

Sermon for the Ecumenical Church Service commemorating the 79th Anniversary of the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp. May 5, 2024

„And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.“

Dear congregants,

These are the words that conclude the Gospel according to Mark.

For 2000 years, since Christ's resurrection and ascension, his disciples have been making their way in the world. They proclaim the paschal victory of life over death.

When the concentration camp here in Dachau was set up in March 1933, both the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany endeavoured to provide for the prisoners' spiritual needs. Church services were initially allowed to take place. Soon however these were stopped by the SS. Indeed the churches complained, however in the end they gave in without much of a fight.

And not a few of our number welcomed the fact that it was communists and social democrats who were being locked up. From their point of view they were dangerous „Godless and rootless fellows“. The man-made evil spirits of nationalism, antisemitism, antiziganism, racism and homophobia were also rife among many people of Christ, we must confess.

From 1940 clergy from all denominations arrived in Dachau in large numbers, certainly unwilling prisoners. They had tried to resist the evil spirit of National Socialism. In occupied Poland their career alone was enough for the Germans to have them incarcerated in the concentration camps. They had been made into members of the persecuted Polish „intelligentsia“.

There were also convinced Christians among the other prisoners in Dachau, however the prisoners were quick to register whether the clergy were behaving according to their Christian principles. Several clergy themselves have commented self-critically that they often radiated very little of the Good News. How would we have resolved ourselves? I would not wish to cast the first stone.

Yet – thank God! – the followers of Christ in the concentration camp and its surroundings found the inner strength to be believing witnesses of the resurrection:

How else but through a miracle could Josefa Mack's relief efforts from the spring of 1944 have remained hidden? She was a postulant with the „School Sisters of Notre Dame“ at just twenty years old, and later took the name in religion of Maria Imma. She smuggled items the priests needed for their services through the shop in the „Kräutergarten“ [herb garden], not far from here, as well as medicines and other groceries. She was supported in this by her fellow sisters in Freising. Had she not gone to her eternal rest in 2006 we would have celebrated her hundredth birthday a few weeks ago. God blessed Sister Maria Imma.

Several clergy volunteered to care for their fellow prisoners in the sick bay, laid hands of them and prayed for them, and could save the lives of some. They secretly dispensed the sacraments to the dying. Not a few were themselves infected and died. May they rest in peace as the blessed martyrs of Dachau.

Bohumír Opočenský belongs to the ranks of the survivors, a pastor of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. He could assist many sick prisoners; before his theological studies he had taken several semesters in medicine – „they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.“ – these words from our gospel reading today are brought to fruition in his actions. After his liberation on the 29th April 1945 Bohumír Opočenský assisted with the funeral rites of his dead comrades on the Leitenberg.

Meanwhile, Henryk Maria Malak, a young Polish priest, also volunteered to care for the terminally ill among the freed prisoners. In his memoirs he writes:

„Fifty Polish priests to the hospital as nurses!“ the fellow leading us reports to the American guard.

„Okay!“ the busy jaws continue chewing gum. The heavy gate closes behind us.

Beyond the little bridge, we make a turn onto the Road of Death. The sun is setting behind the dark tops of fir trees surrounding the crematorium. Its blackened chimney stands out against the dusky blue of the May sky. To the right, beyond the canal and the coiled wire, lie stuffy barracks filled with human wretchedness. Before us is the black, gravelpaved Road of Death. So many thousands walked this way to lose their lives; bringing our whole life as a gift obtained through the pleas of our Lady, we walk here [...]. Isn't it fitting that we, who have been so blessed, should bring aid to those who are near death while at the threshold of freedom?

Henryk Maria Malak survived this task, thank God! He had a blessed vocation among the Polish exile community first in Germany and later in the USA to his death in 1987.

Evil spirits, horrible memories, traumatic experiences haunt not a few of those who were liberated here 79 years ago, including those who have long been healed of their external afflictions. One of them was Nikolai Choprenko from Ukraine – he is now a hundred years old and is present with us today along with his son George, and I most sincerely welcome them both. Back then he suffered from the long term effects of the tortures in the Dachau concentration camp and on the death march and sought consolation in alcohol.

I quote from his message given at one of the more recent Liberation Day commemorations:

Then...I was in an awful situation. My condition was not good and the doctor said to me: „seek God“, and I found God. A fellow prisoner who carried a Bible with him worked there and helped me. „You know, when we pray and when you desire to give up everything – smoking, drinking, the alcohol, all of it, then He will make it possible – believe and pray“. And God did make it possible. One day, God released me from smoking, from smoking and alcohol, from all of it, right up to now. Ich was so happy [...] God made it happen, I was healthy, completely healthy.

Nikolai Choprenko was freed from the evil spirits of the past, healed of them. Hallelujah!

And he now proclaimed the Good News himself as a witness to the resurrection:

I met [...] this Nazi Eisenbarth [who had tortured me in the camp] in some office [in Munich]. When I recognised him – he didn't recognise me – I went over and said, „Herr Eisenbarth!“ I introduced myself and said, „I have come to forgive you“. He was amazed. „What, how?“ He was afraid and thought I would send him to prison or hit him or something. „No“, I said, „I have come to forgive you. Give me your hand.“ I squeezed his hand and said, „Remember, that God exists, He is there. I will pray that you let God into your heart, that he changes you just as he has changed me, that God helps me and you as well, and that you begin here a new life.

Whether Herr Eisenbarth was also released from the evil spirits of the past? We do not know.

But along with Nikolai Choprenko we hope so – when he emigrated to the USA he took a new surname: Hope.

And we hope that He who has risen will heal the wounds of history, that he frees us all, the whole world, from the evil spirits that plague us today. I need not number them here, we are all too familiar with them.

We hope that we will also be his witnesses, carrying his Good News of the victory of life over death, in word and deed. Thanks be to God we have good role models to follow in Sister Maria Imma, Bohumír Opočenský, Henryk Maria Malak and Nick Hope.

May we trust that the Lord help us in this work and strengthens this message through the miracles he has wrought.

Amen.

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