

The Miracle of Christ in Dachau



Anne Barbeau Gardiner

Account by Fr. John Lenz

Christ in Dachau, or Christ Victorious. By John M. Lenz. Roman Catholic Books. 328 pages. \$22.95. First published in German in the mid-1950s, Christ in Dachau is a deeply moving account by Fr. John Lenz of the five years he spent in a concentration camp in Bavaria from 1940 to 1945. Perhaps the most striking aspect of his account is that it reveals how atheists of all stripes -- criminals, socialists, communists, and SS agents -- joined forces in Dachau to persecute Catholic priests. At the root of the misery of the concentration camps, Fr. Lenz remarks, was a Europe that had "turned away from Christ" and toward "a totalitarian system based solely on power." The same godlessness that led to the Third Reich now reigned in the camps, especially in the form of the active hostility of the atheist prisoners against the prisoner priests.

Today the media never stops its ridiculous campaign against Pope Pius XII for his alleged "silence" about the suffering in those camps, but it never reports on the complicity of left-wing atheists with the Nazis to inflict suffering inside the camps. According to Fr. Lenz, "The camp SS and the tough communist and atheist prison-

ers conspired to make our life a Hell." Yes, conspired, just as Pilate and Herod did in afflicting Our Lord. The atheists' hatred of Catholic priests was so intense there that Fr. Otto Neurerer, among other martyrs, ended up hanging upside down for 36 hours until he died, only because a fellow prisoner pretended to want religious instruction and then betrayed him. In another case, the SS in Dachau, along with communist prisoners, subjected Polish Bishop Michael Kozal to intolerable indignities before he died. Yes, communist prisoners serving as SS henchmen! When do we ever hear about that?

The subtitle of Fr. Lenz's book is Christ Victorious because the 2,400 Catholic priests interned in Dachau remained spiritually undefeated to the end, even though about a thousand of them died in what Fr. Lenz calls "the greatest martyrdom of priests in the history of the Church." They were offered their freedom if they would resign their priestly "office," but only two accepted and were released. Christ won a great victory in Dachau. The horrors were only half the story; those who embraced the cross, Fr. Lenz declares, witnessed Our Lord's triumph over the "powers of Hell."

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Denounced

In 1938, right after the Nazi march into Austria, Fr. Lenz spoke to a farmer in his parish about the "godlessness of the new regime" -- and was denounced. Under interrogation he admitted to having said that the Nazi teachings were "atheist" and "anti-Christian." That was enough. He was imprisoned in Vienna for 17 months and ended up in Dachau in August 1940. There he found roughly three hundred of Austria's Catholic leaders who had been incarcerated since the "rape" of Austria. Every priest coming to Dachau -- many from Austria, most from Poland -- was immediately sent to the "punishment squad" with Jews and gypsies, because priests were also regarded by the Nazis as the "scum" of humanity.

After a week, Fr. Lenz was sent with others in sealed cattle trucks first to Mauthausen, then to Gusen, a hard-labor camp where criminals were "bosses." From the start, Fr. Lenz noticed that the dauntless Poles -- who were treated worse than others, especially if they were priests, doctors, or teachers -- had turned Gusen into a camp of prayer: "It was above all the Poles and their gallant priests who inspired this spirit of prayer." He was touched by the way they prayed together in their work-columns until an SS guard or capo came near, when they would lapse into silence. They would also pray together on Sunday around their 150 priests who "lived and suffered and died" with them. Throughout his ordeal at Gusen, Fr. Lenz says, "I never ceased to thank God for my suffering, and this more than anything helped me to bear the Cross." For the

first time he grasped the meaning of St. Paul's words, "I overflow with joy in every tribulation" (2 Cor. 7:4), for he realized that "this time of suffering, terrible though it was, was immensely profitable." He had spent three years in a Jesuit novitiate, but those three months in Gusen were worth "far more," for they made him discover "the sort of prayer which pierces the soul like a sword," the prayer of "unconditional surrender" to God's will. Sadly, the atheist prisoners in Gusen and Dachau were unable to make spiritual use of their sufferings: "As for the godless among us, camp life with all it entailed only served to make them more disillusioned, hard and bitter." Since they could not pray "in the apparent hopelessness and senselessness of our camp," these men would lose their self-respect and make their own lives as "tolerable as possible" at the expense of others. Their fellow prisoners had to use their clothes as pillows to prevent jackets and caps from disappearing in the night. Fr. Lenz concedes that not all the atheist prisoners were corrupt or hardened cases, but the "warm-hearted" among them were the exception to the general rule.

