

## SAINT JOHN OF COLOGNE, O. P., AND HIS COMPANIONS THE MARTYRS OF GORCUM<sup>1</sup>

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The year 1572 found the inhabitants of the Netherlands in rebellion against the dominion of Spain as well as against the authority of the Church. In this struggle the Calvinistic element in the country gained the ascendancy. The Calvinists held their first synod at Embden, in 1571. On April 1, 1572, the Gueux, or Watergeuzen (Sea-beggars), conquered Brielle and later Vlissingen and other towns of the locality. In the same year Dortrecht and Gorcum fell into their hands.

Gorcum, originally Gorinchen, is a little town in Holland, on the River Meuse. It is situated in the midst of a fertile country, about twenty miles from Dortrecht. At the time of which we write the town was in a very poor state of defense. In fact, the only place considered safe at all was a citadel built on the town walls, at the foot of which flowed the Meuse. When the town was attacked, the inhabitants hoped it would hold out against the insurgents till succour could be obtained from the neighboring cities, still loyal to the Spanish sovereign. The Protestants of Gorcum had, however, sent messengers to Dortrecht, which had just been captured, to attack the town suddenly. Accordingly, on the morning of June 25, thirteen vessels carrying soldiers were sighted coming up the river from Dortrecht. They sailed almost to the very walls of the city, their appearance causing great joy to the Protestants but sorrow and dismay to the Catholic inhabitants.

In the town of Gorcum there was a monastery of Franciscan Recollects. The community numbered eleven members, namely: Nicholas Pieck, Guardian of the monastery; Jerome of Weert, vicar; Theodore van der Eem, of Amersfoort; Nicasius Jansen, of Heeze; Willehad of Denmark; Godefried of Mervel; Anthony of Weert; Anthony of Hornaer and Francis de Roye, of Brussels. The lay brethren of the community were: Peter of Assche and Cornelius of Wyk, near Duurstede.<sup>2</sup> When the town of Gorcum was approached by the invaders these religious took

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<sup>1</sup> The year ending in June, 1918, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the canonization of the Martyrs of Gorcum.

<sup>2</sup> See Cath. Ency. under "Gorkum."

refuge in the citadel. They were later joined by the learned parish priest of Gorcum, Leonard Vechel of Bois-le-Duc, who had distinguished himself by his studies at Louvain, and also his assistant, Nicholas Janssen, surnamed Poppel, of Welde in Belgium, Godefried van Duynen of Gorcum, who performed his sacerdotal offices in his native city, and John Lenartz of Oisterwijk, an Augustinian and director of the convent of Augustinian nuns in Gorcum.

Father Leonard Vechel and his assistant, Father Nicholas Poppel, had done all they could to animate the courage of the citizens. They had visited the magistrates, made a tour of the walls, and harangued the soldiers, but as the enemy had proclaimed toleration for Catholicism, the citizens failed to see their danger.

The refugees had scarcely reached the fortress when the Gueux were secretly introduced into the town by their partisans. They were under the leadership of Martin Brant, a Fleming, a man of considerable military talent, who had been a dyke-digger and later a pirate under William Lumey, Count de la Marck. As soon as Brant found himself in possession of the town he assembled the inhabitants and proposed that they vow eternal hatred to the Duke of Alva the Governor, and the Spanish conquerors of the country, and that they swear allegiance to the Prince of Orange. All present consented with loud cries of "Long live the Gueux!" Brant then convoked the town council and made arrangements to complete his successes.

The Gueux then proceeded to besiege the citadel. The place was very poorly fortified and the aid expected by the inmates had not arrived. The soldiers of the Gueux outnumbered those in the fortress. Consequently, the citadel was soon in the hands of the besiegers. The place was surrounded on conditions proposed by the governor and accepted by Brant—that every one in the citadel, whether of the clergy or of the laity, should be allowed to go free and unharmed. All the property within, however, was to be turned over to the conquerors.

During the parley preceding the surrender the ecclesiastics prepared for the worst. They confessed to each other and then heard the confessions of the others. Father Nicholas Poppel had brought with him the adorable Sacrament and all were enabled to communicate. When the Gueux entered, sorrow filled the hearts of the Catholics to find how many of their fellow citizens

had gone over to the enemy. They carried with them many articles plundered from the village churches, and now they came to demand the treasures they thought had been carried into the fortress by the religious. When they found themselves disappointed in their calculations, they treated their prisoners with great cruelty. Crowds of curious spectators came to gaze upon them and wantonly insult them. "We have them at last," they cried, "these shaven pates, supporters of the Papacy and Spanish despotism!" The captives remained silent.

After a day had elapsed, spent in mingled fear and hope, the names of the prisoners were called, and all except the priests and religious were set at liberty, only, however, after having paid large ransoms. The aged priest, Godfrey van Duynen, was also permitted to leave; but upon reaching the drawbridge, one of the inhabitants asked the soldiers who accompanied him whither they were taking him. "He is allowed to go because he is a fool," answered the soldiers. "Fool!" said the citizen. "He has wits enough to make his God in the Mass, and enough head to be hung." Upon hearing this the soldiers laughingly led him back to prison.<sup>3</sup>

The Friday following, though faint with hunger, the holy men refused to partake of the meat that had been set before them in mockery of their religion. The soldiers, having surfeited on the food and drink found in the castle, were just in condition to vent their fury to the fullest extent upon their prisoners. They resolved to call them, in turn, to ascertain "the state of their purses." The parish priest, Leonard Vechel, was the first summoned. He still had a little money, which he immediately turned over to them.

