

COURAGEOUS MARISTS



The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are – and will be – defined by choices. Myriad stories have already been told in print, audio, video, and photography. We’ve seen or heard of makeshift morgues in refrigerated trucks in New York City or ice rinks in Spain; selfless doctors and nurses struck down by the virus; and countless others on the front lines whose courage serves as an example of self-sacrifice for the whole. We are witnessing many acts of courage, generosity, compassion, and community that provide inspiration and underline the power of our humanity.

The weeks in “lockdown” got me to thinking about *why* people act courageously. I fell to pondering the biblical story of the widow's mite. Jesus, who has traveled with his disciples to Jerusalem for the Passover, is watching those who come to make their offerings to the temple treasury. He draws the disciples' attention to a widow who has given two small coins, saying that while others gave out of their abundance, she gave "all that she had, even all her living." How would he have known this? Perhaps she gave one coin, hesitated, and then, in defiance of circumstance, tossed the other after it. The meaning of the story is that an act of true generosity is an act of courage. A number of authors, including author Stacy Mitch, called this “**courageous generosity.**”¹ In both Mark and Luke, the point is made that the widow has not one but two coins, together equaling one mite. Since she is a poor widow, if she had given one coin and kept one, she'd have been generous by any ordinary standard. But she gave them both. And since there was nothing in her experience to encourage the expectation of any material reward for her gesture, I think it might be best to imagine a kind of pure gallantry in it, an act of loyalty to what she loved best, a gift made freely, and in many ways courageously, in contempt of circumstance. Just as we can only practice courage in the face of fear, we can only practice generosity in the face of need.

In our Marist history, we have many examples of our Brothers who acted generously and courageously, whether it was during the revolutionary years in France in the 1830's and 1840's, the Civil War in Spain during the 1930's, or the Rwandan genocide and the Islamist revolutions in the African continent in the 1990's. But I found that not much was written about our Brothers during the Second World War.

Times of crisis generate extreme moral dilemmas: situations we cannot begin to imagine, unthinkable choices emerging between options that all seem bad, each with harms and negative outcomes. Generous courage means doing the right thing even at the risk of inconvenience, ridicule, punishment, loss of job or security, social status, and even death. This type of courage requires that a person rise above the apathy, complacency, hatred, cynicism, and fear mongering in our political systems, socioeconomic divisions, and cultural/religious differences to do “what is right” in the midst of our common humanity.

¹ *Courageous Generosity: A Bible Study for Women on Heroic Sacrifice.* Published 2009.

Countless of professional articles have been written about courage. These articles indicate that people who possess courage have certain characteristics which come to the forefront in times of trial or distress. Courageous people believe in themselves. They know who they are and what they stand for. They have strong values, recognize their personal capabilities, and are confident in meeting the challenges that lie before them. They are passionate and purposeful and know the difference between right and wrong. They do not just talk about honor; they live it every day. They are more likely to be trustworthy, objective, fair, and tolerant, and willing to stand up against injustice — backing their words with action. They also put other people’s needs ahead of their own and are not afraid of “swimming against the tide” or challenging the status quo. They stare adversity in the eye — running toward the problem rather than away from it. They know that saying “no” to one idea may enable them to say “yes” to another, and that old ways of doing things should not stand in the way of a better solution. Courageous people follow their intuition. If information required to make a good decision is not available, they usually follow their “gut”, their instincts, and given that, they know that it is not enough to talk about doing something — instead, they act. Courage is required to act even when one has doubts or fears about the consequences. It takes courage to make the difficult choices. Let us look at some of the actions of our Brothers during the second World War.

The Second World War

World War II (1939-1945) proved to be the deadliest international conflict in history, taking the lives of 60 to 80 million people, including 6 million Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust. Of the 6 million killed, approximately 1.5 million children. Civilians made up an estimated 50-55 million deaths from the war, while military comprised 21 to 25 million of those lost during the war. Millions more were injured, and still more lost their homes and property.

It was during these war years in both Europe and the Pacific, that many courageous everyday heroes emerged to stand up to the terror imposed by militaristic and fascist regimes. Some of these heroes would survive the war, others were not as fortunate. All demonstrated a humanity that history shows persists even in the darkest of times. Of these everyday heroes, nine were Marist Brothers.

