

Christ. Only in Christ will it be possible for our justice to abound more than the justice of the scribes and Pharisees, and for us to enter the kingdom of heaven. If we let go of him, if we give up the faith, we are lost. If we wander from him who is the way and the truth, we cannot, by going our own way, come to him who is the life. With St Paul we must be ready to suffer the loss of all things and count them but as dung that we may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having our own justice, but that which is of the faith of Christ Jesus, justice in faith.



## A MARTYR FOR PEACE<sup>1</sup>

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**B**EFORE the first world war, there was in Germany no talk of refusing to serve in war. True, we heard that in England and America there were a few sects that refused war service or military service even during peace time. But they were considered strange people; mentally and morally not quite sound!

During the four years of the first world war, we became more thoughtful. Afterwards there was an upsurge of the anti-war movement, but it was suppressed by the Nazis. The second world war, stretching over five years, was so horrible that probably the majority of all Germans came to appreciate the point of Conscientious Objection. Indeed, an interior objection, a protest of the moral sense, gripped them. But exteriorly they did not dare to come forward. In fact, their political and military thought, the legacy of centuries, held that there were moral objections against open resistance to directives issued by legitimate authority.

As a result, the Germans as a whole not only did not refuse their services in the war unleashed by Hitler, but most of them, even most of the Christians, expressed serious religious doubts, whenever this or that individual consistently and bravely answered 'no' to his draft call. Was such an answer, they asked, compatible with Christian ethics? Was not obedience to the government still a duty,

<sup>1</sup> Translated by John Doebele from *Der Christ in der Welt* (Spring, 1953, Nachreihengasse 48, Vienna, 17).

so long as the one in power was there 'legitimately', even though he was a criminal? And was open rebellion 'prudent'? People did not recall that there is a short-sighted prudence that sooner or later proves to be foolishness in the eyes of God, and soon too in the light of history. Thus conscientious objection to service under Hitler remained the very rare exception.

It is all the more heartening then, to learn of the position of a Catholic priest, Franz Reinisch, of the Pallottine Order, who like a bright and burning light penetrated the general fogging of consciences. Heinrich Kreuzberg, at that time an army chaplain who became acquainted with Fr Reinisch in the Berlin military prison, has with great diligence collected all the accounts about him and has sympathetically portrayed the interior and exterior development of his hero in a recent book: *Franz Reinisch, a Martyr of our Times*.<sup>2</sup>

Franz Reinisch, born in 1903 in Feldkirch, Austria, came from a respected and very religious Tyrolean family. He received the usual classical education. After first studying law in Innsbruck and Kiel, he took up theology. He was ordained priest and in 1928 entered the Pallottine Order. He had been a happy student, but at first the discipline of the seminary, especially the no-smoking rule, was so difficult for him that he considered leaving. However, his will-power and generosity of heart won despite all temptation.

Then came Hitler's war, reaching out its hand for him, too. To fight for Hitler? For the strengthening and extension of his anti-Christian rule? To kill innocent people for this tyrant whose hands had been blood-stained since 1934? Franz Reinisch had a steel temperament. He was 'radical through and through' and 'he liked radical solutions best'. So you might think that he made up his mind at once when, in 1941, he received the preliminary notice for his call-up. But that was not the case.

Despite his spontaneous manner, Fr Reinisch never made up his mind lightly in matters of conscience. It did not occur to him to play the hero. He did not feel that he was a hero in the eyes of God, but rather a weak man, and he distrusted himself. Apart from his new situation, his inmost longing was an ardent desire for perfection, for an increase in his love of God. This can be attained by the toilsome way of daily trial of oneself—a way, as Fr Reinisch knew well, that is perhaps more difficult than an

<sup>2</sup> Franz Reinisch. *Ein Martyrer unserer Zeit* (Limburg 1952, Lahn-Verlag).

actually greater but shorter single heroic total sacrifice. It can be almost a flight from oneself, from the ever-recurring weakness, if one makes an end to the long struggle and the weary failures with one quick offering of one's life for God.

This steep way suited our idealistic priest more than did the other. What was decisive, naturally, was the demand to co-operate in a war that to him was evidently unjust. Here was the opportunity, as it were, to brush aside with one stroke his own weaknesses, the prudence of the flesh in himself and in others, and to soar to holiness. The 'violent spiritual struggle' ended with his determination to refuse to obey the call-up (which did not come until a year later) and with that to suffer death in witness to the kingdom of Christ. . . .

His parents were worthy of him. Naturally it wrung their hearts to think of losing such a son thus early, and of his death as a criminal in the eyes of many. At his farewell visit to Innsbruck, he made the Stations of the Cross with his mother in the cemetery; At the first Station he said: 'I too stand before the judge like that. At the ninth Station, 'Now I also lie there.' At the thirteenth Station he took his mother's hand: 'Mother, can you too be a mother of sorrows, who bears her cross without breaking down?' His mother answered slowly: 'If God gives me the strength, I will be able.' He offered Mass once more in the Sacred Heart Church, with his father, Councillor Dr Reinisch, acting as server.

