

# The martyrs of Compiègne

From the book: "RITRATTI DI SANTI" by Antonio Sicari ed. Jaca Book



The martyrs of Compiègne are sixteen Carmelite nuns killed during the French Revolution.

Of this revolution today people especially remember those three big words on which everyone seems to agree: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

Even John Paul II said at Bourget to the French youth:

"It is well known what position the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity occupy in your culture and in your history. Fundamentally, these are Christian ideas. I am telling it, aware of the fact that the first men to formulate these ideals did not refer to the Eternal Wisdom. But they wanted to operate in favour of man."

It is still in discussion whether the triplet originates from Christianity or freemasonry; anyway it is known that at the beginning, the Revolution preferred to insist more on the doublet Liberty-Equality than on the word Fraternity, considered anyway too sentimental and too "Christian".

As a matter of fact, the hardest fight was unleashed in the name of those two first "values", so the opposite manner with which enlightened and believers conceive "reason" emerged.

For the so called "enlightened reason", proclaiming that "men are free and equal in their rights" (1<sup>st</sup> article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1789) meant admitting nothing prior to this formulation, giving it no foundation beyond that very reason that produces and recognises it. Only an indefinite and extrinsic reference to the "presence" and to the "omens" of the Supreme Being was maintained, but it disappeared in the Declarations of the following centuries.

On the contrary, for "reason enlightened by faith" men are free and equal in their rights because they all have a first and inalienable dignity: to be all children of God, loved, created and saved by Him.

The boundless distance between the two points of view could be noticed by an opportune and deep reflection, but it is even more apparent when those two widely displayed rights of "Liberty and Equality" must be concretely recognised, defended and applied.

The history of our martyrs offers a "bright" example, for with every clarity it puts in evidence the different "light" of which reason makes use.

The famous Declaration of Rights of Man was issued on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1789; a few months after, the prohibition of swear religious vows (in the name of individual freedom) came just in time, as well as the suppression of religious Orders, starting with the contemplative ones.

The theorem was simple: he cannot be free he who locks himself in a convent and ties himself down with vows; if one does it, it means that he was forced. It is task of Reason (and of a Nation) to give freedom back to him.

Then it was, when the Prioresses of three Carmelite monasteries, speaking for all the others, sent to the National Assembly a communication which reads:

The most complete liberty governs our vows; the most perfect equality reigns in our houses; here we know neither the rich nor the noble. In the world people say that monasteries contain victims slowly consumed by regret, but we proclaim before God that if there is on Earth a true happiness, we are happy.

Those revolutionaries, regarding vows and monasteries, had their mind enlightened by what they had read or heard from literate, actors, journalists and philosophers, who gave life to morbid and romantic ideas, like those still found nowadays in some serials or "telenovelas"

Thus the persecution began with the knightly and ridiculous zeal of a troop of officials, who appeared at the monasteries' doors to offer themselves as paladins and liberators.

We are able to describe exactly what happened in Compiègne monastery, where then were 16 professed nuns. There was also a young novice who at the last moment had been prevented taking her vows, by that very decree that "did not recognise any more religious vows or other enrolment against natural rights.

Then the officials came, violated the cloister and settled in the big chapter hall. Four guards were placed near the two doors. Other guards were set, one by each cell's door, to prevent the nuns from communicating among themselves and moreover from keeping contact with the Prioress; the other doors of the cloister were occupied as well.

The idea that otherwise the nuns would be subjugated and forced to lie by the presence of their Mother Superior (or some more despotic sister) was held for sure.

One by one the nuns were summoned, to each one the president "announced (literally!) that he was carrier of freedom and invited her to speak freely and declare if she wanted to leave the cloister and return to her family..." A secretary in the while was taking accurate note of the answers (thus their authenticity is granted by the "opposers").

This unlimited presumptuousness of knowing what freedom is and arrive as welcome liberators is more enlightening than philosophical and theological debates, moreover if compared with the freedom experimented by those nuns who they expected to set free.

The Prioress, called first, declared she "wanted to live and die in that holy house".

An old nun said that "she had been a nun for 36 years and she wished to have just as many more to consecrate to the Lord."

A nun said she had made herself a nun "with full pleasure and of her own free will" and that she was "firmly decided to keep her cloth, even at her own blood's cost".

Another one explained that "there was not such a great happiness as that of living as a Carmelite" and "her most burning wish was to live and die a Carmelite".

