

Titus Brandsma Carmelite and Martyr

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

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 in 1985. Titus will be canonised as a martyr on 15 May 2022.



Early Life

Anno Brandsma was born to Tjitsje and Titus Brandsma on 23 February 1881 at Wonseradeel in Friesland, a province in the very north of Holland. The Brandsma family consisted of four girls and two boys, of which Titus was the second youngest. Five of the siblings would later enter religious life.

The family owned a dairy farm and herd, selling milk and cheese made on the farm itself. At the time, Catholics were a minority in Friesland and protective of their religion and culture. Anno's father worked to preserve the Friesian culture within his family and the local community. He participated in politics, and at one time served as chairman of the local election board.

When Anno had completed his secondary education at a Franciscan school, he decided to join the Carmelite Order. He began his novitiate at Boxmeer in September 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.



◀ The Brandsma Family (Anno on far left)

After further studies at the Gregorian University in Rome, he was awarded a PhD in Philosophy in 1909. Titus also had a keen interest in both Spirituality and Journalism, two areas which, together with his academic pursuits, would make up much of his life's work.

Ministry and Mission

In 1923, Titus helped found the Catholic University of Nijmegen, and worked there as lecturer, professor and administrator. He served as Rector Magnificus (President) during the academic year 1932-33.

As a Carmelite friar, he also liked to share the Order's spiritual tradition with people outside of the University. He travelled widely lecturing on Carmelite Spirituality. In preparation for a lecture tour in the United States in 1935, he spent some time at the Carmelite Pories in Whitefriar Street, Dublin, and Kinsale, Co. Cork, Ireland.



▲ *Professor Brandsma at work*

Journalism

Titus also cultivated his interest in journalism and publishing. In late 1935 he became the National Spiritual Adviser to the Union of Catholic Journalists. In this role, he encouraged opposition to the publication of Nazi propaganda in Catholic newspapers and in the Press generally. He was especially critical of its anti-Semitism. When the Nazis invaded Holland in May 1940, Titus was an adviser to the Archbishop of Utrecht. He encouraged the bishops to speak out against the persecution of the Jews and the infringement of human rights generally by the occupiers. In doing so, he became a marked man by the authorities.

Arrest and Martyrdom

The refusal by Catholic newspapers to print Nazi propaganda sealed the fate of Titus. Titus had agreed to deliver personally to each editor a letter from the Catholic bishops. This letter instructed the editors not to comply with a new law requiring them to print official Nazi advertisements and articles. Titus had visited fourteen editors before being arrested by the Gestapo at Nijmegen on 19 January 1942.

Titus was interned at Scheveningen and Amersfoort in Holland before being transported to Dachau in June. Under the harsh regime there, his health quickly deteriorated and he was in the camp hospital by the third week of July. He was subjected to biological experimentation before being killed by lethal injection on 26 July 1942. On the day he died, the Dutch Bishops issued a pastoral letter protesting strongly against the deportation of Jews from Holland.

Before his execution, Titus had prayed that God might help the nurse who would administer the injection to repent of her actions in the camp. He also gave her his rosary beads, although she protested that she was a lapsed Catholic. Some years later, that same woman came to a Carmelite priory seeking forgiveness and was a witness in the process for his beatification, which took place in Rome on 3 November 1985.



Prayer before an image of Christ

O Jesus, when I gaze on You
Once more alive, that I love You
And that your heart loves me too
Moreover as your special friend.

Although that calls me to suffer more
Oh, for me all suffering is good,
For in this way I resemble You
And this is the way to Your Kingdom.

I am blissful in my suffering
For I know it no more as sorrow
But the most ultimate elected lot
That unites me with You, O God.

O, just leave me here silently alone,
The chill and cold around me
And let no people be with me
Here alone I grow not weary.

For Thou, O Jesus, art with me
I have never been so close to You.
Stay with me, with me, Jesus sweet,
Your presence makes all things good for me.

Written by Titus Brandsma on
12-13 February 1942 while
a prisoner at Scheveningen.

Translation: Susan Verkerk-Wheatley / Anne-Marie Bos
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▼ *Dachau Concentration Camp*



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