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# Three influences on the spiritual experience of Titus Brandsma in the Lager

## ABSTRACT

*This article introduces the three main inspirational figures that were very important in the spiritual journey of Titus Brandsma during the last months of his life in the numerous jails and concentration camps where he was imprisoned. These three “models” form the spiritual background of the Carmelite and explain his fraternal, evangelical, and elegant way of dealing with everybody in that hell of the concentration world. The three elements are the spirituality of Teresa of Avila, in which Titus Brandsma was a real expert and the translator of her works into Dutch; the spirituality of the passion of Christ, as expressed in the Way of the Cross of the expressionist Belgian artist Albert Servaes, and the work of Gert Grote, considered founder of the Devotio Moderna. In conclusion, the author links this background with both the Italian novelist Mario Debenedetti and Zoran Mušič’s famous paintings.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an excellent contribution by Prof. Kees Waaijman (to whom we pay tribute with affection and admiration in this volume) at a Congress on the Rule of Carmel, held in Rome in 2014 on the occasion of the eighth centenary of the death of Albert of Jerusalem, legislator of the Order, I heard him say that the last months of Blessed Titus Brandsma’s life had constituted a kind of process of stripping, of shame (to use a term with Pauline resonances), or of self-emptying. Waaijman attributed this primarily to



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the concrete theme of clothing, since the Carmelite prisoner was gradually stripped of the type of dress that distinguished him: the Carmelite habit, the clerical clothing, his shoes (replaced by some type of clogs that rarely matched the prisoner's size), the striped costume characteristic of the *KZ-Häftlinge*, up to the total stripping even of his body, which would be incinerated anonymously, like that of so many thousands of prisoners, in the crematoria of Dachau.

In this process, the religious, the professor, the distinguished journalist was losing other “supports” that were fundamental in his life: his books (he still kept some in Scheveningen), his rosary, the paper for writing (something essential for a journalist like himself), tobacco, the contact with his family and with his Carmelite community, and so on. Although this idea was only mentioned (the Congress focused on other aspects), it seems to me a very valuable intuition of Prof. Kees Waaijman, on which I would like to reflect in this article.<sup>1</sup>

I do not intend to make a detailed study of the subject, but simply to suggest some avenues for research and, above all, for reflection on the testimony of Blessed Titus Brandsma and his significance, starting from the idea that our honouree acutely pointed out.

## 2. THE *KENOSIS* OF BLESSED TITUS BRANDSMA

It is well-known that, in his letter to the Philippians (Phil. 2:6-11), Paul presents a very beautiful synthesis of the incarnation of the Word and of his salvific mission, using the concept of self-emptying, stripping, or annihilation. Some exegetes believe that the hymn is probably not original to Paul himself, but that he included it in the letter to illustrate his own thought.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, some consider that it may be a baptismal hymn, accompanying (even rhythmically!) the descent of the neophyte into the baptismal pool and the ascension from it, thus creating a beautiful theological and spiritual effect. The baptised person is incorporated into the death and resurrection of the Lord, shares with him the *kenosis*, but also rises with him to a new, definitive, and true life.

Perhaps we might think that applying this dynamic proper to the Word Incarnate to a saint or a blessed person (in short, to a human being) might be exaggerated or even irreverent. Yet it is completely appropriate to do so, since Paul himself includes the hymn, asking the Philippians to have

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1 His talk was later published. See Waaijman (2016); Antista (1985).

2 See, for example, what one of the great Pauline experts, Gnillka (2009, with a rich bibliography), points out in this regard.

“the same sentiments that were in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Every believer, therefore, should feel called to imitate, in some way, and to reproduce this kenotic dynamic. Of course, not everyone relives it in such a dramatic or bloody way. In many instances, it is done in a quiet, daily, and apparently simple way. Moreover, we speak of *kenosis* in the analogical sense (an important word in theology) and not in a literal sense. But this dynamic, which is ultimately nothing more than the Cross that distinguishes the Christian, cannot be ignored. We are called to surrender our lives and to incorporate ourselves into the suffering Christ. Although this language may seem harsh, masochistic, or negative to certain sensibilities of our time, it is nothing other than the consequence of true, joyful, fulfilling love.

