

SPLENDOR OF PARISH PRIESTS

ROBERT REID, O.P.



HE BOAT slipped silently away from the dock. On the deck, chained closely together, lay a small, haggard-looking group of men. They had been badly bruised and beaten, some into a state of unconsciousness. Only remnants of tattered clothing clung to their broken bodies—a piece of black cassock material, a brown Franciscan cowl, a hardly recognizable Dominican habit. These men were priests and religious about to receive the coveted crown of martyrdom. The men on that boat were Saint John of Cologne, O.P. and his companions—known to history as *The Gorcum Martyrs!*

THE SETTING

Holland in the sixteenth century was a very unhappy country, torn asunder by both civil and religious strife. The tide of Calvinism was rapidly sweeping over the land; the yoke of Spanish domination was weighing heavily upon the backs of the citizens of both Holland and Belgium. Spain and Catholicism were identified in the minds of the Dutch and Flemish peoples. The proponents of Calvinism used the peoples' natural aversion for Spain and things Spanish to fan up flames of hatred for the One True Faith. Catholics, they said, were friends of Spain and traitors to the fatherland; Protestants, and especially Calvinists, were patriots. Loyalty to Holland and adherence to Catholicism were incompatible. Aided by such arguments, Protestant leaders succeeded in disseminating the teachings of Calvin through a great part of the Low Countries.

Alarmed at the contagious spread of this heresy and the ensuing possibility of a revolt, the Spanish monarch, Charles V, and his successor, Philip II, set up an inquisition, similar to the Spanish Inquisition, to deal with the situation in the Netherlands.

The enraged Protestants, under the leadership of William, Prince of Orange, dispatched a strong petition to the Spanish monarch, demanding immediate cessation of the Inquisition and, indeed, of all measures taken against the Calvinists. Despite the fact that Philip made many concessions to them, the Protestants rose in open rebellion against both Church and State. They attacked and

pillaged Church property; convents, schools, rectories and other religious edifices, not the least of which was the Cathedral at Antwerp, were damaged or completely destroyed.

Philip eventually succeeded in restoring order for a time and placed the Low Countries under the iron hand of the Duke of Alba who entered Brussels on August 22nd, 1567. Two of the three leaders of the revolt, the Count of Egmont and the Count of Hoorne, were brought to punishment. However, the third and most powerful, the Duke of Orange, escaped. With the help of the Calvinists and French Huguenots, the rebellious Duke laid plans to re-enter Holland. Admiral de Coligny advised him to attack by water, in the northern provinces, because there the heretics were in the ascendancy and success would be assured.

By the spring of 1572, a fleet of some forty vessels had been fitted out in various English ports. But Queen Elizabeth, acknowledging the legitimate complaint of the Duke of Alba and still desirous of maintaining good relations with Spain, ordered the fleet, under the direction of William of Marck, to leave her kingdom at once. The rebel fleet crossed the North Sea and sailed along the coast of Flanders. Strong winds forced the ships into the mouth of the Meuse River near the Isle of Voorne. Finding the city of Brielle almost defenseless, the Count de la Marck's men siezed it on April 1st, 1572 and it became the base of operations for the so-called "reformers." The stage was set for the events at Gorcum.

GORCUM IS TAKEN

Three months after the siezure of Brielle, a Flemish captain named Martin Brandt, one of the Count de la Marck's men, left the town of Dortrecht, about midway between Brielle and Gorcum. He headed a fleet of thirteen ships toward the latter town which was about twenty miles away.

Gorcum, a small fishing town, which was called Gorinchem at that time, was hardly prepared for an attack by such an overwhelming force. Early on the morning of June 25th, the townspeople saw the enemy ships coming up the Meuse and fled to the town citadel, the only fortified place in the area. They were joined there by all the priests and religious in the area of Gorcum, namely, the Franciscan Recollect community from their local monastery, Father Leonard Vichel, the local pastor, Father Nicholas Poppel and Godfrey van Duynsen (a native of Gorcum), his assistants, (all secular priests) and Father John Lenartz, a Canon Regular of Saint Augustine, the chaplain of the local convent of nuns of the same Order.

