

THE 'SILENT' SUMMER OF 1944

Carthusian monks in Italy opened their doors, saving many from death camps; their reward: martyrdom



Charterhouse of the Transfiguration
2019

CARTHUSIAN BOOKLETS SERIES, N° 10

First published, 2006

Photo **front cover**: *Christ and the Carthusians of Pavia* (Italy),
by Ambrosio da Fossano, 1450-1523.

All other photos: Charterhouse of Farneta.

THE SILENT SUMMER OF 1944

Carthusian monks in Italy opened their doors, saving many from death camps; their reward: martyrdom

L'Osservatore Romano, English Weekly Edition
February 2, 2005, p. 4-5

BY GIUSEPPINA SCIASCIA

†

August 1944. Within the walls of the Charterhouse of Farneta, Italy (near Lucca), more than 100 refugees had found a hiding-place from the SS military troops. In Lucca, the troops of the 16th *Panzer*grenadier-Division were closing off the streets and mopping up the territory, arresting and sending off men and women to concentration camps in Germany.

As a result, many came knocking at the Carthusian Charterhouse monastery door in search of a hideout until the Americans would finally arrive; the time was getting closer and liberation from the Nazi-fascist regime seemed to be right around the corner.

But group executions and the horrors of concentration camps were everyday realities.

IF IT WERE JESUS KNOCKING?

Still today, Carthusians are bound by the age-old rule of enclosure, and guests are forbidden in the monastery. Although this rule was well-known throughout Lucca, the pilgrimage of desperate townspeople in search of help was insistent.

One evening the Prior, Dom Martino Binz, together with Dom Gabriele Costa, Procurator, and Dom Pio Egger, Novice Master, consulted one another.

“If it were Jesus himself knocking at the door, what would we tell him?”, the Prior asked. “Would we have the courage to send him off to die?”

They decided to open the door.



The Carthusians were violating the age-old rule of enclosure in order to save human lives. In the cells, but also in the service areas and attics, persecuted Jews and Italians could be found, sons together with fathers.

Vincenzo Rizzo, 18, was among them, with his father Vito, a police officer of Lucca who had helped Jewish families escape the racial arrests. In August 1944, when Vito understood that his life was at stake, he knocked at the Charterhouse door, his son with him. The monks gave them a hermitage in which to live.

Carthusian monastic life seemed out of sync with the world: found in each stone hermitage was a wood-turning lathe and each monk had his own little garden within the confines, entrusted to his care. The monk lived each day in prayer, study and work.

The Carthusian Rule of silence still exists today and is interrupted only on feast days and for brief periods of time. The founder of the Carthusians, St. Bruno, discovered the secret of contemplative life centuries ago: God is found in silence, God *is* silence, revealed in contemplation. In a recollected heart, it is he who speaks, revealing to cloistered souls the greatest mystery of love.



INVASION OF THE SS

Every evening, before midnight, the Carthusians would leave their cells and, dressed in their long white habits, would enter the conventual church dedicated to the Holy Spirit. Here, standing upright in the choir stalls, they would sing matins.

And so it was on the night of 1 September 1944, when the monks, immersed in Gregorian chant, were taken by surprise by the German SS. They entered the Charterhouse by trickery: the Sergeant, Edward Frolin, well-known by the monks and a man who had received help from them on more than one occasion, knocked at the door and told the porter he had a package for the Prior from his commander, since the German division was on its way out of Lucca.

When the monk opened the door, at least twenty German soldiers burst in with automatic machine guns, storming the chapel and taking over the rest of the Charterhouse. They forced Dom Costa to accompany them. When he knocked at the door of the cell of Vito Rizzo, he announced: "I am Father Procurator. Open the door, the Germans are here!"

The SS completely occupied the Charterhouse. Only a handful of refugees were able to escape into the fields, while the captured were lined up against the outside wall of the monastery at gunpoint.

A few hours later they were forced to climb aboard covered trucks, headed for Nocchi, near Camaiore, and were taken to an abandoned warehouse, where Nazi cruelty was at its worst.

HEROISM OF THE MONKS

On 29 September 2004, 60 years after the terrible massacre, a trial was held in La Spezia, Italy; here, Vincenzo Rizzo, now eighty-seven and a fortunate escapee of the slaughter, testified to all the events in the Charterhouse and then at Nocchi. He recalled the heroism of the Carthusians who were tortured by those SS who sneered at their faith.

Brother Gabriele, for example, had a burning flame repeatedly held up to his beard. The monk courageously faced the pain wordlessly and calmly looked at his torturer, who finally gave up, confused by such behavior.

