

The Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne

During the last weeks of the Reign of Terror, on July 17, 1794, sixteen Carmelite nuns and lay sisters lost their lives in one incident, martyred by the French revolutionaries by guillotine. Though they are only sixteen of the more than 1,300 victims of the guillotine, the nuns are remembered because they sang religious hymns as they were paraded through the streets of Paris on their way to the Place de la Nation, where their executions would take place.

The French revolutionaries saw the Catholic Church as collaborators with the French nobility and therefore an extension of the social order that they were trying to overturn. They had no respect for the Church and went about confiscating her property. Religious congregations, especially contemplative ones such as the Carmelites, were particular targets of revolutionary forces because they were devoted to prayer rather than active in broader society and so were seen as not sufficiently productive.

Leading up to the Reign of Terror, in 1792, French revolutionaries took over and subsequently disbanded the Carmelite community in Compiègne. Much of their property was confiscated, and they were forbidden to wear their traditional religious habits. Undeterred by the threats of the revolutionaries, the sisters continued to meet for prayers until they were discovered, captured, and imprisoned. Following a brief trial, the sixteen women were sentenced to be executed by the guillotine, a grisly instrument designed to decapitate a person. It was a method of capital punishment used frequently throughout the French Revolution.

On the day of their executions the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne were dressed in their religious habits and paraded through the streets of Paris. Although filled with fear, they broke out into joyous Christian hymns as they prepared to ascend the scaffold to meet their brutal deaths. One of the songs they sang was *Veni, Creator Spiritus* (*Come, Creator Spirit*). The Carmelite prioress, Mother Teresa of St. Augustine, was greeted by each of the women at the foot of the scaffold and heard them as they renewed their vows. As each sister was executed, the singing grew quieter, and after all had been martyred, the crowd was reduced to silence instead of the usual cheers. The crowd seemed to realize the tragedy of the massacre that had occurred, and the martyrdom of these holy women was a precursor to the end of the Reign of Terror. In fact, Maximilien Robespierre, a leader during the Reign of Terror, was himself guillotined ten days after the nuns, signaling the end of the Reign of Terror.

The story of the Compiègne nuns was kept alive in France and elsewhere. They were honored by the Benedictine nuns of England and St. Thérèse of Lisieux. In 1906 they were beatified by Pope Pius X. The sixteen martyrs of Compiègne remain an example of courage and Christian witness under harsh persecution.



Reading Comprehension

1. Why did the Carmelites of Compiègne fall out of favor with the French revolutionaries during the Reign of Terror?

2. What was the reaction of the witnesses as the Carmelites of Compiègne were executed one by one?
3. How has the story of the martyrs of Compiègne been kept alive?

Writing Task

View a clip of the 1960 French-Italian film *Le Dialogue des Carmelites* (*The Dialogue with the Carmelites*). Write a three-paragraph description and review of the scene you watched.

Explaining the Faith

Why is faith higher than human reason?

Of course, reason is important, and scientific experimentation and data are similarly significant. Without them, it would be very difficult to make advances in technology, medicine, transportation, and so forth. And human reason can be used to clarify your understanding of God's Revelation, on which faith is based.

However, God cannot be subjected to scientific experimentation. Thus, reason is not above faith, and science must always be at the service of humanity, rather than humanity at the service of science. Faith accompanied by reason does what reason alone cannot do: it gives you a glimpse of the reality of God beyond the merely physical and observable. That is why Jesus' coming to earth through the Incarnation was such a monumental experience in history: here was the invisible God taking incarnate human form.



Further Research

Read paragraph 157 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Explain the meaning of the quotations by St. Thomas Aquinas and Bl. John Henry Newman listed in the passage.

