

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Deacon Ordained at Dachau

Once I preached a homily on the “Priesterblock,” the section of the Dachau concentration camp where priests were kept in isolation during World War II. Dozens of men were imprisoned there, kept apart from others, for one explicit purpose: The Nazis didn’t want the clergy to give the people hope. Out of that experience, and a desire to better serve the needs of a war-ravaged world, came the seeds of the modern deaconate.

But what many people may not know is that one of the men imprisoned there was a deacon. More remarkably, during his time there he was secretly ordained a priest—to my knowledge, the only such ordination. His name was Karl Leisner.

According to Wikipedia, he studied theology in Münster, where he founded illegal youth groups to resist the Nazis. With these groups he travelled to the Benelux countries to have camps outside of Nazi control. He was named official diocesan youth leader by Bishop Clemens August von Galen.

When forced to become a worker under the Third Reich, he organized Masses for himself and the other workers. His home and papers were searched by the Gestapo. On March 25, 1939, Galen ordained him deacon.

Then, on November 9 of that same year, due to his criticism of Adolf Hitler, Leisner was arrested by the Gestapo while on a vacation in St. Blasien for his health. He was imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp initially, but was moved to the Dachau concentration camp on December 14, 1941. (Most Catholic prisoners were kept in that camp.)

What the Wikipedia entry leaves out is his frail health. Leisner was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and in Dachau his condition began to deteriorate.

Fearing that the great dream of his life—to be a priest—would never be realized, he and the priests in his cell block secretly sent a petition to a local cardinal (aided here, and in so many areas, by a nun known as the “Angle of Dachau,” Sister Imma Mack.)

The cardinal granted permission for a French bishop detained in the camp to perform the ordination, and had Sister Imma deliver a ritual book and chrism needed for the rite. Sister Imma was to return these items, along with written documentation of the ordination, if they were able to celebrate it.

A number of prisoners, including a couple of non-Catholics who worked in different work areas of the camp, made full sets of vestments for the bishop and Deacon Leisner. The ordination was celebrated in 1944 in secret, and the documentation was smuggled to Sister Imma who delivered it all to the cardinal. But Fr. Leisner’s health was so weak, he was only able to celebrate Mass, secretly, once. Shortly after the camp was liberated, he was sent to a hospital for the terminally ill, where he died in 1945. He was 30 years old.

In 1996, Pope John Paul II declared Karl Leisner a martyr for the faith and beatified him. His feast day is August 12, the date of his death. Blessed Karl Leisner’s remains rest in the crypt of the Xanten Cathedral in Germany.

As we remember all our faithful departed this month of November—and pause to give thanks for God’s blessings—I can’t help but think we need to remember and be thankful for extraordinary men like Karl Leisner.

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