our warnings. I cannot believe that our long-established citizenry and farmers, craftsmen and workers, that our women, that our fathers and brothers and sons, who even now are risking their lives for Germany at the front, can have any community of convictions with those who have persecuted and turned out our religious orders.

We shall obey them in so far as they are entitled to give us orders as representatives of the lawful authorities. But it must be impossible for us to have a community of convictions, a sense of inner solidarity, with these persecutors of the Church, these invaders of religious houses, who expel defenseless women from their convents, the children of our best families, our sisters, many of whom have lived there for decades in work and prayer, doing nothing but good for our people. I should feel ashamed before God and before you, I should feel ashamed before our noble German forefathers, before my own late father, who was a chivalrous man and brought up, admonished and taught my brothers and me sternly to show the most delicate respect to every woman or girl, to afford chivalrous protection to all the unjustly oppressed, particularly to women as the images

of our own mothers, and of the beloved Mother of God herself in heaven, if I had any community with those who drive innocent and defenseless women out of house and home and drive them out of their country without shelter and without resources! Moreover, as I showed last Sunday in St Lambert's church and as I must repeat today with great solemnity, in a warning inspired by love for my people and my country, that these punitive actions by the Gestapo against innocent people, without any judgment by a court or judicial proceedings or opportunity for defense — the "prosecution of accused persons who are condemned in advance and deprived of any means of defense", in Reich minister Dr. Frank's words — destroy men's security under the law, undermine faith in law and destroy confidence in the government of our country.

We Christians, of course, are not aiming at revolution. We shall continue loyally to do our duty in obedience to God and in love of our people and fatherland. Our soldiers will fight and die for Germany, but not for those men who by their cruel actions against our religious, against their brothers and sisters, wound our hearts and shame the German name before God and men. We shall continue to fight against the external enemy; but against the enemy within, who strikes us and torments us, we cannot fight with arms. Against him we have only one weapon: endurance — strong, tough, hard endurance.

Become hard! Remain firm! We see and experience clearly what lies behind the new doctrines which have for years been forced on us, for the sake of which religion has been banned from the schools, our organizations have been suppressed and now Catholic kindergartens are about to be abolished — there is a deep-seated hatred of Christianity, which they are determined to destroy. If I am correctly informed, the Schulungsleiter [head of indoctrination], Herr Schmidt, before an audience which had been invited by force and which included schoolboys and schoolgirls, expressed this quite frankly and district leader Mieling applauded him enthusiastically, expressing his intention to exert himself for the execution of such plans.

The anvil represents those who are unjustly imprisoned, those who are driven out and banished for no fault of their own. God will support them, that they may not lose the form and attitude of Christian firmness, when the hammer of persecution strikes its harsh blows and inflicts unmerited wounds on them.

It is our religious, the fathers, lay brothers and the sisters, who are now forged on the anvil. The day before yesterday I was able to visit some of those who had been driven out in their temporary accommodation and to speak with them. I was greatly edified and encouraged by the valiant bearing of the good men and the weak and defenseless women, who had been so ruthlessly torn from their convent, from the chapel, from the vicinity of the tabernacle, and who are now going into unjust banishment with their heads held high, in the consciousness of their innocence, trusting in Him who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field and even joyous in the joy which the Savior enjoins on His disciples: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven." Verily, these men and women are masterpieces of God's forging.

What is being forged in these days between the hammer and the anvil are our young people — the new generation, which is still unformed, still capable of being shaped, still malleable. We cannot shield them from the hammer-blows of unbelief, of hostility to Christianity, of false doctrines and ethics. What is instilled into them at the meetings of those youth organizations, which we are told they joined voluntarily and with the agreement of their parents? What do they hear in the schools which the children are compelled to attend without regard to the wishes of their parents? What do they read in the new school-books? Christian parents, ask your children to show you these books, particularly the history books used in the secondary schools.

You will be appalled to see how these books, in complete disregard of historical truth, seek to fill inexperienced children with mistrust of Christianity and the Church, indeed with hatred of the Christian faith.