Brandt easily siezed the town with the help of a few local partisans who championed the cause of the Calvinists. The force of about twenty men within the fortress was no match for Brandt's more than 200 armed soldiers and the Catholics soon surrendered. Upon payment of huge ransoms, the laypeople were allowed to go, but the heretics refused to release the priests and religious. Father Poppel had brought the Blessed Sacrament with him and all received Holy Communion. They would need all the graces and strength of this Sacrament during the following days when they were to be subjected to inhuman cruelties as the heretics vented the full force of their wrath on these defenseless religious.

SAINT JOHN OF COLOGNE

Meanwhile, at the nearby town of Hoornaer, the pastor of the local Dominican parish learned of the terrible events at Gorcum. He was Father John, O.P., a member of the Province of Germany which at that time included Holland. Like so many other great men, little is known of his early life, other than the fact that he was born in Germany and entered the Order at the famous Convent of the Holy Cross in the City of Cologne. There St. Albert the Great, as Regent of the Studium Generale, had taught St. Thomas Aquinas. Other illustrious alumni of the Cologne convent were Blessed Ambrose Sansedonius, Blessed Henry Suso, Venerable John Tauler, Ulrich of Strassburg and Thomas de Chantimpre. Little did young Friar John realize as he lived behind those hallowed walls that one day he would die for the sacred doctrines he now studied.

For twenty fruitful years, Father John had faithfully fulfilled his parochial duties at the Order's parish in Hoornaer. The people there learned as much from his saintly example as from his exposition of sacred truth in sermons. He knew well the holy doctrines of the Catholic Church and he knew equally well how to explain and teach sublime mysteries so that they were understood by his people. The good Dominican cared for his flock, blessing them, absolving them, joining them in holy wedlock and feeding them with the Angelic Bread, the Food of Life.

Stunned and shocked to hear of the horrible fate of his fellow priests and religious at the unhappy town of Gorcum, his pastor's soul grieved no less for their poor flocks, left helpless without shepherds in the midst of ravenous wolves. But long years in the parochial ministry had made Father John a man of action. He resolved upon a plan by which he could aid both shepherds and sheep.

SAINT JOHN IS CAPTURED

As an obedient religious, the pastor of Hoornaer first sought and received the permission of his superiors before undertaking his hazardous mission. Prudence tempering his zeal, John wisely disguised himself before setting out for Gorcum. He was able not only to enter the Catholic homes of the town and minister to the people, but even entered the citadel itself to bring encouragement and the consolation of the Sacraments. This went on for some days, but whether through treachery or not, the Friar was siezed by Brandt's men as he was in the act of baptizing an infant in the house of one of the Gorcum Catholics. He was then thrown into the dungeon with those whom he had served so well.

The prisoners were treated with unspeakable brutality as we can see from the following account:

"The soldiers struck the martyrs so violently on the face that blood gushed from eyes, ears, nose and mouth . . . they fastened the cords of the Franciscans round the necks of the Father Guardian and one of the secular priests, and, dragging them to the open door, threw the ends of the cords over it, and the victims were hoisted as high as possible, and then allowed to drop heavily on the floor; this cruel game continued till the Father Guardian's neck was one red wound, and he fainted away; then they approached lighted torches to his face, either to ascertain if he were really dead or in order to increase his torture; they thus burnt his beard, eyebrows and eyelashes and even thrust a torch into his mouth, burning his palate and tongue and then left him for dead, but he survived to consummate his martyrdom a few days later . . . the Mass and the Blessed Sacrament were the special themes of their horrible jests."¹

Meanwhile, word of the brutal treatment accorded the men of God held inside the citadel reached the ears of an outraged populace and seething resentment grew against the Calvinists. Alarmed at the seriousness of the situation, Brandt sought the advice of the Count de la Marck at rebel headquarters in Brielle. La Marck ordered the prisoners sent to him immediately. John Omal, an apostate priest, who had been a canon of the Cathedral at Liege, was sent to Gorcum to carry out the Count's orders and to accompany the martyrs back to Brielle.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

A little after midnight on July 5th, the saintly band, stripped of most of their clothing, were dragged aboard a waiting ship. The

¹ Durrant, C. S., *A Link between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs*, New York, 1925, p. 157.

final chapter of their martyrdom had begun. At about nine o'clock the next morning, the ship docked at Dortrecht where a crowd of curious onlookers egged on by the example of Omal abused and tortured the little band of religious.