Dom Giovanni Abetini was forced to balance his Breviary on a board held between his outstretched arms. During all this, the soldiers beat him with a rod and made him do knee-bends; when the prayer book fell to the ground, he was punched and insulted. Then, he was

forced to hold the book between his teeth and to do balancing acts. Through it all, Dom Giovanni had a smile on his face, showing neither fear nor resentment.

“The Carthusians never showed fear in the face of threats and torture; they remained in peace, in silence. Never, even when the alternative to torture was to renounce their faith, did they hesitate,” Vincenzo Rizzo told the tribunal.

Dom Pio Egger, a Swiss native, was thirty-nine years old. The days of his imprisonment were illuminated by his fervent faith. Convinced that his end was near, he would climb on a barrel and peer out of a little window, looking over the premises where the other prisoners were kept.

Through the mesh wire, he would call out to them: “Be strong, what are you waiting for? We must prepare ourselves! Don’t you know what awaits us?” He had a comforting word for everyone. With a strong and serene voice he encouraged those who had lost hope; to fearful prisoners forced to “assist” in the “torture sessions”, he spoke of what would come after, of that eternal happiness the King of Martyrs promised to all who were persecuted in his Name.

In the end, Dom Pio was also a martyr, shot to death in the Nocchi forest in the beginning of September; the Prior and Procurator were put to the same death.

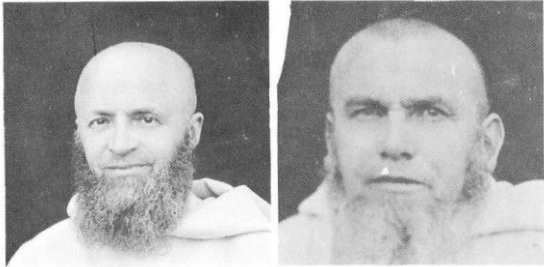
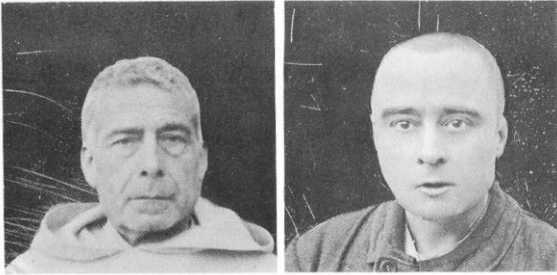
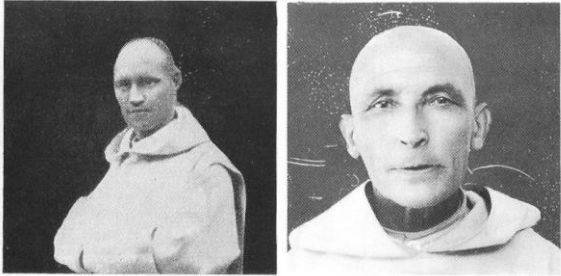
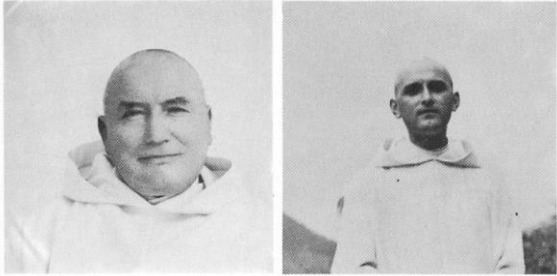
Twelve Carthusians were martyred during this Nazi horror. Among them was Father Bernardo Montes de Oca, former Bishop of Valencia, Venezuela, who had entered the Carthusian Order; he was a novice when he was killed.

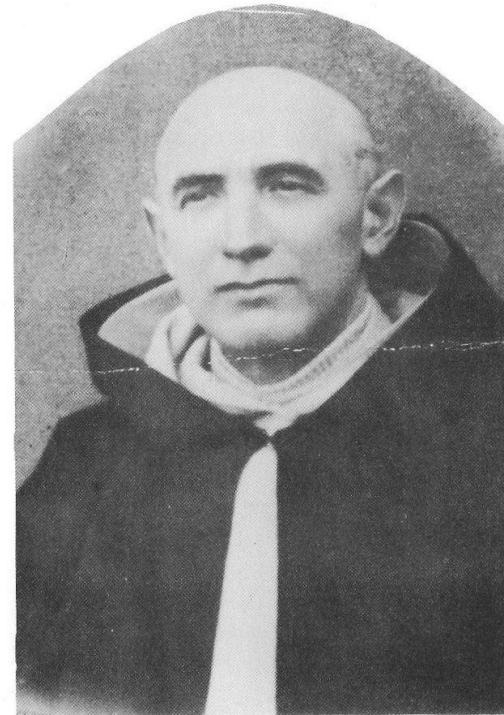
Edward Frolin died in Germany during the trial; he was ninety-four years old. The number of victims of the massacre of 1944 was no less than sixty.