Godfrey van Duynen was called next. "Show us your treasures," they demanded.

The priest responded that he had none.

"Possible!" said the soldiers. "You are half-fool; it is not to you that treasures would be given, but rather to this old confessor of nuns."

They meant Father Theodore van der Eem, director of the Sisters of St. Agnes. Holding a pistol to his heart, they demanded his treasure. But upon his earnest reiterations that he knew of no such treasure, they proceeded to question Father

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<sup>3</sup> Dyson, O. P., "The Holy Martyrs of Gorcum," New York, 1897.

Nicholas Poppel. When he also said that he had brought no treasures, they blasphemingly cried:

"At least give us the God which you made in the Mass. You, who have so often railed against us in the pulpit—what do you think now, in the face of this pistol?"

With the courage of a martyr, he replied: "I believe all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches, and in particular I believe in the Real Presence of my God in the sacramental species. If that is any reason why I should die, kill me. I should be happy to die at the end of the confession of faith you desire from me." Throwing himself upon his knees, he exclaimed: "Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."

But his time had not yet come. A soldier snatched the cord of St. Francis from one of the friars and twisted it several times around Father Poppel's neck. Fastening one end of it to the prison door, and pulling the other, they violently raised him from the floor repeatedly. They continued their questions regarding the treasures. He could only answer by gesture that he had none. At last they left him half dead. The cord left a mark upon his neck which remained distinctly visible until his death.

The Franciscans were next called upon. They answered that they possessed nothing of the goods of this world, since the Rule of St. Francis forbade them to possess anything of their own. Thinking that the younger religious would betray the place where lay the supposed treasures, they ill treated them in various ways. One of them, overcome by pain, answered with tears in his eyes that the Father Guardian was intrusted with the goods of the community. Upon hearing this they laid hands upon the Vicar, but the Guardian quickly presented himself, not wishing to have the crown of martyrdom thus wrested from him. They fell upon him at once and tossed him backwards and forwards, demanding his possessions. He replied that all the treasures which he had brought with him—the sacred vessels—were already in their hands. They then demanded the alms which the friars received by begging. When told that nothing remained of them, they called the superior a liar. But he answered not a word. He was then subjected to the same treatment that had been meted out to Father Poppel, but with added cruelty. When the cord broke and he fell apparently lifeless to the ground, the soldiers applied burning torches to his mouth and ears, thrust them into his nostrils and into his mouth, scorching his tongue



and palate. They ended by rudely kicking him, and then left him for dead upon the prison floor.

After their departure the religious crowded about him and looked at his wounds. They were surprised to hear a sigh escape from him. They raised him and washed his bleeding neck and burnt face. At last he spoke: "I hoped that my good Master would have received me into his bosom. But His holy will be done!" The next morning the soldiers returned with hatchets to hack his body to pieces. But, finding him still alive they kicked him and beat him with their fists and rolled him upon the ground, taking care, however, not to endanger his life again.

For ten days the martyrs were subjected to this inhuman treatment. When one band of soldiers was worn out torturing them, another arrived to take their place. In fact, when any citizens came to visit the prison they, in concert with the soldiery, devised new methods of cruelty. They did not even spare the aged Willehad, who was decrepit from extreme old age, and who at every blow merely said: "Thanks be to God!"

It was during these days that Father John of Cologne, of the Order of Preachers, was brought prisoner into the citadel. Since we are more particularly concerned about St. John, as he was of our own Dominican family, let us pause to recount the few details that have come down to us regarding his life. He was by birth a German. The exact date and place of his birth, however, are unknown.<sup>4</sup> His learning and sanctity—two qualities to be desired in every Friar Preacher—were remarkable.<sup>5</sup> He belonged to the convent in Cologne,<sup>6</sup> but had been sent as parish priest to Hornaer, a town in the vicinity of Gorcum. When he became aware of the incarceration of the Gorcum clergy, he speedily obtained the consent of his superiors to minister to the wants of those who were thus deprived of all spiritual assistance. This faithful son of St. Dominic knew full well the fate that awaited him if he were detected, but like the Good Shepherd he was willing to give his life for his flock. Clad in secular attire to avoid detection, he would come from Hornaer to Gorcum to administer the Sacraments. This holy priest was especially zealous in baptizing infants. On one occasion, when he had been suddenly called from Hornaer to Gorcum to baptize a child, just as he was

<sup>4</sup> *Analecta S. O. P.*, Martio-Punio, 1917, page 128.

<sup>5</sup> *Annee Dominicaine*, "Saint Jean de Cologne," Juillet I, page 195.