Chapter 7 Teacher Resources

Faithful Disciples: The Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne

Reading Comprehension

1. Why did the Carmelites of Compiègne fall out of favor with the French revolutionaries during the Reign of Terror? *The French revolutionaries saw the Church as collaborators with the French nobility, and therefore part of the society they were trying to overturn. Contemplative congregations such as the Carmelites were particular targets because they were devoted to prayer rather than action in society and thus seen as not sufficiently productive.*
2. What was the reaction of the witnesses as the Carmelites of Compiègne were executed one by one? *They fell into silence as the singing stopped rather than cheering as usual.*
3. How has the story of the martyrs of Compiègne been kept alive? *They were honored by the Benedictine nuns of England and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and were beatified in 1906 by Pope Pius X.*

Writing Task

View a clip of the 1960 French-Italian film *Le Dialogue des Carmelites* (*The Dialogue with the Carmelites*). Write a three-paragraph description and review of the scene you watched. *Accept responses that reflect both an accurate description of a scene in the film and a thoughtful review and commentary. You might encourage students to watch the film together to select their scenes, or even offer time in class or after school for a class viewing.*

Additional Background Information

A quotation that is attributed to the Carmelites of Compiègne is: “We are the victims of the age, and we ought to sacrifice ourselves to obtain its return to God.”

Today’s official website of the Carmelite Order (www.ocarm.org/en) provides a great deal of information, including:

- a description of the Carmelite charism: “How Do We Live Our Lives? What Is Our Charism?,” www.ocarm.org/en/content/ocarm/charism;
- biographical information on the tremendous number of men and women from this order who have been or are in the process of being canonized;
- additional biographical information about the Carmelites of Compiègne: “Bl. Teresa of St. Augustine and Companions (OCD), Virgins and Martyrs (M),” www.ocarm.org/en/content/liturgy/bl-teresa-st-augustine-and-companions-ocd-virgins-and-martyrs-m; and
- daily resources for guided *lectio divina* on the day’s Gospel passage.

The text references the beautiful hymn “*Veni, Creator Spiritus*.” The post “*Veni Creator Spiritus: Various Translations*,” at aclerkofoxford.blogspot.com/2011/06/veni-creator-spiritus-various.html, offers a number of English translations of this hymn text, dating back to the Middle Ages, as well as a video of the chant being sung.

For further information on the guillotine, see Evan Andrews, “8 Things You May Not Know about the Guillotine,” The History Channel, September 15, 2014, www.history.com/news/history-lists/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-guillotine.

Explaining the Faith

Why is faith higher than human reason?

Further Research

Read paragraph 157 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Explain the meaning of the quotations by St. Thomas Aquinas and Bl. John Henry Newman listed in the passage. *The quote from St. Thomas Aquinas states that we can be certain of things that we know based on Divine Revelation. Because God is truth, we need not question the things that God has directly revealed to us, which we know through faith. Reason gives “light”—it helps us to know—but that light is not the same as certainty. The quote from Bl. John Henry Newman states that even though we may struggle with truths revealed by God, these difficulties do not negate the certainty of faith. We may struggle, but this does not add up to actual doubt about the truth of Divine Revelation.*

Additional Background and Resources

Satoshi Kanazawa’s thought-provoking article in *Psychology Today* discusses the concept of “scientific proof” and why this is a misnomer. View the article, “Common Misconceptions about Science I: “Scientific Proof,” at www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-scientific-fundamentalist/200811/common-misconceptions-about-science-i-scientific-proof. The article makes reference to the certain, final, and binary nature of mathematical proof, which students are likely to have studied previously in math classes. Mathematical proofs rely on logic rather than the scientific method and begin with an assumption; students may connect this with the certainty of Divine Revelation once we accept the starting assumption that God is Truth.

Another exploration of what *proof* means in science can be found at: “Can Science Prove Anything? What Proof Means in Science,” Thoughtco., www.thoughtco.com/can-science-prove-anything-3973922.

The following piece is written from a Protestant point of view, but it begins by describing five categories of knowledge that science cannot explain, nor even consider. The explanation provided here is certainly resonant with the Catholic understanding of the relationship between faith and science: Darren Hower, “Five Things Science Can’t Explain, The Life, thelife.com/five-things-science-cant-explain.

Further wisdom, from Pope Francis’s encyclical *Lumen Fidei*:

Nor is the light of faith, joined to the truth of love, extraneous to the material world, for love is always lived out in body and spirit; the light of faith is an incarnate light radiating from the luminous life of Jesus. It also illumines the material world, trusts its inherent order, and knows that it calls us to an ever widening path of harmony and understanding. The gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness. Faith awakens the critical sense by preventing research from being satisfied with its own formulae and helps it to realize that nature is always greater. By stimulating wonder

before the profound mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation” (*Lumen Fidei*, 34).