In some way, this article is tasked with describing in detail the kenotic process that Father Titus lived in the last months of his life. I will only briefly mention three moments or dimensions of his pastoral and academic activity which, in some way, prepared him to give such a deep spiritual meaning to the dramatic experience of the *Lager*. I consider this especially important to understand the profound significance of the last months of the Dutch Carmelite’s life. Pope John Paul II, in his homily at his beatification in 1985, stated of the newly beatified:

Certainly, such heroism cannot be improvised. Father Titus matured it over the course of a lifetime, starting from his early childhood experiences, lived in the midst of a deeply Christian family, in the beloved land of Friesland (Pope John Paul II 1986: 236).

Each of these influences would require more detailed study, but I only intend – bearing in mind the dimensions of such a work – to draw attention to how Blessed Titus Brandsma culminated in a certain way his spiritual process in the last months of his life. In other words, I invite the admirers of Titus Brandsma to “read” those last months (his writings, his attitudes reflected in the process of beatification, his conversations, and so on) in light of these three very profound influences: his admiration and devotion to St. Teresa; the piety of the Passion reflected, among others, in his commentaries on the Stations of the Cross, and his admiration and study of the so-called *Devotio Moderna* and especially of its founder, Geert Grote.

### 3. INFLUENCE OF ST. TERESA OF JESUS

First, it is necessary to underline the strong influence that the work of St. Teresa had on the spirituality of our Carmelite. It seems that, from a very young age, even before entering the Carmelite Order, his sympathy and

devotion to the Carmelite saint was evident. In fact, in a letter he sent to his mother, Tjitsje, from the novitiate, the young Carmelite included an acrostic poem with the name *Teresia* (entitled *Lieve Moeder*), since Brandsma considered Tjitsje to be the Frisian version of that name.<sup>3</sup>

While still a student, in 1901, Titus Brandsma translated from French an anthology of texts from the Saint and the life of Arnauld d'Andilly. He entitled it *Bloemlezing uit de werken der H. Teresia*. Certainly, this work had some shortcomings (starting with the fact that the texts were not translated from the original Spanish, but from a French translation), but the interest of the young Carmelite was significant. This book was also very useful to spread the Teresian spirituality in The Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his life, this passion for the work of the Saint from Avila did not diminish, but rather increased. Prof. Brandsma was always an admirer, translator, scholar, and devotee of the Spanish saint.<sup>5</sup> For him, the lack of a modern translation of the works of St. Teresa into Dutch was a particularly significant deficiency in the religious culture of The Netherlands. Consequently, a few years later, he concluded that the time had come to translate the texts of the saint directly from Spanish. He thus formed a working team with three other Dutch Carmelites to do simply that. The first volume, the *Book of life*, was published in 1918. New volumes would appear successively: in 1919, the *Foundations*; in 1924, the first part of the *Letters*, and, in 1926, the *Moradas* or *Interior castle* (a work that Prof. Brandsma knew almost by heart). There the project came to a standstill, in part because of the many commitments and responsibilities of Fr. Titus (especially at the Catholic University of Nijmegen), the departure of Fr. Humbert Driessen (a great friend and collaborator of Titus) to Rome, and the reorganisation of personnel in the Dutch Province, due to the various missions for which it was gradually taking responsibility.

This would remain his great unfinished project, something that caused him some personal frustration. In the *Liber Amicorum*, prepared in 1937 for Father Humbert Driessen, he fraternally confessed to him: "There are many things in my life that I certainly regret, but none more than not having finished the works of St. Teresa<sup>6</sup>."

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3 This is emphasised by Steggink (1957) in his introduction to the Spanish translation of a *novena* in honour of Titus Brandsma.

