

The Beast of Dachau

The forward thrust of this assignment is the infinitely powerful cause and prompt effect of a sincere devotion to the Precious Blood of Jesus. I hope to accomplish this by employing the simple method of the greatest storyteller of all time, namely, Jesus, the simple carpenter from Nazareth.

Because I was woefully lacking in points, the army offered to send me to the states immediately after V.J. Day for 45 days, provided that I would agree to return to Japan for further occupational duty. I agreed in writing to this arrangement.

After 45 days of vacation in the states, I found myself clinging to the rail of a transport ship destined not for Japan but for Europe. When I arrived, I found Western Europe not only devastated but pulverized. The sight was ghastly and grim. In retrospect, insanely wasteful and dreadfully sad. For me, this duty still had another aspect: it was the coldest winter in Heidelberg in 50 years.

Malaria, amoebic dysentery, and battle fatigue became my constant and persistent companions. Time and again I appealed to return stateside to recuperate only to find myself holding on to yet another rail, not for the United States but to some ten different countries on what was called a recuperation basis.

Chaplain Medeaux was the area chaplain. He finally released me after I agreed to conduct 28 missions at all our military installations. It was after a series of missions that I returned to home base, Frankfurt, for a few days' rest. Six Catholic chaplains lived in one house. I had not even closed the front door when Fr. Rush, the base chaplain, told me to report to headquarters promptly at 0900 the next morning.

The next morning I stood at the colonel's door. He looked up from his paper and said, "Father, sit down." When he finally finished the work at hand, he looked at me and spoke almost apologetically. "Father, we are sending you on a top secret mission. Only you and I, and a few men on my staff know where you will go and what you will do. The mission is so secret that if even the slightest part is leaked, we will know it came from you." I told him I had ample experience in keeping the seal of confession. For the first time he smiled and said, "You are right, Father, I got the right man."

The next morning I stood at attention in the colonel's office. He called in my driver and showed him the map of where he would be taking me. After the driver left, the colonel gave me further instructions. "After some 30 to 40 miles you will be stopped, your driver and jeep will be confiscated, and you will be transferred to a command car. From there you will take orders from the command car."

All this and more actually happened. I was not only transferred to the command car, I was frisked and my Mass kit was searched. I was no longer allowed to speak with my driver. After driving still another 30 or 40 miles I saw in the distance a tremendous complex on the outskirts of a forest. I suspected it was a prison camp. When we neared the camp, the huge iron gates swung open and I was suddenly caught in the jaws of what might be described as a dark hole.

Sandwiched between two guards, we were led by a sergeant to a large room. I was told to set up my Mass kit. As I set up for Mass, one prisoner came in. I protested strongly, saying that I had 9000 soldiers back in Frankfurt and had promised Fr. Rush that I would have 6:00 Mass for them. The sergeant told me he would see what he could do. One more prisoner came and when I repeated my protest to the sergeant, he took me to the far end of the room and whispered. "Father, the prisoners here are of such a dangerous nature that they will never permit more than two in the same room at the same time."

After Mass with these two prisoners, I looked at my watch hoping I could still make Frankfurt in time for the 6:00 Mass. But the sergeant approached me and said, "Father, we have 17 prisoners who demand to see a Catholic chaplain. I will lead you from cell to cell." I no longer protested and simply followed him.

The prisoners were of all nationalities and religious convictions. Language was a barrier. Long after I should have been in Frankfurt, I took a deep sigh of relief. The ordeal, I thought, was over. But once more the sergeant approached me and said, "Now, Father, we have one more prisoner to see. For three days and nights she has screamed hysterically to see a Catholic priest. She is not Catholic but insisted on her Geneva rights to see you."

Since the sergeant had described this prisoner as "she", I asked him as he led me to her cell. "This would not be the 'beast' of Dachau, would it? The sergeant simply nodded and before I could protest, we were at her cell. The guards physically pushed me into the cell and closed the door behind me. When I looked around to see what protection I had, I saw two bayonets sticking through the peep hole. One guard comforted me by saying, "Father, don't worry. We will protect you."