He then left for Kissingen, as ordered by the draft notice. However, he did not mean to become a soldier for Hitler, but to declare his intention to refuse the army oath. Few of the officers that he encountered during the course of the various examinations were harsh on him. Interior agreement and admiration were noted in some, but few possessed the stature of the defendant, and in the end they all did their 'duty', letting the 'law' of the State take its course, even when that State was Hitler's government.

We can presume that the conscientious objector was reminded of the viewpoint of leading Church figures. For Fr Reinisch answered 'that "he realized that his position did not correspond with the official stand of the Church, but his decision came from his own conscience". He had struggled for a long while within himself but now finally it was clear to him that he had to refuse the military oath.'

The prisoner was taken first to the Berlin Tegel Prison. The

first military chaplain whose duty it was to visit him refused him Holy Communion!—'in order to impress upon him his duty to take the oath'. Of course this priest, too, doubtless acted according to his conscience. The next chaplain was Fr Kreutzberg, the author of our book. He brought Fr Reinisch not just one consecrated host, but several, so that he could have the Blessed Sacrament in his cell day and night, and give himself communion every morning.

Later, he also brought him unconsecrated hosts, and some wine, so that he could celebrate Mass early in the morning before the waking bells. 'I offered him a few books and pamphlets.' He declined with friendly thanks. Showing his New Testament, he said: 'I have a book, and that is the New Testament.' Later, a few hours before his execution, he declared: 'If for ten years I had nothing to read but the New Testament, it would still be enough for me.'

At Fr Kreutzberg's request Fr Reinisch set down his reasons for refusing to take the oath. Among them were: 'because today it is open season for attacks on the Church; see the recent pastoral letters of the German bishops, and then the papal encyclical *On Germany*, of March, 1937. Further, the extension of persecutions. Finally, the Nazi principle, "might comes before right", forces me to resist. For me there is no oath of allegiance to such a government. I must not and will not take the oath "with reservations".'

Strong attempts seem to have been made by fellow members of his Order, and even by his superiors, to make him change his mind. They even appealed to his duty to obey his religious superiors. But Fr Reinisch 'resolutely rejected the reproaches that he was disobedient to his superiors and that his conscience was in error'.

He was transferred to the Brandenburg prison, where in the last days of his life he was troubled by the deputy chaplain. This priest, otherwise quite understanding, warm-hearted and thoroughly aware of the primacy of individual conscience, was nevertheless of the opinion that Fr Reinisch had an 'erroneous conscience'. Like so many others, he referred to the conduct of our Lord himself, and to the teaching of St Paul, who held that even an evil ruler had to be obeyed.

It is difficult to understand how here again people overlooked

the simple but essential distinction between obedience in things which, despite their regulation by an evil authority, are in themselves good or indifferent and things that are on the other hand bad in themselves. You must obey even an evil ruler, as a Nero, a Hitler, or a Stalin—but not *in* his evil! Even a government that is criminal through and through can issue thousands of regulations that serve the civil order, commerce and trade, and even justice; every citizen must follow them!

But when it is a question of immoral decrees, 'we must obey God rather than men'. With this rule St Peter, the first Pope, declared plainly and clearly for all times that government laws are sometimes *against* the divine law, and that in these evil things no one has any longer the right to be a 'loyal citizen of the State'. It can be the citizen's duty to take a position against the State.

Only that civil disposition is genuine, honourable and divinely blessed which is in every case oriented towards God. It is also the best and the only true service in the interest of the State. If millions of Germans had refused to follow Hitler in his criminal plundering wars, that would have been the most powerful and noblest patriotic deed in history. It was not Fr Reinisch who had the erroneous conscience, but the Brandenburg chaplain, along with millions of others. Their error lay in assuming the duty of obedience even in cases where the State ordered something evil, and hence too when it ordered them to invade neighbouring lands, plundering them and murdering their citizens in droves.

Pope Pius XII had openly branded as lawless the wars of aggression against Poland, Holland and Belgium in 1939 and 1940. But, as was typical of the lying character of the Hitler régime, even those wars were called 'defensive', and many believed it, or else drank in the assertion as opium for their consciences. Even for the Brandenburg chaplain, the most obvious wars of aggression had, through the systematic dulling of conscience, been transformed into wars of defence. He told Fr Reinisch: 'To defend your country is not against the law of God.'

Those words gave the poor prisoner a sleepless night. But his sound conscience was victorious, he kept to his protest, and went to his death for it. This much can be conceded the Brandenburg chaplain: if Fr Reinisch had felt obliged to refuse absolutely *every* service to the government, he would in fact have had an 'erroneous conscience'. He could, according to the principles explained, have

taken a *civil* oath. But it was a question of an *army* oath, and of military obedience, which had to be absolute for all soldiers. To refuse the oath in this clearly limited field was not 'erroneous' but objectively correct.

To the credit of the chaplain it should be added that he too fully acknowledged the subjective purity of the decision of conscience, although he considered it objectively false. 'Whoever', he said, 'feels urged to a certain action through divine prompting must follow that prompting. No man can do more than to be true to his conscience. May God bless you and strengthen you, my dear fellow priest.'