4 Steggink (1957) points out that "if Fr. Titus himself chose the texts – which is likely – it must be affirmed that the young Dutch Carmelite was very well acquainted with the writings of the saint".

5 See Millán-Romeral (2012), of which there is an English version (2013). See also Staring (2004). Also collected in Valabek (2004).

6 This *Album Amicorum* is not published so far. I translate directly from the Dutch original found in the Archive of the Dutch Carmelites in Boxmeer (NCI).

We know that, during his months of imprisonment, Teresa was very present in the mind and heart of the Dutch Carmelite. In Scheveningen, where Brandsma spent over a month and a half, he wrote several chapters of a spiritual biography, a project so dear to him yet always delayed. The anecdote is well known that, when he was forbidden to use paper, the prisoner continued to write between the lines of one of the books he had been allowed to have (Cyriel Verschaeve's *Jesus* [1939]). That book is now preserved, a true relic, in the archives of the NCI (Nederlands Carmelitaans Instituut) in Boxmeer. The calligraphy, which in the first chapters is clear and firm, deteriorates as the pages go by. The lives of Jesus, of his beloved Teresa, and of the Frisian Carmelite, who perhaps already sensed that the work would not be finished, at least not in the way one might expect, are poignantly intertwined. He would do it in a more existential and sublime way.

There is no doubt in my mind that the spiritual influence of St. Teresa helped Fr. Titus personally cope with life in the concentration camps and to do it as he was remembered, with kindness towards all, with hope, with the generosity to encourage those who lived with him. Analysing, for example, the famous poem that Brandsma wrote in Scheveningen, it is difficult not to see echoes of the masterful Chapter 22 of the *Book of life* (22:6):

And shall we not look at him so weary and broken in pieces, running  
with blood, weary on the roads, persecuted by those to whom He  
did so much good, disbelieved by the apostles?

or of the famous contemplation before “a very wounded Christ” (9:1).<sup>7</sup> Certainly, it would be very interesting to study in depth these “Teresian traces” in the writings of Fr. Titus and especially in those writings during his captivity.

#### 4. THE WAY OF THE CROSS BY SERVAES

Secondly, it is worth mentioning his participation in the famous polemic that was generated on the occasion of the Way of the Cross, a work of the Belgian expressionist Albert Servaes. It is well known that the Discalced Carmelite, Jerome of the Mother of God, commissioned the artist in 1919 to create the fourteen Stations of the Cross for the new chapel that had been built in the monastery of Luythagen. But, once the work was completed, it caused some astonishment because of its style, and even scandalised

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<sup>7</sup> On the meaning of the humanity of Christ in the Teresian Christological concept, see Castro (1978).

some people.<sup>8</sup> The Discalced Carmelite had seen other sketches by Servaes that he liked, so he approached the artist to illustrate a Stations of the Cross that he had appreciated.

After a vivid (and sometimes bitter) polemic, in which authors of the stature of J. Maritain,<sup>9</sup> R. Garrigou Lagrange and L. Jansens participated, and after several shifts on which we cannot dwell, the directive came from Rome to remove the work.<sup>10</sup> Brandsma asked his Discalced brother to comply with the decision and Cardinal Mercier tried to personally console Servaes. Later, in fact, he became one of the greatest representatives of Belgian expressionism. Servaes' Stations of the Cross underwent their own *Way of the Cross* and passed through several hands and buyers until they reached the cloister of Koningshoeven Abbey in Tilburg.<sup>11</sup> The Nuncio insisted that the Servaes stations not be placed as objects of veneration, but simply as "works of art" so as not to contravene the prohibition of the Holy See. At this point, Fr. Titus Brandsma intervened. We do not know in detail about Brandsma's connection with the main characters of this event. It is not difficult to surmise, however, that there was a fraternal friendship with the Discalced Carmelite and that Brandsma's cultural restlessness, well known by his contemporaries, was part of his motivations. It may also be that Jerome of the Mother of God (or even Servaes himself) knew the writings of Fr. Titus on St. Teresa or some of the translations to which I have referred above. In any case, the Frisian Carmelite became involved in the controversy.

