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Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**D**URING the German occupation, the residents of Rue Lhomond in Paris' 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement noticed a black silhouette that, several times a week from 1941-1944, would glide on his bicycle through the deserted streets of the capital, a saddlebag full to bursting firmly fixed to the carrier. After riding fifteen kilometers, the cyclist would arrive at Fresnes Prison, the largest in the Paris region, its 1,500 cells crowded with 5,000 prisoners taken by the Germans. Each time, he had to cross the guardroom, often enduring the jeers of the S.S., always careful to avoid drawing attention to the famous saddlebag, filled with an eclectic assortment of objects : books, clothing, bread, chocolate, toothbrushes, paper, pens, and many other things. This cyclist in a cassock was Father Franz Stock, a German chaplain assigned to visit prisons. He was the guardian angel for about 11,000 French prisoners.

Franz Stock was born on September 21, 1904, in Neheim, Westphalia (west-central Germany), the eldest of nine children. His father was a factory worker in this industrial region of the Ruhr. For Franz, his love for his native land and for the Church were one. At the age of twelve, he revealed his desire to become a priest. The tragedy of the First World War and the influence of a Catholic association, "Quickborn," that Franz belonged to, produced in him a great love of peace. It was in this spirit that he studied the encyclical by Pope Benedict XV, "On the Peace of God" (1920). He dreamed of a reconciliation between France and Germany based on their common Christian heritage. In August 1926, already a seminarian, he went with eight hundred Germans to the International Peace Congress in Bierville, in the Ile-de-France. There he heard Bishop Julien, the bishop of Arras (a city in a region very hard hit by the recent war), propose the ideal which would be Franz' for his entire life : "Not to eliminate borders but to collaborate across them, without leveling the differences. To learn to know one another in order to learn to love one another. To avoid the horror of war, while admiring the courage of the soldiers who sacrificed themselves to defend their country and their homes."

### ***Ministry in Paris***

In 1928, after two years as a seminarian in Paderborn, Franz received permission to pursue his theological studies at the Catholic Institute of Paris. He was enthusiastic about the quality of instruction he received there, and was delighted to stay at the Carmelite seminary, sanctified by the martyrdom of so many priests in September 1792. Yet Franz was misunderstood by some of the French priests who had fought in the war. Although somewhat hurt by this at first, his perfect tact found the difficult path to mutual forgiveness. After

returning to Germany, Franz organized annual pilgrimages and trips to France. On March 12, 1932, he was ordained a priest in Paderborn and made vicar of Dortmund-Eving, in the Ruhr. After Hitler came to power, Father Stock gladly accepted the offer made to him by Cardinal Verdier, archbishop of Paris and his former superior at the Carmelite seminary, to become the pastor of the German Catholic parish in Paris. On arrival, in September 1934, he wrote to his family : "This will not be very easy, but we will begin by placing our trust in God. Thus we will reach our goal." The building he moved into, on 21-23 Lhomond, in the Latin Quarter, contained a chapel that Franz, a very good painter, decorated himself with frescoes.

However, Father Stock's situation in Paris quickly became uncomfortable. The German authorities reproached him for his lack of enthusiasm for the Nazi regime ; at the same time, a French daily published a calumnious article insinuating that he was working for the Gestapo by informing against émigrés. The truth was entirely different : Franz was financially supporting German fugitives, including some Jews. Rowing against the current, he organized a Franco-German High Mass for peace, celebrated in March 1937 by Cardinal Verdier, in the presence of the Catholic ambassador von Welczek. A worker for peace, Father Stock was nevertheless not a "citizen of the world," indifferent to his homeland. He encouraged, among the souls in his care, love for their German homeland and its culture and the use of their mother tongue, while at the same time having them know and love France.

On August 26, 1939, the outbreak of the war forced Franz to leave France suddenly. But in autumn 1940, equipped with a canonical mission from the Archbishop of Cologne, he moved back to occupied Paris as the Rector of the German Mission. Before the apparent vic-

tory of the Third Reich, he remained clear-sighted and confided to those close to him that, in his opinion, “ the swastika flags flying from the Arc de Triomphe will one day be taken down.” As for him, all he wanted was to be a priest and maintain respect and esteem for the humiliated French.