Another one insisted that "If she had had one thousand lives, all of them she would consecrate to the status she had chosen and nothing could convince her to abandon the house where she lived and where she had found her happiness".

Another sister added that she "took advantage of that circumstance to renovate her religious vows, and moreover she exploited the occasion to give the court officials a poem she had just composed about the topic of her vocation" (but they, going away, left the sheet on the table with despise).

Another more remarked that "if she could double the ties that bound her to God, she would make it with all her strength and immense joy".

The youngest professed, who had taken the vows during that year, noticed that "a well born bride remains with her groom, and thus nothing could induce her to part from her divine Spouse, Our Lord Jesus Christ".

Their answer was, saying it as simple as possible, that they wanted "to live and die in their monastery".

Many of them did surely not remember, or had never heard of it, but their answers were very similar to that given by Saint bishop Polycarpus to the Roman prosecutor, in the first Christian centuries: "Since

eighty-six years I have been serving Christ, and He has never done wrong to me: how could I renegade my king and my saviour?"

The nuns of Compiègne became martyrs when, not even realising it, began to use the language of martyrs, the language of who, put to a definitive test, states with all his heart that "nothing could ever separate him from Christ".

And since the menace of death is approaching, this is like giving the great witness, stating that Christ is part of the definition of one's self, of one's life, so that dying for Him is not a misfortune, but a gain.

In this life, one cannot speak the word "I" in a fuller and more definitive way than when giving oneself in the hands of those, who, for Christ's sake, wants to take one's life.

For it is then that Jesus totally makes one with our fragile and fearful self, to sustain it and give it strength and joy.

The novice was not interrogated, since she had not taken the vows, so sooner or later, she was forced to go back home.

Indeed her relatives had come to take her back, but having heard her say that "nothing and no one could separate her from the communion with the Mother and Sisters of that monastery" They had gone away stating that they "did not want to hear of her any more, neither receive her letters": thus acknowledging, in a paradoxical way, the girl's choice.

The text of the answers, both in the unanimity and in the characteristic traits, discloses the image of the martyrs whose story we are narrating.

It is right to warn now that, from the canonical point of view, it is improper to speak of the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne. To tell the truth fourteen nuns were killed, two other victims were the nuns' laic maids, so loving that they wanted to share the same destiny of their nuns, thus sharing their passion and glory, as well. Actually, after that "solemn profession" about martyrdom, we cannot make distinctions among them anymore: they are, for God's decision, "sixteen Carmelite nuns".

We can also proudly add that in all the monasteries in France, counting more or less 1900 priests, nuns and monks, the apostasies were only five or six.

In the while, the National Assembly was giving traumatic proof of how the so-called "enlightened reason" could not understand that "new fact" (even if centuries old) constituted by Church. Words like Revelation, Tradition, Authority, Belonging were stubbornly perceived as opposed to Freedom.

The nuns stubbornly witnessed an evidence that was denied at all costs: one is perfectly free only in the strict and devoted self surrender, a loving freedom is not afraid to tie itself and depend, freedom is not opposite to belonging but to constraint.

In the same way, in the name of a rationalistically meant Equality they began to try and redesign the structure of Church.

First of all they thought to give a civil Constitution to the Clergy, with which force the priests to understate an oath of loyalty to the Nation; entrust the department Assemblies with the election of priests and bishops, reduce the dioceses to administrative structures, renounce the distinctive signs (e.g. the religious clothes)

Who did not accept these regulations could be sentenced to deportation or to death as "refractory", not wanting to be made equal there, where Christ had meant some "inequality"

Not even the Pope could stand high in that marsh of extremised equality: Christians, priests and bishops could at most worship and inform him, but the tie with him should be kept immaterial and superfluous.

Further, the "liberation" process was to be pushed until Reason was set free from all the undue shackles and could triumphate over all the "fanaticisms": dogmas, miracles, beliefs in the heaven and similar.

As this "liberty" and this "equality" could not be accepted by Christians who wanted to stay faithful to Christ and His Church, they could not be considered "brother". And the Terror came.

Only in the month of September 1792, there were 1600 victims. Among them, at least 250 priests slaughtered in the Carmelite convent in Paris.