In the favored state educational establishments, the Hitler schools, the new teachers' training schools, all Christian influence and even all religious activity are excluded as a matter of principle. And what is happening to the children who were sent last spring to remote parts of the country to escape the air-raids? What religious instruction are they getting? How far can they practice their religion? Christian parents, you must concern yourselves with all this. If you do not, you are neglecting your sacred duties; if you do not, you cannot face your own conscience, nor Him who entrusted the children to you that you might lead them on the way to heaven.

We are the anvil, not the hammer! Unfortunately you cannot shield your children, the noble but still untempered crude metal, from the hammer-blows of hostility to the faith and hostility to the Church. But the anvil also plays a part in forging. Let your family home, your parental love and devotion, your exemplary Christian life be the strong, tough, firm and unbreakable anvil which absorbs the force of the hostile blows, which continually strengthens and fortifies the still weak powers of the young in the sacred resolve not to let themselves be diverted from the direction that leads to God.

It is we, almost without exception, who are forged in this present time. How many people are dependent — on an occupational pension, on a state pension, on children's allowances and so on! Who nowadays is still independent, unrestricted master in his own property or business? It may be that, particularly in time of war, strict control and guidance, even the concentration and compulsory direction of products, of production and consumption, is necessary, and who will not readily bear this out of love for his people and his country? But through this follows dependence on many persons and authorities, who not only restrict freedom of action but also bring free independence of sentiments and convictions into grave danger and temptation, as soon as, at the same time, these persons and authorities represent an ideology hostile to Christianity, which they seek to impose on those who are dependent on them. Dependence of this kind is most evident in officials; and what courage, what heroic courage is required of those officials who in spite of all pressure maintain and publicly confess their faith as Christians, as true Catholics!

At this present time we are the anvil, not the hammer! Remain steadfast and firm like the anvil receiving all the blows that rain down on us, in loyal service to our people and country, but also ready at any time to act, in the spirit of supreme sacrifice, in accordance with the precept: "Men must obey God more than men." Through a conscience formed by faith God speaks to each one of us. Obey always without any doubt the voice of conscience.

Take as your model the old Prussian minister of justice – I have spoken of him before – who was ordered by King Frederick the Great to overturn and alter in accordance with the monarch's wishes a judgment which he had pronounced in accordance with the law. Then this true nobleman, a certain Herr von Münchhausen, gave his king this magnificent answer: "My head is at your majesty's disposal, but not my conscience." Thus he wanted to say: I am ready to die for

my king; indeed I am obedient to him and shall even accept death at the hands of the hangman. My life belongs to the king, not my conscience, that belongs to God! Is the race of such noblemen, who have this attitude and act in accordance with it, are Prussian officials of this stamp now extinct? Are there no longer any citizens or country people, craftsmen or workers of similar mind? Of similar conscientiousness and nobility of mind? That I cannot and will not believe. And so I say once again: become hard, remain firm, remain steadfast! Like the anvil under the blows of the hammer! It may be that obedience to our God and faithfulness to our conscience may cost me or any of you life, freedom or home. But: "Better to die than to sin!" May the grace of God, without which we can do nothing, grant this unshakeable firmness to you and to me and keep us in it!

My dear Catholics of Münster! After a bomb had crashed through the aisle of the Cathedral during the night of 7th – 8th July another bomb hit the outer wall and destroyed St Ludger's Fountain, the monument to the return from banishment of Bishop Johann Bernhard in 1884. The statues of Bishops Suitger and Erpho flanking the monument were badly damaged, but the figure of St. Ludger, apostle of the Münster region and first Bishop of Münster, remained almost unscathed. The undamaged right hand is raised in blessing and pointing to heaven, as if to convey to us through the almost miraculous preservation of the statue this admonition: Whatever may befall, hold firm to the Catholic faith that was revealed by God and handed down by our forefathers! In all the destruction of the works of man, in all trouble and sorrow I address to you the words which the first Pope addressed to the oppressed Christians of his day: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, . . . Whom resist steadfast in the faith . . . But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you. To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever." (1 Peter 5,6-11).

Let us pray for the banished religious orders, for all who must suffer unjustly, for all in trouble, for our soldiers, for Münster and its inhabitants, for our people and country and for its leader.

Today's Martyrs

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