

Blessed Jakob Gapp: Social Justice Animator by Daniel M. Jordan

[*Editor's note:* The following material is taken from *Marianist Soundings*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2001), pp. 26-31.]

The Marianist Family has been enriched by the recent beatifications of several of its brothers. During these exciting times, we would do well to pause and sort out what all this “blessed” business really means. In particular, how do we continue to tell the stories of our blessed and to keep their Christian witness alive in our hearts, conscious in our minds, and active in our ministries? I suggest the answer lies in developing and implementing strong identification points.

For Father Jakob Gapp, martyred by the Nazis during World War II, the identification point is social justice. Through his life and actions he sang Mary’s song, the Magnificat, and proclaimed how God lifts up the lowly and casts down the powerful. His beheading is a reminder of the injustice and sinfulness found in state-ordered executions. As we, the citizenry of the United States, examine the death penalty and other forms of human rights issues, perhaps Jakob Gapp can be our Marianist patron.¹ It is my hope that all Marianists, especially those within the field of education and in the peace and justice movement, would promote him as such.

But before looking at his life from a social justice perspective, a brief word about attaching titles to our Marianist blessed. There is a precedence already for this practice.

At last year’s [September 3, 2000] beatification of William Joseph Chaminade, our Founder was rightly exalted as “Founder of the Marianist Family.” This title provides the broad rubric of his vision and highlights his dynamic wisdom in the origins of our interconnected Family. Chaminade’s emphasis on a “discipleship of equals” (“mixed composition”), both within the brother-priest relationship of the Society of Mary and the larger Marianist Movement, is a gift to the Church. Blessed Chaminade’s title is a portal into a deeper understanding of his life, vision, setbacks, and accomplishments.²

For Father Gapp, his portal is social justice.

Jakob Gapp

The story of Jakob Gapp is a tantalizing tale of a young man who had lost his faith in the aftermath of World War I. Spurred toward a religious vocation by a desire for free schooling and

¹ Because Jakob Gapp is not a saint, the term “patron” is meant in a figurative and not literal sense.

² While outside the scope of this work, I contend the portal for the Spanish martyrs [of Ciudad Real] is “education” because all three men—Brothers Carlos Eraña, Fidel Fuidio, and Jesús Hita—dedicated their lives to Christian education. In addition to their deaths during the opening months of the Spanish Civil War, their pedagogical skills and love for the welfare of children are the strands that united them. [Four additional Spanish Marianist martyrs (of Madrid) were beatified after this work was published. They are Father Miguel Léibar Garay and Brothers Florencio Arnaiz Cejudo, Joaquín Ochoa Salazar, and Sabino Ayastuy Herrasti.]

a search for truth, Gapp is not your typical vocational story. This is what makes his life, conversion, and insights so fascinating. Time, the power of God, and Marianist formation would smooth many of his rough edges. He is an excellent role model for those who come to a religious vocation later in life or who view the Gospel from a social perspective. While he found himself embroiled in the sociopolitical reality of his day, Gapp viewed the world through the eyes of faith seeking understanding.

A poor peasant from Wattens—located in the Tyrol region of Austria—Gapp served his country during World War I. Because of a miscommunication on the cease-fire agreement, Italian forces captured him along with the rest of Austria's Riva Storm Battalion. (The cease-fire was to go into effect the following day.) Gapp spent nine months as a prisoner of war. After his release he sought comfort in the examination of politics and religion. Along with a few personal items, Gapp brought his socialist ideology with him to the Marianist novitiate in Greisinghof.

His niece, Marianne Oberauer, would tell those investigating her uncle's cause:

Originally Jakob was not very pious, because the injustices of this world and the unjust division of goods appeared rather to have turned him from God. I know for sure that Jakob actually returned from Italy and from the war as an atheist. He came back from the war as a socialist.³

Focus on Social Justice

As noted by those who knew him, he was not an easy man to live with in community. But the voice of a prophet always resonates with a chord of unease. Gapp was motivated by a passion for truth and love, not silence and nicety. He understood what it meant to practice the Third Object, to be in the world, yet not of it. The worldly life he lived prior to becoming a Brother of Mary would feed his hunger for justice and the love of God.

According to Father Bruno Schilling, Gapp responded to the true needs of others and had a deep compassion for the poor.

