

# Gotha – Catholic Action

## CALL TO ACTION

Comrades! On Sunday, July 25, at 8:30 a.m., there will be a Mass intended exclusively for French people. We are counting on your attendance and ask you to bring as many comrades as possible, as the success of this Mass depends on the efforts of each and every one of you.

If enough people come, we can organize one every month. So: meeting of the French on Sunday, July 25, at 8:30 a.m. here.

Schmalkalden Section of the Christian Workers' Youth

## NARRATOR

On almost every weekend in the latter half of 1943, French forced laborers gathered at various locations in Thuringia for church services, spiritual retreats, and discussion rounds. They saw themselves as part of "Catholic Action," a movement dedicated to living out their faith in daily life, strengthening the community of believers, and providing one another with spiritual support under difficult conditions. At that time, small local groups of Catholic Action existed in numerous Thuringian cities.

One of the forced laborers involved was Marcel Callo, who was deported to Germany in March 1943.

In November 1943, Marcel Callo wrote this letter to his fiancée:

## MARCEL CALLO

The first two months after my arrival were tedious and hard. I had lost the will to do anything at all. I had become numb. I felt as if I were slowly wasting away. (...) But suddenly, Christ made me react. He made it clear to me that my conduct was wrong. He told me to take care of my comrades, and thus my joy in life returned.

## **NARRATOR**

At this time, Marcel Callo was a forced laborer in Zella-Mehlis. He began organizing secret meetings and leading religious services. Marcel writes further:

### **MARCEL CALLO**

I've managed to lead two Frenchmen from the camp to the faith; about ten of them attend Mass. That's already a good number, and I hope it continues to grow...

When I return to my barracks in the evening, I feel good, because by doing good deeds for others, I've also done good for myself. How happy I am to be a Christian activist! I feel Christ by my side at all times. He is my support and my comfort. Without him, I don't know what would have become of me.

## **NARRATOR**

The Gestapo spied on the activities of Catholic Action, and many of the letters through which the local groups communicated with one another were intercepted. On December 3, 1943, the Nazi Reich Security Main Office issued an order for the dissolution of Catholic Action.

In the spring of 1944, twelve French forced laborers were arrested in Thuringia. They had worked in weapons factories, workshops, and nurseries in Gotha, Zella-Mehlis, Suhl, Eisenach, Erfurt, Schmalkalden, and Sondershausen. They were accused of being the leading organizers of Catholic Action in Thuringia. The forced laborer Joël Jouas-Poutrel later recalled the arrest of Marcel Callo:

### **JOËL JOUAS-POUTREL**

I was working the night shift and found myself in the barracks when Marcel came in around 11 o'clock. "What's going on?" I asked him. "Are you sick?" "Listen," he replied, "I've been arrested." A Gestapo officer who had followed him began searching his entire locker, especially his books. "Why are you arresting my comrade?" I asked the officer. He replied brusquely, "This

gentleman is far too Catholic.” (...) “Take as much food as you can,” I told him. “That’s no use,” he replied. He took his rosary, shook my hand, and added, “Goodbye, and hopefully see you soon. Write to my parents and my fiancée that I’ve been arrested for Catholic activities.” Then he left, accompanied by the Gestapo officer, for the Gotha prison.

## **NARRATOR**

Marcel Callo and the other Frenchmen were taken to a prison in Gotha. There, they were subjected to interrogations, starvation, and abuse. They were also forced to work.

Yet even during this time, they continued their religious practices. They prayed together and crafted a small cross out of straw flowers, which they hung in their cell. The cross has been preserved to this day.

In October 1944, the twelve men were deported to various concentration camps. Most were sent to Flossenbürg, others to Dachau or Buchenwald. One of them, Paul Beschet, recalled his arrival in Flossenbürg:

## **PAUL BESCHET**

We arrived in chains, the four of us, handcuffed and tied together, just like a cattle train. And we passed through the gate with the inscription “Arbeit macht frei.” And during that ceremony, we stood side by side. And one of us—I don’t remember who—suggested that we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

## **NARRATOR**

Eight of the twelve men did not survive their time in the concentration camps. Marcel Callo died of exhaustion and dysentery in March 1945 at the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Many decades later, in 1987, Marcel Callo was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

