

THE UPPER ALDE BENEFICE

The Seventeenth Sunday of the Year (Trinity 7)

The name of Karl Leisner was unfamiliar to me until I heard an address this week. His is such a powerful story that I wanted to take the first opportunity to share it with you.

He was born in Germany during the Great War. He attended primary and secondary schools and completed his studies in 1934. During his youth he became an altar boy and, at the suggestion of the high school chaplain, he formed a Catholic youth group. These groups combined worship and prayer with outdoor activities, such as camping and cycling. He turned out to be a natural leader and became a youth leader during the era in which the Nazis were beginning to take control of all youth organizations.

In 1934, when he was nineteen, he entered the seminary in Munich and was named Diocesan Youth Leader by Bishop Galen of Munster. He spent six months in compulsory agricultural work during which, despite official opposition, he organized Sunday Mass for his fellow workers.

In March 1939, Bishop Galen ordained Leisner as a deacon, but shortly after his ordination, during a routine medical examination, he was informed by his doctor that he had contracted tuberculosis. In those days, the sole treatment for this was good food and fresh air so he was sent to a sanatorium to recover. It was during this period of recovery that he was heard by a fellow patient criticizing Adolf Hitler. He was arrested, imprisoned and finally in 1940, moved to the concentration camp at Dachau. Since he was a deacon, he was assigned to the priests' block.

Prisoners often had to work outside in snow or rain and then had to sleep in their wet prison clothes. Cold weather, poor rations and harsh treatment proved to be a dangerous combination for someone already suffering from tuberculosis. Such conditions caused Leisner's condition to deteriorate and added to by the not infrequent beatings he was found to be spitting blood and forced to report to the infirmary. He was put in a large room with over a hundred tuberculosis inmates.

On the third Sunday of Advent 1944, he was ordained priest by Bishop Gabriel Piguet a French fellow prisoner. The necessary paperwork with the authorization for the ordination, as well as the Holy Oil of Chrism, were smuggled into the camp by a young woman named Josefa Mack, the 'Angel of Dachau, who later went on to become a nun. Some imprisoned Protestant pastors made the vestments and help organize the event, and a Jewish violinist played music near the barracks to create a diversion.

The newly ordained priest was so ill he had to postpone his first Mass until the following December 26th, the feast of St Stephen, the first Martyr. He never celebrated Mass again. When Dachau was liberated in the following May he was taken to a sanatorium and he died there a few months later in August 1945.

It was the coincidence which struck me between the story of this Christian martyr and one on the parables in today's Gospel.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

The Kingdom of heaven is a precious treasure that completely alters one's priorities in life. Things that at one time were considered very important no longer carry as much weight in light of the wealth of God's kingdom. One joyfully abandons everything in order to obtain these treasures.

Prayer for the week

Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