In November 1940, Father Stock accepted the position of chaplain for Fresnes Prison. From April 1941 on, he also visited the two other prisons requisitioned by the Germans in Paris : Cherche-Midi and La Santé. This ministry would soon become most of his life. The German command did not want a French priest for this ministry ; therefore, Father Stock was the best choice, with his perfect knowledge of the language. In fact, he would be virtually alone taking care of thousands of prisoners. He refused to wear a uniform (which would nevertheless have made his role easier with the troops ), understanding that a priest dressed as a soldier would lose all credibility with the prisoners. His diary, found after his death, allows us to follow his activity. He scrupulously put down in writing all he did to minister to the prisoners and all the information he was able to convey, so as to bring some consolation to their families.

### ***The only friend***

As a German, Father Stock was often initially poorly received by prisoners. They saw him as an agent of the enemy, and even wondered if he were a false priest sent by the Gestapo to extract confessions. Some treated him as a puppet of the Nazis. This impression was quickly erased in most cases, thanks to his exquisite charity. Moreover, the favors he did for the prisoners proved that Franz was not playing a double game. At the risk of his life, he continually broke the rule of the “ triple punishment ” that hung over many of the prisoners : no contact with families, no mail or reading materials, no packages. In so doing he thwarted the Gestapo, which was trying to destroy the prisoners’ power to resist. He got books for them, especially religious books. He consoled them and cared for their moral and, when he could, physical wounds. Chocolate, very rare during the war, was the most valued commodity, and Father Stock passed out dozens of kilos of it. He passed messages back and forth between the prisoners and their families. For the Jewish prisoners, he got around discriminatory regulations. The chaplain was often the only friend in this hostile universe.

Franz Stock had picked out the jailers who were Catholic, or simply of good will, and got their help : for example, to organize a party. One of them, Sergeant Ghel, devoted body and soul to the chaplain, would be betrayed and eventually killed by the Gestapo. Many prisoners were sent to concentration camps after their trials. But many left the prison only for their executions. For these, Father Stock fulfilled the most sacred of

duties—helping them die a Christian death. The first prisoner he prepared for death was Jacques Bonsergent, an engineer shot “ as an example ” in December 1940, because he had covered up an insignificant act of resistance. The chaplain stayed with him until the end and returned shattered. He never got used to these grim ceremonies, which nevertheless were repeated several times a week for three and a half years.

### ***“God is stretching out His arms to me”***

A ship captain and father of five children, Honoré d’Estienne d’Orves was secretly an officer of the Resistance. Betrayed by his radio officer, he was arrested in January 1941. In prison he thought about God and eternity. Each week Father Stock took him Communion and had him read the *Story of a Soul* by Saint Therese of Lisieux. In May 1941, Estienne d’Orves was sentenced to death. Father Stock witnessed his spiritual ascent. He told him on August 28<sup>th</sup> that he would be shot the next day with two others. Estienne d’Orves thanked him in an affectionate letter, in which he related his last wishes : “ I ask the Good Lord to give France and Germany a just peace, in keeping with the greatness of my country ; and also that our governments might give God the place that rightly belongs to Him.” The three condemned men fervently attended one last Mass and forgave their executioners. The chaplain took care that the prisoners receive the Sacraments with pure hearts, from which all hatred of their persecutors had been banished. On August 8, 1943, he assisted Eric, an eighteen-year-old youth. In a note to his mother, the prisoner wrote, “ I just saw the priest. See him after my death. He will tell you about me and my last moments ... God is waiting for me with outstretched arms. I am entering eternal Life and the infinite Love of God. Forgive with all your heart all those who are responsible for my death. God will be the judge... I have just received Communion. Goodbye.”

But other captives, often prisoners of atheism as well as of the Wehrmacht, refused all religious assistance. On April 13, 1942, Father Stock, his heart broken, noted in his journal, after an execution : “ No one wanted spiritual aid. All died without faith.” Trusting in the power of grace, the priest had celebrated Mass even for them, in a neighboring cell occupied by a Catholic prisoner. Albert P. was to be executed on March 16, 1942. An atheist, he refused the sacraments, but allowed the chaplain to accompany him. On the way, Franz prayed ardently for his conversion and invited him to think about his eternal destiny. Again a refusal. But, at the last moment, Albert called the priest and asked for a crucifix. The chaplain was able to note : “ He recited the act of contrition with me, showing great repentance. I gave him absolution.”