God did bless and fortify the man ordained for death. The two priests prayed together through the final night. Then the last confession, and extreme unction, on the way to heaven. It was within the Octave of the feast of the Assumption. Fr Reinisch, a great venerator of Mary, had hoped to enter heaven on August 15th, the feast day itself, and to be able to apply the words of the Church's prayer for that day to himself: 'Come from Lebanon, my spouse, come and receive your crown.' But he had to wait until the 21st.

He wrote a final farewell letter to his parents and brother and sister: 'I rejoice at this moment, singing with Jesus and Mary, with the angels and archangels, the martyrs, confessors, virgins, disciples, with my acquaintances and relatives, singing the always new song, "Praise God who sits on the throne, and the Lamb, Amen". I love you, God. You know everything, and you know that I love you. Good shepherd, lead me to good pastures! Mary, Queen of heaven, Mary, come and take me. I hurry to you with open arms. I am your child! St Thérèse, little flower, Fr Vincent Pallotti, my patron saint, Francis Xavier; all of you come to meet me and lead me to the Blessed Trinity! O love, love, God is love!'

It was all over shortly before five a.m. He and six other men were beheaded within the space of three minutes. Four of the others were Catholics. Before they were placed on the scaffold, the chaplain handed each one the crucifix to kiss, and recited a few short prayers. Then the executioner stepped forward in frock-coat and top-hat and released the guillotine. . . .

Fr Reinisch refused military service under the Hitler government. Can he be grouped among those who reject *all* military service *on principle*? Perhaps not. 'I can swear allegiance to the

German nation', he once declared, 'but never to a man like Hitler.' Yet this much is certain: in any other war, he would have followed his own conscience in deciding what he had to do. And even in a war begun as a genuine defensive war by an authority worthy of respect, it is highly probable that he would have refused to carry out any order incompatible with natural and with Christian morality. Such as, for example, an order to drop a bomb on the civil population or to shoot hostages.

Later, in June 1950, the French Cardinals and Archbishops were to declare that for the disciple of Christ it is a shocking scandal even to ask the question whether they approved the use of the atom bomb, that strikes at combatants and at civilians without distinction. Fr Reinisch would in all certainty have recognized this as beyond argument. He would have carried out none of the immoral orders that are to be expected in modern total war that destroys everything.

For all of us it is of great importance to be guided by the best members of our faith. This book also contains, in an appendix, a report of the fate of another conscientious objector, the Austrian farmer Franz Jagerstatter, who had three children and who could be seen daily with his wife at the communion rail. He too died a holy death when a diabolical State executed him as a criminal. People who live and die like that force every faithful Christian to reflect on the 'duty' of military service, so readily accepted and even extolled by the majority. Their lives are a forceful argument against universal conscription (usually labelled 'for defence', but used often enough for ruthless aggression). They urge us at the present time in Germany to preserve at least the present constitutional right to conscientious objection to armed service.

Those who claim this right do not by that condemn the others who believe they must comply with every demand for military service and renounce all active or passive resistance to the public authority. As Fr Reinisch once said in speaking of these people: 'Not all possess my clear perception.' Many of them became soldiers and fighting men with serious doubts, but in the last analysis they believed they were doing their duty and continued in it to death.

As Ernest Wiechert said of them, in his address to German youth of 1949, 'The laurel they gained was the laurel of many sacrifices. Perhaps it was a false sacrifice they made of themselves, a false



obedience they practised, but their hearts were right, and those were the hearts of your comrades. Many believed it was a matter of their homeland; they did not know it was only a matter of the Nazi party. Many others, however, did not believe this at all. They knew they were dealing with an unjust cause, and they hated him who sent them. But they thought it a soldier's duty to obey, so they obeyed.

'In the storm of battle they were so utterly alone and abandoned that for them death was a release. They accepted death as they had accepted a share in the guilt. Their graves number in the hundreds of thousands. We should bow before them, before them and their mothers, who had to let them go, knowing the while that they cursed those who sent them. Much has been suffered, on this earth, that few know about; it has been suffered because of error, of weakness, and of obedience. Lost blood, precious blood, irreplaceable blood, but which one of us will dare to be a judge over those who erred?'

We can and should think of them with genuine esteem and love, and yet we can and should keep in mind that the objective 'error'—probably in most cases without subjective guilt—was on their side, and not on the side of those who for the sake of God and of their consciences refused military service. To these latter is due the greater respect!

## II

### A PRIEST WHO STOOD UP TO HITLER<sup>1</sup>

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THE book *Franz Reinisch, ein Martyrer unserer Zeit*, by Heinrich Kreuzberg, published recently in Germany, contains a remarkable tale. It depicts vividly and impressively the life and suffering of the Pallottine priest Franz Reinisch, who was condemned to death on July 7th, 1942, and executed in Brandenburg on August 21st, 1942, at the age of thirty-nine. Called up for army service, he had firmly refused, for reasons of conscience, to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler. He knew, of course, that many others in the same situation thought and acted differently. That gave him reason

<sup>1</sup> Translated by John Doebele from *Stimmen der Zeit* (March 1953).