

## **The Marianist Family Must Be Strong in Faith: *Fortes in Fide***

Fr. Paul Landolfi

This motto has been with the Marianist Family from its beginning. Blessed Fr. William Joseph Chaminade, who bequeathed this treasure to us, was himself seen as a person strong in faith. This month we look to one member of the Marianist Family who became a model for us of faith.

On Aug. 13, 1943 Blessed Jakob Gapp, an Austrian Marianist, was beheaded because he firmly believed and publicly proclaimed that National Socialism (Nazi) was absolutely incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ.

Adolph Hitler hated the Jews. At first, he used Christianity and Gospel teaching to discredit the Jews. In a speech delivered April 22, 1922, and published in *Mein Kampf*, he told the people:

“...In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders. How terrific was His fight against the Jewish poison.

Today, after two thousand years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before the fact that it was for this that He (Jesus) had to shed His blood upon the cross. As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice....”

*Ed. note: Hitler then made comments on the economic inequality the Jews and the German people. He continued,*

“...When I go out in the morning and see these men standing in their queues and look into their pinched faces, then I believe I would be no Christian, but a very devil, if I felt no pity for them, if I did not, as did our Lord two thousand years ago, turn against those by whom today this poor people are plundered and exploited.”

Once Hitler had gained power, he began to see Christianity as a threat to the National Socialists' domination of Germany. He argued that Christian worship was a sign of weakness and should be replaced by reverence for the nation and the State, i.e., the National Socialist Party. The following is quoted from Hitler's Table Talks with Bormann, in "Hitler, A Study in Tyranny," by Allan Bullock:

"The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity....The deliberate lie in the matter of religion was introduced into the world by Christianity. I'll make these damned parsons feel the power of the State in a way they would never have believed possible. For the moment, I am just keeping my eye on them: If I ever have the slightest suspicion that they are getting dangerous, I will shoot the lot of them. This filthy reptile raises its head whenever there is a sign of weakness in the State, and therefore it must be stamped on. We have no sort of use for a fairy story invented by the Jews."

In sharp contrast, Blessed Jakob Gapp, known for his great sense of social justice, which he tried to share with his students, based his opposition to National Socialism on his faith. At his interrogation after being arrested, he unwaveringly admitted:

"I said precisely the things of which I am accused...I told the students that I had been a prisoner of the Czechoslovakians and was treated badly by them but I could not for that reason nurture hatred for all Czechoslovakians. I exhorted them not to hate anyone...because Christ taught us to love others as ourselves. I sought to persuade them to "assimilate the principle that one cannot hate the Czechoslovakians and the Jews for the sole fact of being Czechoslovakians and Jews."

For Blessed Jakob, these were not just nice words. They were his faith convictions. He had studied the writings and teachings of National Socialism and found them incompatible with his faith. At his interrogation he openly told them:

"In 1935 when the National Socialists were also getting livelier in Austria and were trying to gain a foothold, I gradually became more interested in this movement. What particularly turned me off from National Socialism before I

studied it further, were certain events in Graz. I set about to study the works of the movement... I became convinced that National Socialism is incompatible with the Catholic Church. I was not satisfied with only studying these works, but I sought to penetrate the heart of the movement more and more and gradually became horrified."

At the inquiry for beatification, his community director at the time testified,

"His relationship with National Socialism was imprinted and determined totally by religion. His position up to his witness in death can only be seen in this way. For him it had absolutely nothing to do with politics, but completely with the ideal of faith which he saw to be in danger. Jakob Gapp conveyed this position of his with complete consistency in all of his sermons, in school, and in his conversations. In this regard Jakob Gapp was in no way a fearful person. He was thoroughly conscious of the effects of what he was doing, but he was not afraid because he was thoroughly convinced of his position. I spoke with him on the evening before the Anschluss and there was nothing in the world that would influence him to take a more moderate position. Nothing could talk him out of his clear position against National Socialism which for him was an announcement of battle to the Church and to the faith."