Willing tools of the SS

In what he says about the "godless" in the concentration camp, Fr. Lenz offers the perfect reply to Christopher Hitchens's boast in *God Is Not Great* [reviewed by this writer in the Dec. 2007 NOR -- Ed.], that "if a proper statistical inquiry" were made, atheists would be found to be "more moral than Christians." When atheists became the "real masters" of the concentration camps -- "Judas souls" who wore a yellow arm-



band and were "willing tools of the SS" -- they made life a living hell for their fellow prisoners. For the sake of a few privileges and better food, there was "no limit to which they [the capos] would not go in their godless, self-seeking practices." They were often more bestial and sadistic than the SS themselves in acting out their hostility toward the priests. Such a capo kicked Fr. Lenz all the way uphill as he carried a wheelbarrow full of gravel while the SS stood around "goading, abusing and jeering." Such a capo in charge of the infirmary boasted that no priest admitted there ever came out alive. And when a chapel was being prepared in Dachau, such a capo, an "atheist with an unspeakable contempt for us priests," was "cursing and swearing" as he bellowed out directions.

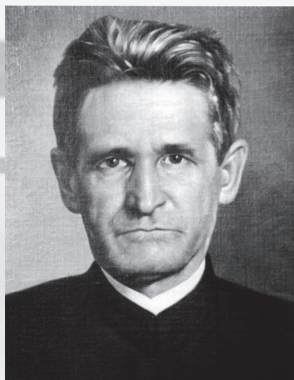
In December 1940, as a result of prolonged negotiations between German bishops and the Gestapo, the commandants at Gusen and other camps received orders from Berlin to send all priests back to Dachau. The bishops had failed to win the priests' release, but they had secured for them breviaries, a chapel, regular Masses, and a separate priests' block in Dachau. Fr. Lenz returned to Dachau on December 8, 1940, and settled into the cramped quarters of the priests' block, which now became "the largest and at the same time the most rigorous enclosed order in the world." The Catholic priests there, hailing from 136 dioceses and 24 nations, formed a great religious community in the middle of "Hell itself." Two-thirds of these priests were over 50, a quarter was over 60, and one was an octogenarian, the Lithuanian Fr. Stanislas Pujdo.

There were also two bishops: Dr. Kozal from Poland and Bishop Piguet from France.

Christ's Cross triumphed

Mass was first offered in the new chapel on January 22, 1941, the red crosses on the chapel's green windows testifying that "Christ's Cross had triumphed in the hell created by the Nazi swastika!" Even though the priests were still half-starved and full of lice, they joyfully sang "Christus vincit!" and basked in the "realization that Christ Himself was here with us in the Blessed Sacrament. Christ Himself, our Lord, our God was with us there in Dachau, fellow-prisoner with us behind barbed wire." From that day on, Christ remained in Dachau; His presence in the Blessed Sacrament became "the perpetual source of our spiritual and intellectual life." The priests were united each day in the Mass like the early Christians in the catacombs, and though the chapel was strictly forbidden to all except priests, they managed to let a few trusted lay prisoners enter the chapel, though there was always the danger of being "betrayed by spies." From this point on they also managed to send the Eucharist to others in the camp, especially to those who were near death. It was "a miracle of Christ in Dachau."

Fr. Lenz then founded a Rosary confraternity in Dachau, so that the priests would not only say the Rosary privately, but also communally. In May 1941 they received permission to have devotions to Our Lady in the chapel and hymns in choir, a victory Fr. Lenz sums up as: "Through Mary to Christ -- in Dachau." Eventually, they obtained a fine statue of "Our Lady of Dachau."



Father Rupert Mayer spoke out against anti-Catholic baiting campaigns and fought against Nazi church policy. His protests against the Nazis landed him several times in Landsberg prison and in Sachsenhausen concentration camp under the Kanzelparagraphen, a series of 19th-century laws that forbade the clergy to make political statements from their pulpits.

Rupert Mayer resolutely spoke out against the Nazi régime's evil in his lectures and sermons. Before the Sondergericht – one of Adolf Hitler's "special courts" – he declared "Despite the speaking ban imposed on me, I shall preach further, even if the state authorities deem my pulpit speeches to be punishable acts and a misuse of the pulpit."

Predictably, the new chapel and worship vastly increased the hatred and envy of the atheists in the camp. At times, the SS would burst in during the Mass and order all the priests at gunpoint to clear out, saying, "That's enough hocus-pocus for today!" And yet, amazingly, "their godless hands never opened the tabernacle in all those four years." Likewise, the left-wing atheists were bitter about the new chapel, and as "a counter-measure" wanted to set up a "political instruction" center in the camp but they were refused. Enraged, they kept watch over the priests "like vultures to seize upon the slightest peccadillo, the most trivial remark, a chance slip."

All this time the priests were "not spared" from hard labor. They still had the "exclusive" chore of carrying 500 metal buckets full of food, each holding around 50 liters and weighing around 160 pounds when full, from the kitchen to the various huts. Despite their overwhelming hunger and weakness, they also had to work on the 160-acre plantation in all weather. In 1941 one hundred priests starved to death, and in 1942 four hundred died that way. Why? Because the capos would steal from the priests' food so that there was never enough to go around, and besides that would fish up whatever meat was in a food-pail, leaving only potato-and-tur-nip soup, and not much of that either. Regarding the missing food, Fr. Lenz says, "Our Block Capo and his communist cronies certainly knew where it had gone," but it was useless to protest, for they would merely laugh. "They were communists and atheists," after all, and it was part of their "sacred duty, as it were, to take it out of

us in every way they could."