What particularly characterized Jakob Gapp were the social components of his life. He had a fine sensitivity to the need and poverty of his fellow men and, appropriate to his character, he could become very vigorous when he thought that he had to denounce open injustice or extravagance. Within the framework of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of our parish in Graz, he continually supported poor and lonely people.⁴

Gapp practiced what he preached. During the heart of winter he donated to the needy the fuel earmarked to heat his bedroom in the Marianist community. He also taught the importance of love for all people, a highly treasonable offense during this period of extermination of Jews, Gypsies, and mentally handicapped. He distributed Church literature examining the flaws of the Nazi state: an action that would eventually culminate in his conviction as an "enemy of the state"

³ *Positio super Martyrio* of the Congregation for the Cause of the Saints. P.N. 1552. (*Vindobon, Beatificationis seu Declarationis Martyii servi dei P. Jacobi Gapp, S.M.*), 106.

⁴ *Positio*, 15.

and his death. Yet history has revealed the truth: he “practiced the virtues of the Gospel in an heroic way.”⁵ His motives were other-centered, and he taught through example.

We were permitted to accompany him to the poorest of the poor and help distribute bread, rolls, and money. For us students it was always an experience, a distinction, to be able to follow him into the very miserable neighborhoods in order to do some practical good. It was noteworthy that Jakob Gapp always stepped into the background and let us accept the thanks of the needy people.⁶

Enemy of the State

Followed by the Gestapo⁷ and forced into exile from Germany and occupied Austria because of comments he made against Hitler and the Nazi government, he fled to France in January of 1939. He spent several months at a Marianist community in Bordeaux and studied French, worked in the library, and heard confessions. In May of 1939 he was transferred to Spain and spent the next four years as a religion and language teacher at Marianist schools. During the summer of 1942 several Gestapo informants posing as potential converts befriended him. Gapp began religious instruction with the group. Realizing this cleric was about to be transferred to a new ministry and city (Tortosa, Spain) and fearing their plans would be foiled, the impostors devised a plot.

During an outing to the Pyrenees Mountains they secretly drove Gapp out of Spain and into occupied France. Once across the border, German authorities arrested Gapp and took him to Germany. In his subsequent interrogation he effervesced the depth of his religious convictions.

I was and am of the conviction that my Catholic faith has placed me in opposition to National Socialism. Therefore, on all occasions, including in class, when the conversation turned to National Socialism and its world philosophy, I have in no way concealed my hostility toward it.⁸

Convicted of treason and condemned to death, Gapp was beheaded in Plötzensee Prison in Berlin on August 13, 1943.

Gapp’s Message Today

Gapp’s story, while fully rich in its historical merits, also is an allegory of how God works with us where we are and how we are. However crooked the line of our faith may appear, the power of Jesus Christ can straighten us out. We can begin with a life of action and move to prayer. Or, in turn, we can begin with prayer and move toward the social dimensions of the Gospel. What is essential is being *with* and *for* those in need and finding ways to free “ourselves” of our “selves.”

⁵ Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *Circular 5*, Mar. 19, 1995, p. 11.

⁶ *Positio*, 123.

⁷ Gapp was tracked as early as December of 1938, according to minutes from his 1943 interrogation.

⁸ Josef Levit, SM, *Blessed Jakob Gapp Marianist* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 1998), p. 112. Transcript of “Minutes of the Interrogation,” conducted on June 4, 1943, in Berlin, Germany.

Gapp was able to let the voice of God work through him, and he obeyed God's calling.⁹ He filtered out the false god of National Socialist ideology and heard the true voice of God, a virtue many others, including some Marianists during his day, were either not adept at hearing or were too afraid to act upon. Is today any different? Are there not voices of distraction—mass media, mass consumption, racial stereotypes, religious indifference, personal fears, etc.—that pull us away from God? If so, our blessed brother, Jakob, reminds us as Marianists of how we are to live and spread the social dimensions of the Gospel.

⁹ "The word obey comes from *ob* + *audire*, which means to hear 'closely' or 'totally,' to read well the desire, the need, or the intention of the other." Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *Growing in the Virtues of Jesus: The Marianist Method of Virtues for Use in Groups* (San Antonio, TX: Burke, 1997), 79.