It seems that Brandsma first attempted mediation with the superiors of the Discalced in Rome through the Postulator General of the Order, his friend Humbert Driessen. However, this mediation failed. Titus then made one of his typical Solomonic decisions. On the one hand, he showed his understanding (although he would later make some strong contrary comments) to people who, perhaps uneducated, might be scandalised to see a weak, starving, twisted or too human Jesus. On the other hand, he asked the recently founded magazine of religious culture *Opgang* to publish the Stations. The Stations were published in the very first issue

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8 On the pictorial and spiritual sources of Servaes' Stations, see Schoonbaert (2003).

9 On Maritain's intervention in this polemic, see De Maeyer (2010).

10 See: Acta Apostolicae Sedis XIII (1921-1925:197). The prohibition to exhibit the work was based on canons 1399-12 (of the Pibenedictine Code of 1917), which stated: the prohibition (among many other things) of "images in any way printed of Our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Angels and Saints of other Servants of God, opposed to the sense and the Decrees of the Church".

11 Later sadly known as the place from which the three Trappist brothers of the Löb family would be deported to the extermination camp.

of this magazine, giving Fr. Titus the opportunity to write his famous commentary on the Stations of the Cross. In it he stressed, on more than one occasion, that the real scandal is not so much in the naked and weak Jesus, but in the fact that He scandalises us, his followers.<sup>12</sup> One aspect that especially concerned Fr. Titus was the painter's lay status. He thought it would be more difficult for a layman to take the blow of the prohibition. This says a lot about Titus Brandsma's pastoral sensitivity.

Nowadays, we cannot only contemplate Servaes' Stations of the Cross, but – in some ways thanks to that controversy – we can read the meditation of Fr. Titus on each of the stations. He recreates, in the best tradition of both the Rhenish-Flemish mysticism and the spirituality of St. Teresa, the suffering of Christ, in his weakness and fragility, but not in a masochistic or negative sense, but as the culmination of his love for humanity and his full identification with it.

Through the art and theological debate raised by Servaes' work, Brandsma turns his attention to the abased Christ, the man of sorrows, "before whom his face is turned" (Isa. 53:3), or to the kenotic Christ who,

in spite of his divine condition, did not flaunt his status as God; on the contrary, he stripped himself of his rank and took the condition of a slave, passing for one of many. And so, acting like a common man, he lowered himself so far as to submit even to death, and a death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-11).

Perhaps as a prisoner in Scheveningen or in Amersfoort or in the hell of Dachau, some of the comments he had written twenty years earlier about each of the Stations of the Cross were now echoing in his mind and heart. Perhaps he also asked himself, as he went through the various stages of his personal Stations of the Cross, what he put in the mouth of the Christ who falls for the first time and feels his strength failing: "Stand up here, my God. Can you not be crucified here?"<sup>13</sup> Perhaps, while trying to get up after stumbling in the woods near the Amersfoort camp, where he was gathering firewood, he remembered what he himself had written about Jesus: "His Sacred Humanity must be annihilated, no human trace must remain in Him ... He had been so cruelly mistreated."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, having fallen on the dusty floor of Dachau while protecting the particle of the Eucharist he carried with him and awaiting the blows of the *kapo*,

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12 The original Dutch text and the English translation (with the plates of the art) can be found in the work mentioned above (see note 10). An Italian translation is available in Brandsma (1994); in English, in Darien-Illinois (2004); in German, in Geisbauer (1987).