Later in the day, the trip to Brielle was resumed, the ship arriving there that evening. However, the martyrs were kept on board all night so that their presence might be made known to all. Count de la Marck was on hand to meet them as they came ashore, as well as a screaming mob of rebels whose hatred had been inflamed to a white heat. The Count ordered the company of saints to march in mock procession through the streets of Brielle and they were made to sing the *Te Deum* and the *Salve Regina* as la Marck repeatedly lashed them with a huge bullwhip from the position he occupied at the rear of the "procession." Upon reaching the town gallows, they were commanded to march around backwards three times and then to sing the Litany of the Saints.

After the Count and the mob had satisfied their sadistic desires, the martyrs were brought to a dungeon in the cellar of the town prison to await their deaths. Three more priests whom the rebels had arrested during the night were already there: Andrew Wouters, a secular priest, and Fathers Adrian Janssen and James Lacops, Premonstratensians.

On the evening of July 7th and the morning of the 8th, the Calvinists held their own "inquisition." Heretical Protestant ministers, in the presence of the Count, tried to force the holy men to renounce their Faith. The two dogmas which the heretics constantly assailed were the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, and the Primacy and Supremacy of the Roman Pontiff. The saintly Dominican, Friar John, was brought before the "examiners." "You have but to renounce the Eucharist and your Pope and your life will be spared," they told him. John turned away in disgust and would not even listen to such proposals. He was cursed and beaten until he collapsed. The haranguing of the prisoners went on until, finally, the heretics were being refuted and confused by the martyrs!

MURDER AT TEN RUGGE

Later that same day, July 8th, la Marck received letters from the town council of Gorcum, Martin Brandt and from the Prince of Orange himself. All reminded him that under the terms of an agreement made some time before, the lives of the captives were to be spared. Enraged, the Count vociferously announced that *he* was the supreme authority of the area and would have no one

dictating to him. As a proof of his claim, he ordered the immediate execution of the prisoners from Gorcum. They were to be taken to the previously ransacked and desecrated Convent of St. Elizabeth at nearby Ten Rugge and hanged.

At about one o'clock on the morning of July 9th, a band of soldiers took the religious from their dungeon to the abandoned convent and its half-ruined barn where their ordeal would finally end. Despite the lateness of the hour, a sizeable crowd had gathered in the dark barn where the murders were to take place. Nooses suspended from the cross-beams on the ceiling were the means by which each of this company of saints received his crown of martyrdom. Father Nicholas Pieck, 38-year old Father Guardian of the Franciscans, was the first to go. The courageous and buoyant spirit in which he went to his death served to bolster and strengthen his companions against promises of freedom and material wealth if they would renounce their Faith. Saint John was among the last to go to his well-earned reward. He went joyfully, firmly proclaiming to the end his belief in the Most Blessed Sacrament and in the Sovereignty of the Holy Father.

In all, nineteen received the martyr's crown at Ten Rugge that day. In addition to the Dominican, Saint John of Cologne, there were eleven Franciscan Recollects: St. Nicholas Pieck, St. Jerome of Weert, St. Theodore van der Eem, St. Nicasius Janssen, St. Willehad of Denmark, St. Godfrey of Mervel, St. Anthony of Weert, St. Francis de Roye, St. Anthony of Hoornaer, St. Peter of Assche and St. Cornelius of Wyk (the last two named being lay-brothers), two Premonstratensians: St. James Lacops and St. Adrian Janssen, four secular priests: Saints Nicholas Poppel, Leonard Vechel, Godfrey van Duynsen and Andrew Wouters, and St. John Lenartz, a Canon Regular of St. Augustine.