Roger L., 28 years old, was baptized the day of his execution. The journal mentions, "He had lost all courage. With my help, he regained confidence... He made his first Communion with a moving gravity... His last words at the moment of his death were 'Lord, have mercy on me.'" Most of the executions took place at Mont-Valérien, a former fortress west of Paris. Sometimes, Father Stock spent the last night with the condemned. At this ultimate moment, the priest was the only friendly, brotherly, Christian presence. Franz promised those who were to be shot that he would pray for them at their final moment, but he also asked them to pray for him, and for all, when they were "on the other side." In October 1945, he wrote, "I have been faithful, I believe, to those whose chaplain I was for four years... If I want a special grace, a spiritual illumination, I ask those who knew how to die, who went straight to God after so many sufferings and a beautiful interior preparation, and whom I was able to accompany on their final path. I am convinced that their prayer will be heard... the departed do not forget us."

### **"God exists!"**

Hitler decided that random attacks against German soldiers would be retaliated for by executing hostages. Father Stock often intervened to save a prisoner who had been put on the list of hostages to be shot. One day, he struggled the entire day to reach Berlin on the telephone. In the end, he saved the life of a prisoner, who fell into his arms shouting: "God exists!" Another time, a prisoner already en route to Mont-Valérien was pardoned *in extremis* through the priest's intervention. The chaplain had pointed out that the prisoner's brother had already been executed.

Franz Stock welcomed families into his home on Rue Lhomond with the greatest discretion. When he could, he gave the closest relatives a souvenir of the deceased. The conversations with the mothers and spouses were sometimes more painful for him than the execution itself. An eyewitness commented, "I think Father Stock demonstrated great courage, great compassion, great love." The chaplain managed, along with Bishop Rodhain, the founder of Secours Catholique, to start an aid society to support the neediest families of those who had been executed.

Father Stock's journal registers 863 executions from January 28, 1942 on, of which he attended 701. In all, he aided 1,300 to 1,500 people in their final moments. In December 1941, he wrote, "This week alone, I prepared seventy-two men for death, assisted them at the final moment and buried them." In 1943, a priest friend heard him murmur, "I wonder sometimes if I will be able to continue... If only I could sleep..." An examination of his heart revealed an alarming weakness. The poet Reinhold Schneider wrote, after meeting

Father Stock in 1943: "He was presented with a suffering that he could only endure strengthened by the Blessed Sacrament."

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI says to priests: "Priestly spirituality is intrinsically Eucharistic. ... In order to give an ever greater Eucharistic form to his existence, the priest ... should make his spiritual life his highest priority. ... An intense spiritual life will enable him to enter more deeply into communion with the Lord and to let himself be possessed by God's love, bearing witness to that love at all times, even the darkest and most difficult" (February 22, 2007). Every Christian can be inspired by this advice.

### **Prisoner in his turn**

On August 11, 1944, Franz would have been able to still leave Paris as the Allies approached. Yet he decided to stay where he was to look after the six hundred Germans, wounded and unable to travel, grouped together at the Hôpital de la Pitié, as well as the other wounded prisoners of the Germans. By the authority of his presence, he prevented these men from being massacred by civilians. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, after an exhausting week, he was taken prisoner by the Americans. From then on, Father Stock devoted himself to his fellow countrymen imprisoned with him, just as he had with the French prisoners. On September 25, he was transferred to an American prison camp in Normandy. As everything was makeshift, the conditions in the camp were very difficult. Nevertheless, the Catholic chaplaincy was organized around a combination tent-chapel, thanks to the ingenuity of prisoners and the generous assistance of the Trappist monastery of Bricquebec, which offered vestments and sacred vessels. Franz and the other prisoner-priests were everywhere—Masses were offered in different places in the camp, confessions were heard, catechism taught... A priest from Normandy, Father Cadel, had printed 20,000 prayer booklets written by Father Stock, for the prisoners to use. For many of them, Christmas 1944, in spite of the extreme destitution, was wonderfully profound.