13 Commentary on the Third Station. I am translating from the edition cited in note 12.

14 Commentary on the Third Station. I am translating from the edition cited in note 12.

he encouraged himself and received a glimpse of meaning in that world of horror and absurdity by repeating to himself: “This makes me feel, more and more intensely, that I must share the weight of your cross.”<sup>15</sup> On certain occasions, the identification with the kenotic Christ is explicit and impressive: “Let me be weak with you, bend under the weight of life, make me insignificant and small in the eyes of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

A lover of the work and life of Blessed Titus Brandsma may be surprised that I have quoted a few examples only from the first commentary on the Stations of the Cross that Brandsma wrote. In fact, our Carmelite wrote a second commentary in more dramatic circumstances and closer to his reality, in the same prison of Scheveningen in The Hague. Fr. Titus had worked enthusiastically on the construction of a shrine dedicated to St. Boniface in Dokkum, at the place where, according to tradition, he had been martyred by the ancient Frisians. For this shrine, a Way of the Cross was being prepared for the pilgrims and Brandsma was preparing a commentary on each of the stations. Curiously, the reflection on the fourteenth station is missing. Perhaps he did not have time to write it or perhaps he would write it with his own testimony, a few months later in the hell of Dachau.<sup>17</sup>

I wanted to omit this second Way of the Cross, because one might suspect that, given the dramatic circumstances in which it was written, it would be more logical and, therefore, less significant to show Brandsma’s identification with the suffering Christ as something spontaneous or not the result of his situation. For this reason, I have referred only to the first Way of the Cross, written several decades earlier when the Frisian Carmelite could not even imagine that his life would end the way it did.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. GEERT GROTE AND THE *DEVOTIO MODERNA*

Finally, it is necessary to stress the profound influence that the so-called *Devotio Moderna* and, in particular, its founder, Geert Grote, had on Brandsma. This deacon was born in Deventer in 1340 and, in 1940, the

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15 Commentary on the Third Station. I am translating from the edition cited in note 12. In the commentary to the Fourth Station, he states, “I have decided to follow you on the sorrowful way of the cross.”

16 Commentary on the Third Station. I am translating from the edition cited in note 12.

17 Available in German (Geisbauer 1987) and in Italian (Mosca 1985).

18 I would like to mention that, in his contribution to the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité II*, Brandsma (1953) refers to the *via crucis* of John Pascha, noting that in the same “we find the most ancient formulas of our present-day Way of the Cross with its fourteen stations”. See Hense & Chalmers (2021:187). For a modern English version of Pascha’s voyage, see Clemmer (2016).

600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth was celebrated. Prof. Brandsma was invited to give several lectures in various places in The Netherlands. We know, for example, that, on 16 October 1940, he gave a lecture on this mystic in Deventer, Grote's hometown.<sup>19</sup> Previously, in October and November 1938 and again in February 1941, he published a series of popular articles on this author in the newspaper *De Gelderlander*, to which he was a regular contributor.

While in Amersfoort, and after a period of convalescence in the infirmary, Brandsma was asked to give a lecture. Given the number of intellectuals, doctors, writers, trade unionists, university professors, and so on, who were in the camp, they were allowed to organise a kind of cultural evening periodically on various topics. Such conferences were not altogether uncommon in the concentration camps, as we know from the testimonies of Etty Hillesum, Robert Antelme, Jorge Semprún, and Petr Ginz, among others.

Between Brandsma and the organisers, they thought that he should speak about Geert Grote, which could pass for a literary theme, since censorship was strict and political and religious questions were forbidden. The themes were to exalt Dutch culture, as part of Germanic culture, which was only accidentally contaminated by Christianity, Judaism, and Communism. Moreover, Prof. Brandsma fairly recently studied the subject, as indicated earlier.

It was Good Friday, and although Fr. Titus began by speaking of Grote's literary significance and his influence on late medieval Dutch culture, his lecture gradually turned into a heartfelt homily – sweaty, behind foggy spectacles, a grotesque spectacle, full of inner strength, conveying hope in that sordid atmosphere. On such a day, Jesus, also martyred, humiliated, tortured, and so on, was in solidarity with everyone. They were not alone. Christ, God made man, made them sharers in his passion. In the most miserable part of themselves, in that corner, where barbarism had been visited upon them, God continued to give a word of hope to the human being. It was another Good Friday, another Way of the Cross, the eternal Way of the Cross of a man, of so many men. But the passion of Christ led to the resurrection. They had to keep hope and not allow themselves to fall.