In front of me, stretched out on a concrete floor, lay this terrible creature in utter, unbelievable despair. Without so much as raising her head, she demanded in a low, guttural voice, "You are a Catholic priest?"

"I am."

"Prove it." Her German was excellent.

"What precisely do you want me to say to prove that I am a Catholic priest?"

"Say the Ave in Latin," she said. I did.

"Now say the confiteor in Latin." Every altar boy knows that this is, of all the prayers, the most difficult. But I said it to her satisfaction.

Then she put me in a real bind. "Now give me the words of absolution in Latin," she said. I hesitated for a minute but obliged her even with my reservations.

Now raising her head slightly, she literally trounced on me. She cursed me, ridiculed me, scoffed at me, and denounced me in the most correct German but in the most terrible language. Over and over she screamed, I am damned! I am damned! My father cursed me, my mother cursed me, every innocent prisoner I led to his death cursed me! Yes, the prisoners I slowly tortured to death cursed me a thousand times over!" Staring at me with a diabolical look, she said, "What makes you foolish enough to think that you can forgive my sins when not even God has the power to forgive me?"

When I was near total exhaustion from this tirade, she forcefully thrust her hands into my face and screamed, "You damn fool! Can't you see the blood of thousands of innocent prisoners dripping from my hands? I am cursed! I am damned forever!"

I now took the lead. "Olga (not her real name), I cannot see the blood of a thousand prisoners dripping from your hands, but I can see the Precious Blood of Jesus dripping from the cross. I do not condone your terrible sins --many as the sands of the seashore and red and scarlet. My memories of Dachau are deeply imprinted. I was there only a week ago. Yes, I saw the shelves and shelves of souvenirs made out of the skins of prisoners. I saw your ghastly work. I saw the

crematories, the underground rooms full to the ceiling with urns containing the ashes of dead prisoners. Even more horrible, I saw the kennels where you detained and starved dogs and then stood by the gate and watched the hungry dogs tear dozens of prisoners to pieces. I saw the grave that contained some 30,000 of the noble dead. I saw all that and much more.

"But I remind you that your greatest sin is the arrogance, your diabolical pride, your terrible boast that God does not have the power to undo what Olga has done -- forgive her sins. You want to go down in history for all to see and know that Olga did something that God cannot undo and therefore Olga is more powerful than God. I repeat, your sins are horrible but the most heinous is your pride, your arrogance, your boast, your despair!

"Yes, you see the blood of a thousand innocent prisoners dripping from your hands, then why not see the Precious Blood of Jesus dripping from the cross? The blood of Jesus redeemed all mankind. If the Precious Blood of Jesus could redeem the sins of all the world, how dare you say, how dare you boast, that it is not powerful enough to cleanse the sins of one individual!

"I now challenge you, like the good thief, repent! And like him, you may see the kingdom of God, if not today then certainly in the future. Acknowledge your crimes humbly and sorrowfully and learn that God is infinitely merciful and forgiving. Weep for your sins and like Peter you will say, 'Not by worthless silver and gold but by the Precious Blood of Christ you were redeemed.' "

Most unexpectedly, Olga collapsed. She broke into uncontrollable sobbing that seemed to shake even the concrete floor of her cell. Over and over she pleaded, "Herr Pater, bitte über-setzen, über setzen." ("Please repeat, repeat, translate again.") And finally she exclaimed, "It is true, yes, it is true. God is infinitely powerful and infinitely merciful." Slowing she scuffled back to her cot on her knees. I watched her and even wept with her. I so completely and gratefully agreed with her. After awhile, I left.

Before leaving the complex, I asked the sergeant to take me back to her cell. I looked through the peep hole and there she sat on her cot like a Grecian marble statue. She repeated over and over, "It is true, God is merciful and infinitely powerful." A second time I left her -- never to see her again.

The trip back to Frankfurt was long and I had ample time to think. And the thought that remains with me even today is what human cleverness or worldly wisdom cannot accomplish, the Precious Blood of Jesus can. For certainly it was the Precious Blood that produced this miraculous effect -- the conversion of Olga.

(Fr. Kilian Dreiling, C.PP.S., "The Power of the Precious Blood," The New Wine Press, Vol. 2, Issue 9, April 25, 1993.)