

# THE 'SILENT' SUMMER OF 1944

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# THE SILENT SUMMER OF 1944

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

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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 16<sup>th</sup> *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 illumined 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.

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.

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### ***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."*

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CARTHUSIAN EMBLEM

13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

A GLOBE SURMOUNTED BY THE CROSS

-“THE CROSS STANDS FIRM, WHILE THE WORLD TURNS”-

WITH SEVEN STARS SYMBOLIZING ST. BRUNO

AND HIS FIRST FOLLOWERS