The outline that Fr. Brandsma used for his talk is available. With a trembling calligraphy writing out academic notes, names of medieval authors and modern scholars, one reads with emotion: "God voor ons,

19 Published originally in Dutch in a booklet in 1981. See also Brandsma (2013:237-260). On Brandsma's studies on Grote, see Van den Berg (2018:76-83) and Van Dijk (2012:85-125).

God met ons (...), God in ons.” (Brandsma 1942). Brandsma concluded, by making a spiritual interpretation of the macabre acronym P.D.A. (*Polizeiliches Durchgangslager Amersfoort*), see everywhere, and which he interpreted as: *Perseveramur, Deo Adiuvante* (“We will resist with God’s help!”), and as *Probamur dum amamur* (“We are tested, while we are loved”).<sup>20</sup>

His voice dropped off because of his weakness. The silence was intense, excited. No one wanted to break that magical moment. There was some unkind commentary, but no one answered and, without saying anything, they gradually left their places and marched to their bunks and to the other barracks. Something had changed in Amersfoort. Titus Brandsma, who had never preached well, who had already been told by his teachers that his voice was not very “oratorical” but somewhat monotonous, had delivered the sermon of his life. Little was left for him to seal it but with life itself.

Although it is beyond our focus in this instance, I would like to point out that a few days later (and in view of the success of the first lecture), Prof. Brandsma was invited to speak at another cultural evening. But the second lecture on the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Franciscan preacher and poet Johannes Brugman was very different, according to witnesses. The speaker could not get the words out; he repeated concepts, and it was very disordered. I opine that it is appropriate to point this out, in order not to soften too much or idealise the experience of Blessed Titus in the concentration camp. He was not a hero, and he did not have an abundance of strength. Both physically and psychologically, the Frisian Carmelite was very weak. In this context, his identification with the suffering Christ, which both Geert Grote and Brugman considered essential in the spiritual life, takes on more significance.<sup>21</sup>

I am aware that I have only pointed out possible lines of investigation. However, it seems evident, significant, and moving to me personally that, in the last months of his earthly pilgrimage, Blessed Titus intensified intellectually, but above all spiritually, his identification with the *kenotic* Christ he had spoken and written about so often. As I have pointed out on other occasions, his two poems (one written in Scheveningen and the

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20 Other less pious interpretations have been given by fellow prisoners. Looking for double meaning to the pompous and grandiose acronyms of the camp was a frequent humorous occupation in the concentration camps, given the tendency of the Third Reich (and other totalitarian regimes) to use acronyms with an air of technocracy and crypto language, as George Orwell would denounce with his famous principles of neo-language (Newspeak) in his novel *1984*. See Klemperer (2007); Marzulli (2017).

21 For a good synthesis of this spirituality, see García Villoslada (1956:315-350).

other in Amersfoort), his letters, the description of his cell and his schedule and, above all, the trace of humanity, simplicity, and spiritual elegance that Brandsma left in the various camps and prisons through which he passed, constitute a true master class of spirituality and, why not say it, of holiness.

