

A MODERN MARTYR CHAMPIONED THE CATHOLIC PRESS

Brother John M. Samaha, S.M.

Blessed Jacob Gapp, S.M., may well be considered another patron of the Catholic press as well as a patron of justice and peace advocates. Because the Gestapo condemned him for his unwavering adherence to the Catholic faith and his unabashed denunciation of National Socialism (Nazism), Father Jacob Gapp was guillotined by the Nazis in Berlin at the Ploetzensee Prison on August 13, 1943. Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1996.

Before entering the Society of Mary in his native Austria, this intrepid Marianist priest had served in the Austrian army in World War I, was wounded and decorated for valor, and suffered as a prisoner of war in northern Italy. This experience taught him to loathe war, selfishness and greed, arrogant pride, political and social injustice. As a young Marianist religious and teacher of religion he was unstinting as a militant advocate for the poor, the needy, and the oppressed.

This action made Father Gapp a serious irritant to the Nazis after they annexed Austria in 1938. For his own safety and for the welfare of the Marianist school where he was teaching in Graz, his superiors moved him from place to place for parish work. The Nazi regime forbade him to teach. Some pupils in the Tyrol told a school inspector in October 1938 that Father Gapp explained to them the Gospel message of brotherly love and their obligation to love and respect “Frenchmen, Czechs, Jews, and communists alike, as they were all human beings.” He insisted, “God is your God, not Adolf Hitler.”

Realizing that the spoken word and the printed word clearly possessed a power lacking in the sword of militarism, he employed the Catholic press as a weapon of

choice. And he read avidly to study the thorny problem of National Socialism and all its ramifications.

Imbued with the message of Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* and the statements of the Austrian bishops, Jacob Gapp had formed a lucid and sound judgment about the utter incompatibility of National Socialism and Christianity. In his preaching he emphasized this truth fearlessly, and he taught the uncompromising law of love for all people without reference to nationality or religion.

In a fateful sermon in his home parish of St. Lawrence at Wattens in the Tyrol on December 11, 1938, this seasoned Marianist priest staunchly defended Pope Pius XI against the attacks of the Nazis, knowing that his words were being monitored by the Gestapo. He urged the faithful to read Catholic literature rather than Nazi propaganda, and to follow the lead of the Catholic press. This bold move forced him to leave his native country and escape to France. A few months later his anti-Nazi audacity required that he flee Bordeaux and enter Spain, where he assisted in several schools and parishes served by the Marianists. But in Spain, which had Nazi sympathies engendered during its Civil War, even among his fellow Marianists he stood alone and was misunderstood because of his rejection of the Nazi diatribe. Yet his zeal for the cause he so fervently espoused was not diminished.

In the summer of 1942 the beleaguered Father Jacob Gapp visited the British consulate in Valencia to inquire about a visa to England. He also wanted to learn what was really happening in Germany and in Nazi-occupied Europe, especially concerning the Church. The consulate staff gave him a stack of newspapers and magazines. Among them were copies of *The Tablet*, a weekly journal edited by Catholic laity in London. *The Tablet* provided reports about the persecution of the Church, internment camps, pastoral letters like that of the Bishop of Calahorra in Spain criticizing the Nazi ideology, and objective reports from the war fronts. Shunning the biased propaganda

material, Father Jacob began to distribute *The Tablet*, returning regularly to the consulate for new copies.

Shadowed by the Nazis over the years, he was arrested through a deceptive trap that lured him across the border into occupied France, where the Gestapo arrested him and hustled him to prison in Berlin. In January 1943, for two long and intense days he was interrogated nonstop by the Gestapo. Jacob Gapp welcomed the opportunity to present his case. The Gestapo interrogators were particularly interested in his visits to the British consulate in Valencia, and in the “subversive propaganda against the Fatherland” he had repeatedly collected there and distributed. Calmly and firmly the prisoner explained that *The Tablet* was not propaganda: “It is a good, Catholic journal. The writing is sound, and I even intended to subscribe.”

Willingly and vigorously the martyr-to-be not only admitted he consistently opposed the Nazi regime and all it represented, but explained when and why he had done so. He virtually flew in the face of the interrogators. His reasoning and candor stunned the Nazi agents. First and foremost he was a Marianist religious and Catholic priest, conscience-bound to place God before Caesar. Since the Nazis were bent on destroying the Church, he was convinced it was his duty to blaze a trail of resistance and opposition, to educate with truth, and to be a role model of fidelity.

For his honesty and integrity Father Jacob Gapp was sentenced to death for treason and guillotined. His body was destroyed because the Gestapo feared the people would revere him as a martyr. Reportedly Heinrich Himmler, the cunning manipulator of the Nazi leadership, expressed the opinion that Germany would win World War II without difficulty if there were a million party members as committed as Jacob Gapp. Even the enemy admired his tenacious and unstinting adherence to conviction.

Today we honor Blessed Jacob Gapp as a modern-day champion of the Catholic press, which strives to be a source of truthful reporting. Because he respected the

Catholic press as the vehicle the Church employs to reveal the Good News for our day, we are invited to call on him to help us to appreciate and promote a more effective Catholic press – print and electronic -- with a wider readership, and to use the Catholic press as he did for the cause of truth and justice.

As the Church regards St. Francis de Sales as patron of the Catholic press, who intercedes for writers and publishers, we can call on Blessed Jacob Gapp as a patron for readers of the Catholic press. We can request him to assist all who turn to the Catholic press for a reliable source of information.

- The author:

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