In the Carmel the idea of martyrdom was neither strange nor far away. This religious order remembered vividly the teaching of St. Teresa of Avila, who since her childhood had looked for martyrdom for the wish to "see God" and make the encounter with Him closer, and had then prophesised: "In the future this Order will have many martyrs". "When one wants really serve God, she taught, the least he can do is offer Him the sacrifice of life"

St. John of the Cross heard one day a brother saying that "with God's grace he hoped to bear patiently even the martyrdom, if it was really necessary" and had replied with boundless wonder: "and you say it with such lukewarm heart, friar Martin? You should tell it with tremendous desire!"

And moreover the French Carmelites could not forget that St. Teresa of Avila had reformed the Carmel just because she was "moved by the distress that wasted the French land and Church." Offering their lives for this purpose was a part of their very original vocation.

In 1792, at Easter, the Prioress of Compiègne, letting each nun free to choose, proposed to offer themselves as a holocaust to appease the wrath of God, and in order that the divine peace which his dear Son had come to bring into the world would be bestowed on the church and the state.

At first, the two oldest were taken by anguish: they were terrorized by the thought of the gloomy guillotine; but afterwards, they wanted to offer themselves together with their sisters. Since then, the community would renovate the act of offer every day, during the Holy Mass, binding more and more consciously to Christ's sacrifice.

On 12th September they were ordered to abandon the monastery, which was seized.

They rented some rooms in the same quarter, in four close houses, divided in small groups managed to communicate passing through the internal gardens and courts.

They had no more monastery, nor cloister; neither grate nor church. They gathered regularly in the Prioress' dwelling, to be sustained and guided, otherwise they tried as they could to respect their rule of prayer, silence and work, even in such an unexpected and provisional situation.

And the whole quarter knew and tried to live more quietly and silently and with moderation, while the nun were praying.

In the while, the Great Terror had begun, (October 1793 – June 1794) favoured by the war of France against other European countries, by the inner civil war, as well as by a grave economical crisis.

The revolutionary tribunal decreed the "law of suspicion". On trial no proof, no witness was necessary any more; the sheer suspicion was enough to sentence to death.

The most rigorous Jacobean ideology held power and it required a complete erasing of the Christian tradition: abolition of the Christian calendar, week and Sundays, substitution of Christian names for people, streets, squares, villages, cities; sealing off and destruction of churches and relics, desecration of every cult building, introduction of new cults and festivities.

In this very occasion the word "vandalism" was created to indicate the mindless destruction of the artistic patrimony, just to remove each and every sign of the ancient faith.

We own some letters sent in that period to the national security committee in Paris by the responsible for Compiègne district, André Dumont, who had abandoned his name of André to be called Pioche ("pickaxe"):

"Citizen colleagues, the ecclesiastic rabble feels its last hour approaching... the impostures of these animals are now unmasked, and the citizen themselves offer help to clear the former churches. The benches are used in the popular societies and in hospitals. The wood pieces, once called saints serve to heat the rooms of public administration. The niches once called confessionals are converted in shacks for the sentinels. The barkers' theatres, once called altars, where the priest played tricks, are knocked over. The pulpits, needed for the imposture, are kept for the publication of laws and to educate the people. The churches are transformed in markets, so people go buying goods and foodstuff there, where they had been swallowing poison for many centuries.

But as such zeal was not trusted in Paris, he went on insisting after some weeks:

"Your fear, regarding priests and the madmen listening to them has no foundation. The truth has made the imposture disappear, the darkness of the latter could never cast shadows over the light of the former, thus every effort of this church people would be of no avail. If the safety of the nation is so sure as it is unquestionable that here priests are unmasked, we can rightly state that here "the Republic is safe", or, rather, that both the salvation of the fatherland and the slaughter of priests are granted.

Actually, that Pioche would then boast he had stuffed them of chat: he "had contented himself with sending ink, when they asked for blood". And went on proclaiming: "Compiègne is infinitely far away from fanaticism".

"Fanatical – fanaticism: here is the word that in those days summarised and expressed the worst suspicions. It, alone, was enough to support dozens of death sentences and still is a must of the anticlerical language nowadays.

As a matter of fact, a man can be well fanatical, even in the most wicked and vulgar ways and this is part of the freedom of expression, but if the Church wants to allude at what it cannot renounce, or at what men cannot renounce, because of their dignity, then the charge with intolerance and fanaticism is never to be waited for long and always finds a choir that amplifies and spreads it. This is another inheritance of Enlightenment.