## 6. TWO CONCLUDING NOTES

Allow me to make two final comments, one literary and the other artistic. I would relate (by opposition, *sub contrario*) that *kenotic* process whereby Fr. Titus was literally undressing himself to the description of the uniform of the German officer who embodies the forbidden, the *verboden* (rigorous, automatic, uncompromising, sharp), made by the Italian writer Giacomo Debenedetti in his famous work *16 ottobre 1943*. Brandsma was stripping himself of the identity-security of a religious habit (which was very important for him) or of a retailored suit, until he reached the nudity demanded during the admission process in some of the *Lagers* through which he passed,<sup>22</sup> until, finally, his total annihilation of the crematorium. As is well known, the Italian novelist describes in his book the roundup of the Jews of the ghetto of Rome that took place on that date. In the midst of the chaotic situation that is created, a macabre character appears in the streets of the ghetto, flanked and escorted by the SS, who will end up destroying the library (very valuable) of the rabbinical school. Debenedetti's description is worth reproducing:

A strange figure, about whom we would like to have more information, appears on October 11 in the premises of the community. Accompanied by an SS escort, on seeing him one would say that he is a German officer like all the others, with that extra arrogance that comes from belonging to a privileged and sadly famous "specialty." All of him is a uniform, from head to toe. That tight uniform, of a fussy, abstract, and implacable elegance, which sheathes the person, the physical, but also and above all the moral, with a hermetic zipper. It is the word "*verboden*" translated into a uniform: forbidden access to man and the individual past that dwells in him, which is his history and his truest "specialty;" forbidden to see anything beyond his rigorous, automatic, uncompromising, sharp present.<sup>23</sup>

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22 This was especially harsh and painful in Amersfoort and Dachau. The process of admission to the camps is well-known and became a kind of perverse rite of passage in which the aim was the humiliation of the prisoner and his total submission to the rules of the camp, however absurd they might seem. The aim was also the radical dehumanisation of the Häftling who became a number, a voiceless cog in a violent and threatening machine.

23 I quote from the Spanish translation by María Folch in Debenedetti (2019:37).

This German Army officer, a kind of *anti-figure* of Fr. Titus, shields himself and makes himself strong behind his suit: powerful, overpowering, rough, metallic. There is no person behind the uniform (“He is only uniform, from head to toe”); he is only function, mission, rank. He is the closed, hermetic man, the man of the forbidden. He is, in short, the empty man, degraded, reduced to a uniform, which forbids everything that goes beyond the present moment, that is to say, who destroys the memory represented by that wonderful rabbinical library of the Jewish ghetto in Rome.

If this character were to lose his uniform, he would be reduced to nothing, like a corpse that, when taken out of its grave after some time, is dust. In the face of this, our ill-treated and ill, tired, and limping little man gains in size as he strips himself of all his costumes, his routines, his ultimate securities. The man remains in his inhabited and blessed nothingness. The creature remains.

The second note refers to the Slovenian painter Zoran Mušič. As the end of the war approached, the Dachau concentration camp suffered a tremendous typhus epidemic. The American troops were already nearby and discipline had been relaxed. The shortage of food was dire, and the atmosphere was tense, especially among the SS and the other guards of the *Lager* in view of the likely imminent takeover of the camp by the Americans. The situation was chaotic. In the cold Bavarian winter, the half-frozen corpses piled up, before being taken to the crematorium, which had no room for them. Every day, the number of the infected grew and several barracks had become Dantesque places where the sick, the dying, and the deceased were piled up in the bunks.<sup>24</sup>

Mušič’s drawings revolved around this unique motif, difficult to express in words: starving, dying bodies, human beings reduced to their minimum expression, faces looking up to the sky with an expression of defeat and supplication, arms and legs twisting in a macabre dance of horror and suffering, corpses hanging and piled up.<sup>25</sup> Keith Lowe, a scholar of this period of European history, notes that

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24 I do not want to fail to mention that, in the midst of this terrible situation, some priests (especially from Poland) behaved in an exemplary and heroic manner, volunteering to help the sick and to attend to them spiritually before they died. Among them was the Carmelite Hilary Januszewski, who had been prior of the Carmelite house in Krakow. See the synthesis made of this figure by the prior general, Joseph Chalmers, O. Carm., in his letter *Faithful in little, faithful in much*, published in various languages, on the occasion of Januszewski’s beatification in 1999. It was published in the three official languages of the Order in Cordero & Llorente (2019:369-375 [Spanish]; 465-471 [Italian]; 557-563 [English].