"These men are Saints who for the love of God despised the threats of men; these Holy Martyrs are rejoicing in the kingdom of heaven with the angels! O, how precious is the death of the Saints who continuously stand before the throne of God and are not separated from each other!"²

But the demoniacal fury of the mob was not yet satisfied. The soldiers and heretics began a horrible mutilation and shameful desecration of the martyrs' bodies. Disemboweling them, cutting off ears, feet and other members, these precious relics were sold as curios in the Gorcum marketplace. Eventually, at the orders of the local

² *Dominican Breviary*, *Benedictus* Antiphon of the Common of Many Martyrs.

magistrates, they buried the pitiful remains in two common graves. This was accomplished by digging two holes underneath the beams on which the bodies still hung and then cutting the ropes so that the bodies fell pell mell into them.

THE REWARD

Desecration was quickly succeeded by veneration. After many miracles attributed to the Gorcum Martyrs had been duly authenticated, Pope Clement X declared them Blessed on November 14th, 1675. Almost two centuries later, on June 29th, 1865, during the solemn festivities in honor of the eighteenth centenary of the deaths of Sts. Peter and Paul, His Holiness, Pope Pius IX, added the names of St. John of Cologne and his companions to the catalogue of the Saints and decreed that their feast would be observed on July 9th, the date on which they received the crown of martyrdom at Ten Rugge.

"The honor of the Dominican family" and "the splendor of parish priests" are only two of the lofty titles given St. John of Cologne by Pope Pius IX in his Bull of Canonization. Well has our Saint merited them! Here was a true Son of Dominic, a veritable "Champion of the Faith." For Saint John, "Veritas," the motto of the Order of Preachers, was not some vague, abstract, text-book concept, but rather, something to live and, indeed, something to die for! He maintained unto his dying breath the truth of the Sacred Doctrines of the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist and the supreme Authority and Primacy of Christ's Vicar on Earth.

SPLENDOR OF PARISH PRIESTS

Perhaps more than anything else, the words of the third stanza of the hymn for Vespers of the Feast of St. John of Cologne, written by Father Vincent Jandell, Master General of the Dominican Order at the time of the canonization, best express the dominant note in St. John's life and death:

"This band of martyrs prayerfully surveying,
Our Order claimeth (joyfully not sadly!)
John, a good Pastor, for his sheepfold laying
Down his life gladly."³

Surely, this Dominican priest and martyr was a true represen-

³ Byrnes, Aquinas, O.P. *The Hymns of the Dominican Missal and Breviary*, St. Louis, Herder and Co., 1943.

tation of the *pastor bonus*, the good pastor, the good shepherd Our Lord tells us of in the tenth chapter of St. John's Gospel: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again."

We have in St. John of Cologne a model and patron for the Dominican, and, indeed, for every parish priest. For this shepherd of the Lord, the parish priest, has to be:

"the sharer of secrets, the carrier of burdens, the fountain of consolation and the pillar of strength. Solitary, he is called father by thousands; poor, he enriches the lives of thousands; weak, he gives strength to thousands; unimportant, he does things each day whose importance cannot be told in any tongue on earth. He is never too busy to hear another's sorrows; often too busy to realize his own burdens. He is a twenty-four-hour-a-day-man. He is called from his dinner; wakened from his sleep; disturbed at his prayers. He is at the beck and call of any of his people. He is the target of God's enemies, the magnet of God's needy. Occasionally, he attracts attention; but, usually, he works unnoticed and unacclaimed while he does the noblest work on earth—keeps Christ in the lives of his people."⁴

Such a life was lived by St. John of Cologne many years ago and those who seek to lead it today can claim no more powerful and understanding a patron than this saintly Dominican!

Saint John of Cologne,
Honor of the Dominican Family,
Splendor of Parish Priests,
Pray for Us!

⁴ *The Guidepost*, C. U. Conference of Clerics and Religious, C.S.M.C., Washington, D. C., 1953, p. 2.

No effort must be spared to put an end to error, but we must also with all our power love our erring brethren and call them back to salvation by unsparing charity. How many good deeds, how many marvellous works, men outstanding for their holiness were able to accomplish through their kindness of heart—and this in circumstances and among classes of men where practically all was deceit and vice!

Menti nostrae, PIUS XII