

From the MATTHEW 10-27 HouseTops

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Cover: *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*, an illumination by an unknown artist. Design by M.I.C.M. Sisters. **Center:** *All Saints* by Albrecht Dürer (1471 — 1528). Dürer is generally regarded as the greatest German Renaissance artist.

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CRUSHING THE INFAMOUS ONE

By Gary Potter

The Dialogue of the Carmelites, by Francis Poulenc, is one of the few operas composed in the past half century worth hearing. Poulenc based his 1958 work on a drama of the same title that was written by Georges Bernanos, probably best known in the English-speaking world for his novel, *Diary of a Country Priest*. For his drama, Bernanos drew on the ascertainable facts surrounding the arrest, imprisonment, and execution in Paris on July 17, 1794 (this was during the French Revolution), of sixteen Carmelite nuns, all of whom were beatified by Pope St. Pius X in 1906.

In terms both of music and theater, the last scene of Poulenc's *Dialogue* is extremely moving. In live performances it can happen that an audience will sit in silence for at least several beats when the curtain falls, instead of bursting instantly into applause and cries of "Bravo!" as opera audiences commonly do. They will be that moved.

What is staged in the scene is the execution of the nuns. We see them going one by one up the steps of the scaffold to the guillotine. What we hear are their voices raised in the singing of the *Salve Regina* against soaring music of Poulenc's composition, but with the singing and music punctuated by the terrible swish and thunk of the mechanical blade's fall. With each fall the number of voices becomes fewer until there is only one, that of the prioress, Mother Teresa. The sound of it ends abruptly with a last awful thunk. What is amazing is the sense with which we are left, despite the depiction of their death having reduced us to emotional shambles, that these holy nuns have somehow triumphed.

Triumphed over what? Over the men who put them to death and the Revolution those men served? Surely not, if by triumph we mean the nuns conquered or vanquished. We know, after all, that the real Revolution (the ongoing *novus ordo saeculorum*), as well as the one whose minions kill the Carmelites in the opera, has continued to unfold unto our own day and, in fact, is in power, in some form, everywhere in ex-Christendom.

The nature of the Carmelites' triumph is suggested when we remember that the scene in the opera replicates in essential details exactly what transpired in reality in 1794, according to eye-witness accounts. In the opera, and Bernanos' drama, the triumph is made clearest of all through the character of Constance, the youngest of the sisters. She is portrayed as having left the community, but then coming to the place of execution and stepping from the crowd to reveal her identity so that she becomes the first to mount

the scaffold, as in reality she was first, “with the air,” as one witness put it, “of a queen going to receive her crown.”

It is through the artistic license of having Constance abandon her vocation and then embrace it anew, knowing that the consequence will be death, that Poulenc and Bernanos reveal the nature of the Carmelites’ triumph. That is, what the sisters do by dying is actually live the Faith they have professed. Thus do they conquer the tepidity, vacillations, doubts, and cowardice of any we see on the stage who would call themselves Christian but dare not actually live the Faith. Thus, also, did the real Carmelites of 1794 triumph not simply over themselves, if such triumph was necessary for any of the real nuns, but over the skepticism, irreligion, and outright apostasy, widespread in a society that professed to be Catholic, but could not truly have been — not as once it was, not any longer — otherwise the Revolution would not have taken place, or at least would not have succeeded.

We want to tell here the story of the real Carmelites, the ones beatified by Pope St. Pius X. Before we do, we need to talk about the Revolution and the life of the Faith in France at the end of the eighteenth century. We do this for no other reason than to show the heroism of the Carmelites’ martyrdom.

Heroism? What does this word now mean? Has the value of any other been more debased in recent time? It has become a cliché since 9/11 to refer to any and every policeman and firefighter as a hero. Equally, since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it seems that every soldier serving in that country, even if he never does anything but run a computer at headquarters, is to be held a hero. Real heroes, however, are nothing if not exceptional.

Many other Catholics besides the Carmelites died during the Revolution, to be sure. In fact, since France was nominally a Catholic nation, as she still is, we can say there were no victims except Catholic ones, at least until the Revolution began eating its own. Of course, even Danton, Robespierre, and nearly all the other revolutionaries who themselves wound up under the blade of the guillotine, had once been Catholic. They had all been baptized, received First Communion, and been confirmed.

The exact number of men and women put to death by the Revolution in France will never be known, and is negligible, anyway, in comparison to the millions it has killed all around the world during the two centuries since. A reasonable estimate is about forty thousand. Some of them certainly were killed for no reason except that they were Catholic. However, if our sixteen Carmelites were beatified by Pope