The Carmelites, who still lived as they were in the monastery, were then charged with fanaticism: the dwellings were searched, the nuns arrested, their holy things profaned and broken. When the tabernacle was thrown on the floor and cracked, one of the sans-culottes kicked the fragments towards a young girl saying:

"Citizen, take it: you can make a hut for your dog."

In the while, the nuns were at first gathered in an old convent changed in prison, then sent to Paris with a suit that accused them, among the rest, of "halting the progress of the public spirit, allowing in their houses people who were then admitted in another congregation, called of the scapular".

They travelled all day and night long on a cart escorted by two gendarmes, a marshal and two dragoons: the following afternoon they were thrown in the Conciergerie, the death jail.

Once arrived there, each one did what she could: the eldest, seventy-nine years old, with tied arms and without her walking stick, was not able to go down the cart and was thrown roughly to the pavement.

She was thought dead, but with extreme effort she stood up bleeding: "I am not angry," said she, \*I thank you for not having killed me. I would have lost the happiness of martyrdom that is awaiting me".

The tribunal held the sessions at quick rhythm, and there were two simultaneous sessions: one in the "hall of Equality" the other in the "hall of Liberty". And the prosecutor, the notorious Fouquier-Tinville easily shifted from one to the other.

This way, from fifty to sixty prisoners per day were tried.

The Carmelites arrived on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July, a day when the tribunal inflicted forty death condemnments. On 14<sup>th</sup> the sessions were suspended, since it was the anniversary of the capture of the Bastille. On 15<sup>th</sup> thirty prisoners were sentenced to death and thirty-six on 16<sup>th</sup>.

It was the feast of the Virgin of the Carmel and the nuns did not want to quit the nice tradition to compose a new song for the circumstance.

They rewrote "la Marseillaise": same rhythm, same music, some identical expression, but a completely different song of rebellion and victory.

It heard, for instance: "... the day of glory has arrived / now that the bleeding sword is hold high / let's prepare for victory / below the standards of an agonising God / anyone go forth as a winner / Let's run altogether towards glory / for our bodies belong to God" It was poor and limited verse, but with intuition full of light and pride: "if we owe God our life / for Him we accept death"

They wrote them with a piece of coal.

The evening of the same day, they were told that the following day they would be judged by the revolutionary Tribunal.

They stood trial in the "Hall of Freedom"

The prosecution was supported by a load of elements that expected to demonstrate how that small group of nuns was no other than " a crowd of rebels, of rabble-rousers, fostering in their hearts the criminal lust to see the French people set again in shackles by their tyrants and in slavery by bloody and impostor priests: the desire to see liberty drown in the blood flood that their machinations have always made pour in the name of heaven".

It would have been laughable, had it not been the usual style of the revolutionary documents that infallibly precluded a death sentence. The most unbelievable charges were not missing. We recall, among many others that of "having exposed the Holy Sacrament under a baldachin in the shape of a royal mantle".

In the judge's opinion this was a certain clue of affection to the idea of royal sovereignty, and thus to the deposed family (of Louis XVI)".

But the nuns did not want their charges to be confused or entangled with politics: they wanted it to be clear that they were offering their lives to Christ and for Christ. And they made it so that every ambiguity was removed.

Here is what happened, as stated in a witness' account:

"Nun Henrietta Pelras, having heard the prosecutor calling them "fanatical" (word that she knew well), pretended she did not know that word and said: "Would you like, citizen, explain what you want to mean with the word "fanatical"?"

The judge replied angrily with a stream of insults against her and her companions. But the nun, not shaken at all, with dignity and self control replied: "Citizen, it is your duty to satisfy the question of a convict. Thus I ask you to answer and declare what you do mean with the word "fanatical".

I want to mean (Fouquier-Tinville said) that affection of yours to childish beliefs, those silly religious practises of yours" Nun Henrietta thanked him, then exclaimed to the Mother Prioress:

"My dear Mother and Sister, you have heard the prosecutor declare that every thing is happening because of the love we bring to our holy religion. we all desired this confession and have obtained it. Thank He who preceded us along the way of the Calvary! What a happiness and consolation when we can die for our God!"

The witness remarks: "in those times fanatical and christian were considered synonyms and this title, if bestowed by judges, corresponded to a written sentence to death because of faith"

It was six o'clock in the evening when, the same day, hands tied behind, they mounted a cart to be led towards the barrier of Vincennes, where the guillotine was raised.