The martyred monks responded to their executioners with silence, like Jesus in front of Herod: the Master kept silent and continued on toward Golgotha, towards the Cross.

It was also this way for the Carthusians, martyred without “dignity” and deprived even of their white habits.

NINE OF THE TWELVE CARTHUSIANS MARTYRED AT FARNETA





Preceding page (from top to bottom and left to right):

Dom Martino Binz, Prior and Dom Gabriele Costa, Procurator

Dom Pio M. Egger, Novice master and Dom Benedetto Lapuente,
Sacristan

Brother Michele Nota and Brother Giorgio Maritano

Brother Bruno D'Amico and Brother Raffaele Cantero

This page:

Father Bernardo Montes de Oca, former Bishop of Valencia, Vene-
zuela (novice)



Although buried at the time in unmarked ditches, their bodies were finally exhumed and identified, and the monks now rest in peace within the confines of the cloister cemetery.



Editor's Notes

The Carthusians call their priest-monks 'father' or 'Dom' and their lay monks 'brother'. 'Dom' is an abbreviation of the Latin *Dominus*, meaning 'Lord'.

Today a memorial stone at the entrance of the monastery, unveiled in the presence of the Italian Prime Minister on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the event, bears witness to the tragedy. The marble stone has the following inscription: *"Forty years after the Liberation the Association of the Resistance Fighters in Lucchesia and the Municipal Authorities of Lucca remember the martyrdom of six Carthusian fathers, six Carthusian brothers and thirty-two civilians in September of 1944. Nazi savagery imposed the same death both on the monks and on those who at the darkest hour had found brotherly hospitality in these sacred precincts. The presence of the Prime Minister at the inauguration of this memorial stone ensures the entry into the history of the Italian people of the witness of these victims. Charterhouse of Farneta, January 20, 1985."*



— CARTHUSIAN BOOKLETS SERIES —

1. *Two Letters and the Profession of Faith*, by Saint Bruno.
2. *Silence and Solitude: Two Essays on the 900th Anniversary of Saint Bruno's Death*, by Cori Fugere Urban and Philip F. Lawler.
3. *Architecture of Contemplation*, by Robert H. Mutrux.
4. *Carthusian Life and Its Inner Spirit*. Reflections of a Former Retreatant.
5. *Contemplatives in the Heart of the Church: The Solemn Teaching of Pope Pius XI on the Apostolic Value of Carthusian Life*.
6. *The Solitary Life*. A Letter of Guigo, Fifth Prior of the Grande Chartreuse. Introduced and Translated from the Latin by Thomas Merton.
7. *Captivated by Him Who Is Only Love*. Message of Pope John Paul II for the Ninth Centenary of Saint Bruno's Death, to Reverend Father Marcellin Theeuwes, Prior of Chartreuse, Superior General of the Carthusian Order, and to All Members of the Carthusian Family.
8. *Carthusian Saints*, by a Carthusian Monk.
9. *Saint Bruno as Seen by His Contemporaries: A Selection of Contributions to the Funeral Parchment*. Translated by a Carthusian Monk.
10. *The 'Silent' Summer of 1944: The Martyrdom of Carthusians Who Hid Refugees from the SS Military Troops*, by Giuseppina Sciascia (L'Osservatore Romano).
11. *Carthusian Nuns*, by the Nuns of the Charterhouse of Notre Dame, France.
12. *The Silent Life of the Carthusians: A Modern Version of the Classic Text*, by Thomas Merton.
13. *The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration: Two Historical Essays*: Professor Kent Emery, Jr. and *Analecta Cartusiana*. With a Picture History.