25 On the profound meaning of this experience of the author, it is essential to read Clair (2007a). For the Spanish translation, see Clair (2007b).

one of the things that most astonished the British was the indifference with which the prisoners lived their lives among the corpses, as if such sights were the most normal thing in the world (Lowe 2013:112-113).

He gives several horrifying examples of how daily life (eating, washing, defecating) could be done quietly next to the mountains of half-decayed corpses.

Titus Brandsma and Zoran Mušič never met or knew each other. When Mušič arrived at Dachau in November 1944, Titus was dead for over two years. They frequented different environments, very different cultural spheres, and had very different backgrounds and activities. But they shared the horror of the *Lager*. Mušič, almost without knowing it, identified himself in Dachau with the traditional figure of the Veronica, capturing, not on a cloth, but on a series of dirty, greasy, and sullied sheets of paper, the face of the suffering Christ fused with that of suffering humanity. It is the eternal *Way of the Cross* that a humanity lacerated by violence and hatred continues to go through day after day. And both men, the Carmelite and the painter, at very different moments, knew how to capture the beauty of suffering humanity. Not because of an unhealthy morbid curiosity, nor because of a masochism as incomprehensible as it is absurd, but because they discovered in it something that transcends suffering itself, something without which suffering would lead us to meaninglessness and despair. Or, to put it another way, compassion and contemplation coincide in both of them (in very different ways and with very different points of view, I want to stress). Let us leave the word to these two compassionate mystics:

How much tragic elegance in those fragile bodies! How much zeal not to betray those fine forms, in order to capture them as beautiful as I saw them, reduced to the essential! ... Was this universe of senselessness a purgatory? After the vision of the corpses, stripped of all external demands, of everything superfluous, stripped of the mask of hypocrisy and the distinctions with which men and society cover themselves, I believe I have discovered the truth.<sup>26</sup>

How delicate of you, O Jesus, along the way of the cross, to leave us your divine face as a reminder of your suffering, on the veil with which a good woman wanted to wipe your face. May this face remain deeply engraved in my memory so that I may always see before me your suffering as an example (...). O Jesus, tender and humble of heart, transform our face and make it like yours.<sup>27</sup>

26 A phrase by the artist, collected in the wonderful catalogue of the Galería Jorge Mara in Madrid on the occasion of an exhibition in 1996, which I had the opportunity to attend: Mušič (1996:37). See also the interesting prologue to this catalogue by J. Semprún, entitled *Yo lo ví* (pp. 9-29).

27 I am translating from the Italian edition, Mosca (1985:19).

Of the more than 100 sketches that Mušič drew, 35 are preserved, most of which are in the Basel Museum. Many years later, in 1970, the painter produced the series entitled *Nous ne sommes pas les derniers* (We are not the last), in which he returns to the old ghosts of the past in the *Lager*. Like many other survivors of the macabre world of concentration camps, Mušič, too, felt the unsettling memories of the horror he lived through come back to life. Other survivors could not stand it and, several decades after their experience in the camps, committed suicide. Our painter perhaps took refuge in his painting until his death in 2005.

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Returning to our honouree, Prof. Waaijman himself spoke of the process of “iconisation” or interpretation of the figure of Titus Brandsma. Of course, this is not exclusive to him, but to any great figure, in many areas of life, that can be interpreted in many different ways. Waaijman mentions some icons: hero of freedom (a national hero of resistance), pioneer of ecumenism, journalist, disseminator of the Frisian language and man of culture, mystic, martyr, or saint. All of them are, of course, only a part of the whole, but they help one interpret (as far as possible) a figure as multifaceted as that of Titus Brandsma. Each of these facets (or “icons”) can be analysed, nuanced, or even questioned, but I believe that, among them, the one of Titus Brandsma stripped of everything and identified with the suffering Christ is one of the fundamental ones to understand the scope and greatness of his testimony.<sup>28</sup>

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