Someone says that the nuns managed to have their white mantles back, for sure on that cart, at twilight, they sang *Compieta*, then *Miserere*, *Te Deum* and *Salve Regina*.

The carts usually had to work their way between wings of screaming and drunken crowd. The witness says that that cart passed in through such a silent crowd "as it never happened during the revolution". From the crowd, a priest, dressed as a revolutionary, gave them last absolution.

They reached the scaffold, in the old Throne Square, towards eight o'clock in the evening.

The Prioress asked and obtained from the executioner the grace to die last, so she could give assistance, and sustain as Mother all her nuns, especially the youngest.

They wanted to die together, also spiritually, as they were making a unique and last "act of community". It was a liturgical gesture. The Prioress asked again the executioner to wait a while, he agreed and she started singing *Veni Creator Spiritus* followed by the nuns. They sang it all, then renewed their vows.

At the end the Prioress moved to the scaffold's side, holding in her hand a small clay statue of the Holy Virgin, which she had managed to keep hidden so far. The young novice was the first justiced. She was surely recalling how her confessor had tenderly prepared her for this dramatic and solemn moment, to fear not the guillotine.

- They order you to mount the scaffold. Do you feel pain?
- No, Father.
- Then they make you lay your head under the blade and bend your head. Is it a torture?
- Not yet.
- The executioner let the blade fall and you feel just for an instant that the heads separates from the body, and you enter Heaven at once. Are you happy?
- Yes, Father.

The dialogue can seem strange and in bad taste, were it not that then the guillotine worked at full service (thirty- forty execution each day) and the decapitated heads were shown to a screaming public, while the smell of blood spread through the city.

In such conditions of persisting horror, a dialogue like this we quoted is of moving purity and whiteness, even from a psychological point of view.

The novice then knelt in front of the Prioress, asked her the blessing and permission to die, kissed the statue of the Virgin and walked the scaffold's stair, "glad, the witnesses said, as she were going to a party" and while she climbed she started singing "*Laudate dominum omnes gentes*", followed by the others who, one at a time, followed her with the same peace and joy, even if it was necessary to help the oldest.

The Prioress was the last, after delivering the little statue to a person nearby (it was kept and still is in the monastery at Compiègne).

"The blow of the weighbridge, the sheer noise of the cut, the dumb sound of the head falling... No screams, no clapping or disorderly shouts (as instead it used to happen). Even the drums are muted. In this place, sickened by the stink of blood, rotting in the summer heat, a solemn silence fell down the beholders and maybe the Carmelites' prayed had already touched their hearts." (E. Renault)

People would have known that, among those who were present, more than a girl, inside her heart, promised God to take the martyrs' place.

"We are the victims of the century", one of them had said with humble pride: victims of an "enlightened reason" that without faith had become more and more obscure and cruel. Everyone knows that two great writers meditated on this page of history, giving us works of great artistic value: Gertrud von Le Fort wrote the novel "Song of the Scaffold" and G. Bernanos the even more famous "Dialogues of Carmelites"

Despite the beauty of these works, it is necessary to say that they are based on an artistic intuition not corresponding to history. The tragedy of the sixteen Carmelites is told in the light of Jesus' agony on Getsemani. Thus it becomes the tragedy of a community represented on one side by a proud and brave nun who desires martyrdom, but would not obtain it, because she should "pour the blood" of her wounded honor, on the other side by a young nun, weak and scared, who flees and only at last moment, thanks to a prodigy of grace, finds the strength to offer herself freely and die with her sisters, singing their offering song.

The historical truth, on the contrary, tells of a community that rather lives the mystery of the last meal, when Jesus freely and liturgically offers His body and blood.

Anyway it is right to recall some phrases of Bernanos' tragedy.

A burning exchange of judgements between the most fiery nun and the police commissary:

- People do not need any servant!
- But they need martyrs, and that task we can undertake!

The sweet and abandoned reflection by one of the young nuns:

"We can fall only in God"

The conclusion (tis is indeed correspondent to history) of the wise Prioress:

"Blessed God who makes this suffering we are going to withstand together the last ceremony of our dear community".

Pope John Paul II, in the Angelus, on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1978, recalled the example of these Carmelites and said: "the last one, Mother Therese of St. Augustine (the Prioress) spoke these last words: "Love will always be winning, love can everything. [...] Let's ask the Lord a new wave of love for our neighbour in this poor world.