<sup>6</sup> *Analecta S. O. P.*, loc. cit.

about to perform this priestly function he was apprehended by one of the Gueux, who could not tolerate such prompt religious zeal. He was accordingly seized and imprisoned with the rest of the martyrs. The Gueux, as was their wont charged him with treason, saying that in visiting the city he had hostile designs. But the real reason was because he, like the rest of the noble company, was a priest and a religious—because he was a Catholic and a defender of his religion.<sup>7</sup>

By this time news of the harsh treatment of the martyrs had begun to excite pity among many of the citizens and attempts were made to liberate them by the paying of ransoms. A large sum was subscribed for the release of Father Nicholas Poppel, but instead of being used for that purpose it was appropriated by the man who had collected it. The relatives of Father Nicholas Pieck made several attempts to free him, but on conditions which he could not accept. The case of the imprisoned religious was even mooted in the council of the town, and one senator had daring enough to recall to the mind of Brant the terms of capitulation. Noting this reaction of public sentiment, and fearful that their prey might escape, the Gueux communicated their apprehension to the ferocious Lumey, Count de la Marck, who immediately ordered their transportation to Brielle.

Fifteen of the martyrs reached Brielle after a voyage of untold hardships. Arriving at their destination on the morning of July 7, they were made to march in procession through the town and around the gallows erected in the market-place. The holy martyrs, as they proceeded on their way, amidst the mockery and the blasphemies of the bystanders, sang the Litanies, the "Salve Regina," the "Te Deum" and the "Stabat Mater." The sufferings and the insults they had to bear were indescribable. But their martyrdom was not yet at an end.

The prison of Brielle contained three rooms, one above the other. The lowest of these was uninhabitable, since all the dirt and filth of the upper apartments had been thrown into it. Into this loathsome place, where the light of the sun never penetrated, these holy men were forced.

On July 7 the Count caused the sufferers to be interrogated, and ordered a sort of disputation, in which the heretics were put to confusion by the martyrs. This greatly enraged their in-

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<sup>7</sup> Acta Sanctorum, Julii, Tomus II, page 818.

quisitors. In the meantime, the four other captives joined them, namely, the Dominican, John of Cologne; two Premonstratensians—Adrian Janssen and James Lacops—and a secular priest, Andrew Wouters.

The King of Martyrs, however, had decreed that their martyrdom was soon to end. It was exacted of each that he abandon his belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the supremacy of the Roman Pontiff. All remained firm in their faith. Meanwhile, William of Orange sent a letter ordering that all those under his authority should refrain from molesting priests and religious. Despite this, Lumey ordered the prisoners to be hanged. This sentence was carried out with extreme cruelty. One martyr was hanged by his chin, the rope passed through another's mouth, and a third was strangled with difficulty, the rope being so loosely fastened. Thus died the holy Martyrs of Gorcum,—eleven Franciscans, two Premonstratensians, one Canon Regular of Saint Augustine, one Dominican, and four secular priests—martyrs of the Blessed Sacrament and of Papal Supremacy.

The soldiers most shamefully mutilated their bodies, cutting off their ears, noses and other members. The place where they were executed was filled the whole day with crowds of people, the soldiers exacting an entrance fee. In the evening a Catholic from Gorcum paid a large sum to be allowed to bury their remains. God made known the death of the martyrs to Matthias Thoran, a pious citizen of Gorcum. This man was in the habit of rising every night to pray for the welfare of the state. While thus engaged on the morning of July 9, he beheld in vision this blessed band of martyrs, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads and resplendent with glory. When the day dawned he informed the other citizens. A similar favor was vouchsafed to another citizen of Gorcum, so that the martyrdom of these holy men was known long before the messenger arrived with the news of their death. Heaven bore witness to their sanctity by numerous miracles. On the place of their torture there sprang up later a most beautiful shrub, bearing nineteen of the fairest white flowers. Most of their relics are preserved in the church of the Franciscans at Brussels, whither they were secretly conveyed from Brielle. The place where they suffered

has been for many years the scene of numerous processions and pilgrimages.

The Martyrs of Gorcum were beatified by Pope Clement X on November 24, 1675. Two centuries later, June 29, 1867, amidst the festivities commemorating the eighteenth centenary of the deaths of Sts. Peter and Paul, at which cardinals and bishops from all parts of the world were present, Pius IX placed their names on the catalogue of the saints. Their feast is observed on July 9, the anniversary of their martyrdom.

—Boniface Stratemeier, O. P.

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### QUEEN OF PEACE

A heavenly peace enraptur'd Thee  
That blessed Christmas morn,  
Whilst Angel choirs sang joyfully—  
For Christ the Lord was born.

Nor didst the Prophet's darkest cloud  
With sorrow fill thy sky;  
No earthly fears thy soul enshroud—  
Thy peace was ne'er to die.

Thy life was true tranquillity  
With Jesus by thy side;  
In tears of pure humility,  
Thou mourn'd Him crucified.

A twofold peace was thine to taste  
Alone, thou favor'd one,  
Fairest of all virgins chaste—  
Mother of God's own Son.

O Queen of peace, in thee we place  
Our fondest hopes for life,  
Assist us here, a hapless race,  
To check war's bloody strife.

—Reginald Hughes, O. P.