

Titus Brandsma Carmelite and Martyr

A POET OF THE CROSS

Anno Brandsma was born in the Dutch province of Friesland in 1881. He joined the Carmelite Order in 1898 taking his father's name, Titus, as his religious name. He made his First Profession in October 1899 and was ordained priest on 17 June 1905. As an academic Titus specialised in philosophy and mysticism. He helped to found the Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1923 and later served as *Rector Magnificus*.

In the years before the Second World War Titus was openly critical of the Nazi ideology. During the occupation of Holland, he defended the freedom of the Press and of the Catholic Press in particular. Titus was arrested in January 1942 and sent to Dachau Concentration Camp where he was killed by lethal injection on 26 July 1942. He was beatified as a martyr in 1985 and canonised on 15 May 2022.



▲ Illustration by Fr Emanuel Franco Gómez O.Carm. @manuocarm

Early Studies

Fr Titus Brandsma did his doctorate in philosophy in Rome in 1909. He also used his "Roman years" to study sociology and make contact with the new currents of Christian social thought and with the social doctrine of the Church. Following this, throughout his academic life, many of his studies and courses were centered on topics of spirituality and mysticism.

Since becoming part of the cluster of professors at the recently created Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1923, our Carmelite was a professor of "History of Mysticism" and, in addition, taught various courses on the stages and authors of that history.



Areas of Research

There are three specific areas in which Fr Titus developed his research work. The first was the translation and dissemination of the work of Saint Teresa of Jesus. For him, the fact that there was no full translation of the works of the saint, done according to scientific criteria, presented a grave lacuna for the religious culture of the Netherlands. A group of Carmelite enthusiasts, together with Fr Titus, was able to translate several volumes, but were unable to finish the project. While in prison in Scheveningen, Fr Titus continued working on a spiritual biography of the Saint, and although he did not complete it, it would be completed and published in 1946, at the end of the war.

In the second place, Professor Brandsma studied much of the thought and doctrine of the authors typical of the so-called *devotio moderna* - the rhenish-flemish mysticism including that of the beguines - that is, the spiritual literature of central and northern Europe (fundamentally the Netherlands) toward the end of the Middle Ages. Among the authors whom our Carmelite studied, were Jan Van Ruusbroec, Gerard (Geert) Groote, and Hadewijch of Antwerp.

Finally, one should note his interest in the figures of Saint Willibrord and Saint Boniface, the evangelizers of Friesland, his region of origin. He highlighted, in many articles and sermons, their apostolic life and missionary generosity, something that Fr

◀ Young Titus with the Blessed Virgin Mary



▲ Fr Titus Brandsma with Carmelites in Boxmeer

Titus called attention to because he himself wanted to go to the missions in Java in the 1920s, but was not given permission by his superiors.

Via Crucis

From these three influences Father Titus developed a profound sympathy for the passion of the Lord and for the cross. In addition, he wrote two commentaries on the Stations of the Cross. The first, written in 1921, emerged in very peculiar circumstances. The Belgian expressionist painter Albert Servaes had painted a *Via Crucis* (Way of the Cross) somewhat unusual for the tastes of that period. It provoked a great deal of debate. Finally, the Holy Office in Rome ordered that it not be displayed in places of worship. Fr Titus told Servaes to obey the order, but, at the same time, wrote a beautiful commentary on each of the stations that was published in *Opgang* magazine.

The second commentary was written in more dramatic circumstances, in the Scheveningen prison. It was intended to accompany the images of each of the stations in the St Boniface Chapel (Bonifatiuskapel) in Dokkum, in whose construction Fr Titus had played an important role. In this *Via Crucis*, there is no reflection on the fourteenth station. Perhaps he had no time to write it; or perhaps he would write with his own testimony, a few months later in hell in Dachau.

There is no doubt that this deep belief encouraged and consoled the prisoner Brandsma in his personal *Via Crucis*, whose stations were various prisons and concentration camps. Fr Titus felt deeply united to the passion of Christ and felt that the crucified God was very close to his sufferings. This is how it would be presented, as much in the beautiful poem "Before a Picture of Jesus In My Cell", as in the talk he gave to the other prisoners on Good Friday 1942 in the camp at Amersfoort.

Illustration by Fr Emanuel Franco Gómez O.Carm. ►
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Prayer

We ask you, Lord,
that, in the imitation of Saint Titus Brandsma,
we may know how to be close to you, near to
the cross, and that we may always feel you
near to us in our crosses, both large and small,
as our Friend, our Companion on the journey,
and our Redeemer. May the cross always be
for us a sign of love, of generous and total
surrender to the cause of life, of solidarity
and compassion for all. May we always say, in
all the circumstances of life, with joy and full
confidence in you, *Hail to the Cross, our only
hope. Amen.*

Mary, Mother of Carmel, pray for us.
Titus Brandsma, Carmelite martyr,
intercede for us.



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