We ask Blessed Jakob to pray for us that we may be very much aware of what is going on and how to read the signs of the times. We ask him to teach us how to internalize the truths of our Christian faith and help us to develop convictions that will withstand any pressures that might weaken our desire to be true to Jesus Christ. We ask him to pray for us that we may always be strong in faith.

The Nazis beheaded him and destroyed his body so that he would not be considered a martyr. The only remains left of Jakob--his gold ring, the sign of his perpetual profession. It remains in Austria at the Marianist Novitiate, inspiring us all to be faithful. This ring, the sign of his perpetual commitment to Christ, speaks loud and clearly the message he spoke while he lived.

For more information and a list of recent publications, email [r.hartz@chaminade-hs.org](mailto:r.hartz@chaminade-hs.org).

## **Blessed Jakob Gapp**

*Also known as*  
Jacob Gapp

*Memorial* 13 August

### *Profile*

Seventh child in the working class family of Martin Gapp and Antonia Wach. Received a basic education in his native town, then entered the Franciscan high school in Hall in 1910. Austrian soldier on the Italian front from May 1915 till he was wounded in 1916; received the silver medal of Courage Second Class. On 4 November 1918 he became a prisoner of war in Riva del Garda; released 18 August 1919.

Entered the Marianist novitiate at Greisinghof, Upper Austria in 1921. Assigned to the Marian Institute in Graz as a teacher and sacristan for four years, while preparing for the seminary. Made his profession at Antony, France on 27 August 1925. In September 1925 Jakob entered the International Marianist Seminary in Fribourg, Switzerland. Ordained by Bishop Marius Besson at Saint Nicholas Cathedral in Fribourg on 5 April 1930.

Back in Austria he worked as a teacher, director of religious education, and chaplain in Marianist schools till 1938. Economic conditions were terrible; Father Gapp collected food and other necessities from students, and gave his own heating coal to the poor.

Nazism was on the rise in Germany and Austria. Father Gapp saw the incompatibility of Nazism and Christianity, and began preaching this truth. When German troops arrived in Austria in March 1938, he left Graz. His superiors sent him home as they believed his anti-Nazi preaching would bring on the wrath of the Reich; but those institutions were already marked for destruction.

In Tirol he enjoyed the last moments of peace in his life. He was an assistant pastor in Breitenwang-Reutte for two months when the Gestapo, in October 1938, ordered him not to teach religion. Father Gapp taught uncompromising love for all men and women without reference to nationality or religion, and that "God is your God, not Adolf Hitler." In a sermon on 11 December 1938 he defended Pope Pius XI against the attacks of the Nazis, and directed the faithful of the parish to read Catholic literature instead of Nazi propaganda. He was advised to leave the country.

He escaped to Bordeaux, France, where he worked as a chaplain and librarian. In May 1939 he went to Spain where he served in the Marianist communities at San Sebastian, Cadiz and Valencia. The Gestapo had followed him, and in 1942 he received word of two people across the border in France who claimed to be Jews fleeing from Nazis in Berlin, and who wanted instruction in Catholicism. When he crossed into France to minister to them, they abducted him.

Father Gapp was arrested on 9 November 1942 in Hendaye, France, and brought to Berlin. On 2 July 1943 he was condemned to death for speaking against the Reich. Burial of his remains were denied as the Nazis feared he would be seen as a martyr, and his grave became a site of silent demonstration and rebellion. On the afternoon of 13 August 1943 he was advised he would be executed that night. He wrote two moving farewell letters, and was martyred.

*"Action is more important than theory!"* -Father Gapp

*Born* 26 July 1897 at Wattens, Austrian Tirol

*Died* guillotined at 7.08pm 13 August 1943 at Plotzensee Prison, Berlin, Germany; remains used for research at the Anatomical-Biological Institute of the University of Berlin

*Venerated* 6 April 1995 by Pope John Paul II

*Beatified* 24 November 1996 by Pope John Paul II

*Canonized pending*; if you have information related to the canonization of Blessed Jakob contact:

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