14. *Saint Bruno, Pilgrim of the Absolute: Carthusians Reflect on Their Father and Their Life: 1.* La Grande Chartreuse and Serra San Bruno.
15. *Saint Bruno, Pilgrim of the Absolute: Carthusians Reflect on Their Father and Their Life: 2.* The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration.
16. *Saint Bruno, Pilgrim of the Absolute: Carthusians Reflect on Their Father and Their Life: 3.* The Houses of the Nuns: Nonenque, Benifaça, and Notre Dame.
17. *Saint Bruno, Pilgrim of the Absolute: Carthusians Reflect on Their Father and Their Life: 4.* The Houses of the Nuns: Trinità, Vedana, and the Annunciation.
18. *God Alone Is the Source of True Peace.* Pope John Paul II's Visit to the Town and Charterhouse of Serra San Bruno, Calabria, Italy, October 5, 1984.
19. *The Beauty of Nature Opens up to the Graciousness of God.* The Dedication of the Saint Bruno Scenic Viewing Center atop Mount Equinox, September 8, 2012 - *Homily and Addresses.*
20. *A True Link between Heaven and Earth.* The Dedication of the Saint Bruno Scenic Viewing Center atop Mount Equinox, September 8, 2012 - *Vermont Catholic* and *Burlington Free Press* Articles.
21. *A Beacon of Constant Prayer.* The Dedication of the Saint Bruno Scenic Viewing Center atop Mount Equinox, September 8, 2012 - *Reflections and Thoughts.*
22. *The Plenitude of Eucharistic Love.* The Letter of Pope Paul VI to the Minister General of the Carthusian Order, 1971.
23. *A Dwelling Place Worthy of God.* Saint Bruno and Saint Hugh, Bishop of Grenoble, Founder and Co-Founder of the Carthusian Order.
24. *Finding the Essential in Silence.* Pope Benedict XVI's Visit to the Town and Charterhouse of Serra San Bruno, Calabria, Italy, October 9, 2011.

25. *The Fire of Divine Charity*. Spiritual Letters of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and Saint Catherine of Siena to Carthusian Monks.
26. *I Come to Express to Your Community the Esteem and Encouragement of the Holy See*. Two Episcopal Addresses to Carthusian Monks.
27. *The Cross Stands while the World Turns*. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Sermon to Commemorate the Carthusian Martyrs, at Charterhouse, London, May 4, 2010.
28. *Saint Bruno*, by Dom André Louf, O.C.S.O.
29. *Personal Prayer*, by Reverend Father Dom André Poisson:
 1. *At the Threshold of Prayer*.
30. *Personal Prayer*, by Reverend Father Dom André Poisson:
 2. *Prayer in Solitude*.
31. *Personal Prayer*, by Reverend Father Dom André Poisson:
 3. *Prayer and Communion*.
32. *He Had to Renounce a Great Human Love for a Greater Love*. Memories of Our Former Prior Dom Raphael Diamond, Written by His Friend Dr. Alice von Hildebrand.
33. *The Life of Christ Rosary, also Known as the Carthusian Rosary*. Attributed to Dominic of Prussia. 2nd edition. Compiled and Introduced by Daniel Frattarelli.
34. *Saint Bruno's Own Words*. Sermons by Reverend Father Dom André Poisson for the 9th Centenary of Saint Bruno's Arrival at Chartreuse, Given at La Grande Chartreuse, 1983-1984: 1. Sermons I-V (1983).
35. *Saint Bruno's Own Words*. Sermons by Reverend Father Dom André Poisson for the 9th Centenary of Saint Bruno's Arrival at Chartreuse, Given at La Grande Chartreuse, 1983-1984: 2. Sermons VI-X (1984).
36. *The Prayer of the Heart*, by Reverend Father Dom André Poisson.
37. *The Interior Life*, by a Carthusian Monk.

38. *Like a Voice Crying Out in the Desert: The Meeting at la Grande Chartreuse*, by His Eminence Robert Cardinal Sarah and Reverend Father Dom Dysmas de Lassus, with Nicolas Diat.
39. *Contemplatives and the Crisis of Faith*, Message by a Group of Contemplatives to the Synod of Bishops of 1967.
40. *Driving to the Sky: A Visit to Mount Equinox Offers History, Panorama, Gifts and Solitude*, by Telly Halkias, Independent Journalist, 2018.
41. *Praying for the World: The Monastery Above Manchester Village*, by Anita Rafael, in *Stratton Magazine*, Holiday 2017, pp. 100-105.

To order any of these booklets or other Carthusian items, please contact the gift shop (please, not the monastery) at: 1A St. Bruno Drive, Arlington, Vermont 05250. Email: stbrunogiftshop@comcast.net
Phone: 802-362-1114 Fax: 802-362-3346 Website address: equinoxmountain.com



Charterhouse of the Transfiguration
Carthusian Monastery
1084 Ave Maria Way
Arlington, Vermont 05250
Fax: 802-362-3584
E-Mail: carthusians_in_america@chartreuse.info
<http://transfiguration.chartreux.org>



CARTHUSIAN EMBLEM

— 13th CENTURY —

A GLOBE SURMOUNTED BY THE CROSS
WITH SEVEN STARS SYMBOLIZING SAINT BRUNO
AND HIS FIRST FOLLOWERS

THE LATIN MOTTO RUNS AS FOLLOWS
"STAT CRUX DUM VOLVITUR ORBIS"
WHICH MEANS
"THE CROSS STANDS FIRM, WHILE THE WORLD TURNS"