In the last months of the war, the French army took charge of more and more of the huge number of German prisoners. General Boisseau, commandant of the camps, decided to bring together the German seminarian-prisoners so that they could continue their studies. A French priest, Father Le Meur, led this operation. He chose Father Stock, who had been his chaplain at Prison de la Santé during his detention for acts of resistance, to be the director of this seminary. On March 20, 1945, Franz accepted. His new duties obliged him to lead the life of a prisoner, even though he would have been able to immediately return to Germany. He wrote,

“Captivity is a painful phase in a man’s life. But, in the struggle with suffering, man recognizes his true destiny when, having reached the limits of his physical strength, he raises his hands and eyes to Heaven. There lies freedom. And this is indeed the deepest meaning of human freedom—to be free from the earthly and give oneself to Him Who is all Grandeur.”

### **More a program than a name**

The “Barbed-Wire Seminary” began on April 30, 1945, in a decrepit bunker in Orleans, amidst enormous difficulties: hunger, overcrowding, and a spirit of vengeance on the part of certain guards. Fortunately, the religious authorities rallied in support of the seminary. Father Stock, authorized to go out accompanied by a soldier, returned each time heavily laden with books, provisions, and so forth. Soon, French religious communities were sending packages to the seminarians, allowing them to continue their intellectual efforts. The following August, the seminary was moved to Coudray, near Chartres. Commandant Gourut welcomed professors and students with these words: “I entrust you to the maternal protection of Our Lady of Chartres.” Soon, the bishop of Chartres, Bishop Harscouët, visited the camp and shook each seminarian’s hand, a courageous gesture given the political atmosphere of the day. 949 seminarians, of whom 630 would become priests, studied at Coudray until May 1947. On September 18, 1945, the apostolic nuncio, Bishop Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, visited the Barbed-Wire Seminary. He met Father Stock and embraced him; for him, “Abbé Franz Stock is not a name, it is a program!” The nuncio would return three times, never empty-handed, and would perform several ordinations at Coudray.

Following a trip to Germany, Franz Stock got the University of Fribourg to recognize the theological studies done in Coudray. During the summer of 1946, the professors still needed arrived from Germany; they too volunteered to go into captivity. Radiant with his inte-

rior life and his charity, Franz Stock nevertheless had to struggle against sadness and the memories that haunted him. Painting was a great help to him: he made a fresco in the Seminary chapel representing the Virgin of Sorrows and Saint John. Several witnesses were convinced that JESUS CHRIST often physically appeared to Father Stock after the consecration during his Mass; Franz sometimes alluded to this in veiled terms. In May-June 1947, the German prisoners were freed, the Seminary was disbanded, and its students went on to pursue their studies in Germany. Father Stock returned to Rue Lhomond in Paris. He hoped to carry out his apostolate with the free German workers, but the civil authorities refused to grant him permission. Tempted by discouragement, Franz nonetheless found the strength to write to his family: “I willingly accept the situation in which I find myself at the moment, and I thank God for wishing us so much good.”

On February 22, 1948, Franz Stock suffered an attack of suffocation brought on by a pulmonary edema. Taken to the hospital, he who had so often kept others company during their final moments, died there alone on the 24<sup>th</sup>, at the age of 43. Before a handful of people, Bishop Roncalli presided at his funeral, followed by burial at Thiais Cemetery in the section reserved for prisoners of war. In 1963, his body would be solemnly transferred to the church that encompasses the Barbed-Wire Seminary’s first chapel, in Rechèvres, close to Chartres. Several associations are promoting Franz Stock’s beatification. General de Cossé-Brissac testifies that he saw in him “a being inhabited by grace ... I am infinitely grateful to him. Because of him, I forgot all those who had persecuted me. Because of him I have vowed many times to do everything I can to promote an open reconciliation between the German and French peoples, under the sign of Christ.” Father Pihan, a priest who was imprisoned in Fresnes, wrote in 1989: “When I am asked when I have most felt the brotherhood and universality of Catholicism, the answer is in prison, with Father Stock.”

May Father Franz Stock help us to become, like him, peacemakers by intensely living our Catholic faith, and making it radiate around us!

*Dom Antoine Nazie o.s.B.*

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.*

*– Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.*

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