Bestial pleasure in punishment

But with the arrival of a new commandant in mid-August 1942, life improved for a year, for this one did not take "a bestial pleasure in punishment." Trucks now carried food to the huts, parcels from family and friends were allowed, and, to counter the pervasive corruption, priests began to occupy some "key positions in the camp." For example, a priest was for the first time put in charge of the chapel: "Our communist comrades were thus deprived of any further interference in our affairs."

But when the priests began to receive parcels from their families, friends, and sisters in religion at the end of 1942, "The rage and envy of our godless comrades knew no bounds. They threatened and bullied, but they still could not stop the flow of food parcels." Then all hell broke loose when the priests started distributing the contents of these parcels to the destitute in the camp. At that point, the "malice of our godless comrades" made them stir up the SS to punish both the priests and the destitute together: "The communists were only too ready to talk of our clothing and food action as 'proselytizing' and on at least one occasion they succeeded in setting the armed SS guards on the crowd of poorer prisoners which had gathered in front of the priests' block in the hope of assistance." So for a time, the priests were "forbidden to distribute clothing and food" or even visit the sick, thanks to the complicity of left-wing atheists with Nazis.



Edith Stein, German-Jewish philosopher, a Carmelite nun, martyr, and saint of the Catholic Church, who died at Auschwitz. In 1922, she converted to Christianity, was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church and was received into the Discalced Carmelite Order in 1934. She was canonized as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

On July 26, 1942, the Dutch Bishops' Conference had a public statement read in all the churches of the country, condemning Nazi racism.

In a retaliatory response on July 26, 1942, the Reichskommissar of the Netherlands, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, ordered the arrest of all Jewish converts, who had previously been spared.

Edith Stein was captured and shipped to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where they were gassed on August 9, 1942.

Unfortunately, the new commandant stayed only one year, and in the spring of 1944, the priests were removed from the "better" posts because one of them was found to have smuggled out an account of the sufferings in Dachau. Fr. Lenz's own writings were seized, and he was punished with twelve days in the "standing bunker," a prison cell shaped like a chimney.

In the last years of the war, the camp was hit with epidemics of typhus, a disease carried by lice. At first, the infirmary was run by atheist orderlies who would steal the contents of parcels that patients received from families and friends. But as the typhus epidemic progressed, some of these died, while other orderlies fled for their lives, along with the SS guards, so that eventually the care of the dying was left to the priests. Meanwhile, the dauntless Polish priests "had achieved the seemingly impossible and obtained permission from the SS authorities to work among the dying in the typhus isolation block." Fr. Lenz volunteered to join them at a point when one hundred prisoners were dying daily from typhus. Nearly all these patients were Catholics, whether from France, Italy, Yugoslavia, or Czechoslovakia. When he could not speak a dying man's language, Fr. Lenz would use a small crucifix as his interpreter. Only one man ever refused his ministrations, and only three of the nursing priests died of typhus.

Chief enemy

It is worth noting that there were only 141 non-Catholic clergymen in Dachau, as opposed to 2,400 Catholic priests (not to mention a few

hundred seminarians and brothers). This suggests that the Nazi regime saw the Catholic Church as its chief enemy. Fr. Lenz points out that "two-thirds of Germany was Protestant when Hitler came to power" in 1933, yet in 1945 there were only 17 German Protestant ministers interned in Dachau (and 33 of other nationalities), while the Catholic third of Germany alone was represented by 190 Catholic priests. These figures are revealing especially when the Catholic Church in the person of Pope Pius XII is unjustly made to bear responsibility for the sufferings of World War II. The arrests and imprisonment of priests before and during the war was only a prelude, Fr. Lenz declares, to the Nazis' plan. They went as far as they dared at the time, but hoped eventually for a "great purge" of the Catholic Church after Hitler won his victory. For Hitler had boasted, "I shall crush the Catholic Church like a toad."

After the war, Fr. Lenz notes, many used to ask him how God "could permit such injustice" as the suffering of His priests at Dachau. He would reply, "One glance at the Cross of Our Lord and Redeemer surely provides us all with the only true answer." Christ in Dachau is to be highly recommended at this hour, when Christopher Hitchens boasts in his bestselling book that the morality of believers, as opposed to that of atheists, is "well below the human average," when militant atheism is marching in lockstep again, and when Europe is far more godless than in the 1930s.



During the Second World War Father Maximilian Kolbe provided shelter to refugees from Greater Poland, including 2,000 Jews whom he hid from Nazi persecution. He was also active as a radio amateur, with Polish call letters SP3RN, vilifying Nazi activities through his reports. On 17 February 1941 he was arrested, and on May 28 transferred to Auschwitz as prisoner #16670. In July 1941 a man from Kolbe's barracks vanished, prompting SS-Hauptsturmführer to pick 10 men to be starved to death, in order to deter further escape attempts. One of the selected men cried out, lamenting his family, and Kolbe volunteered to take his place. After three weeks of dehydration and starvation, only Kolbe and three others were still alive. Finally he was killed with an injection of carbolic acid.