In Budapest, Hungary ²

²**Brother Albert Pflieger**, a French-born Marist Brother, served in Budapest, Hungary, during the war by running Champagnat, an all boys’ school, together with seven other Marist Brothers, some of whom were French and others Hungarian. The Germans entered Budapest on March 19, 1944. Due to the onslaught of Allied bombings, the schools in Budapest were closed and most of the Hungarian children were evacuated to provincial areas. However, the Jewish children were left in the ghettos. The Budapest ghetto was a Nazi ghetto set up in Budapest, Hungary, where Jews were forced to relocate by a decree

² The following information has been taken directly from the historical records of Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

of the Government. In October 1944, after the pro-Nazi Arrow Cross Party, led by Ferenc Szalasi, took over the country, the plight of the Jews inside and outside the ghettos worsened, and terrorism became commonplace. A reign of terror had begun, especially in Budapest. Jews were massacred in the street and in their homes. Thousands of them were banished to Austria and the rest, about a hundred thousand, were concentrated in a ghetto under horrible conditions. Bands of murderers



roamed the streets, and any activity on behalf of Jews was extremely dangerous. Ultimately, Szálasi's men murdered somewhere between 10,000–15,000 Hungarian Jews. More than half of those that were forced into the ghetto in 1944 were sent to concentration camps, starting almost immediately from the establishment of the ghetto. From occupation to liberation (November 1944 to January 1945), the Jewish population of Budapest was reduced from 200,000 to 70,000 in the ghetto. The Brothers, led by Brother Albert, engaged in their rescue work in this climate. Among the Brothers who served at Champagnat during these years were **Brothers Bernard Clerc, Jean-Baptiste Bonetbelz, Alexandre Hegedus (Brother Joseph), Louis Prucser, Ferdinand Fischer, François Angyal, and Ladislav Pingiczzer (Brother Etienne).**

Jews who knew the Brothers began to seek refuge at the school and at the Brothers' residence. Escaped French prisoners and deserters from the German army, including men born in Alsace and Moseille, also found refuge there. Some civilians came on their own initiative; others, whose relatives had disappeared or been abducted or shot, were escorted to the school by Brother Albert, who habitually, alone or accompanied by another Brother, walked the streets of the Budapest ghetto. The Brothers opened the doors of their monastery both to Jews and non-Jews. The place was full beyond capacity, taking in about a hundred Jewish children and about fifty adults, the children's parents or grandparents. The Marists placed their bedrooms at the disposition of the refugees and slept in the corridors or wherever they could, so they could save as many people as possible. With so many people sheltered in the monastery, it was sometimes necessary for fifteen people to huddle in one room. Not only did they provide food and lodging, they obtained forged



documents for their protégés from the Swedish Red Cross. The most formidable difficulty, however, was keeping the refugees safe. The Brothers drilled them, preparing for German raids, and everyone knew his or her hiding place in case of emergency. During the drills, the Brothers even picked up the elderly on their shoulders and hoisted them into their hiding places under the rafters of the roof. In this huge rescue undertaking, the Brothers exerted themselves to locate new hiding places in other religious or private homes for people who could no longer be admitted to the Marist compound because of the overcrowded conditions.

By hiding such a large number of refugees in a religious house situated right in the middle of Pest, these men placed themselves in extreme danger. However, the Brothers regarded this act of

rescue as their duty. To those who told them the possible consequences of their actions, they replied, "If they come to arrest the refugees, we will go to prison with them; otherwise we will not have completed our action." On December 19, 1944, after an informer gave them away, the SS raided the residence and the school and arrested everyone hiding there, including the eight Brothers. Tortured, starved, and subject to disease in their prison, the Brothers, with great courage, refused to reveal which of their protégés were Jews. Many Jews owed their lives to the actions of these courageous men. Their own lives were saved thanks to a fire that broke out in the Ministry of Interior where they were being held, putting their executioners to flight. Several weeks later, thanks to the intercession of the Swedish Red Cross and the papal nuncio, they were formally released. After the war, recalling his rescue by the Marists, one of the beneficiaries of their actions said: "They considered it the most natural thing to help us...If not for their humane deeds, I would not be here today able to testify on their behalf. We survivors express our deepest gratitude to them from the depths of our hearts."

On February 26, 1981, Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, recognized Brothers Albert Pflieger, Bernard Clerc, Jean Baptiste Bonetbelz, Louis Prucser, and Alexandre Hegedus (Brother Joseph) as **Righteous Among the Nations**.



Les Frères portent le bérêt à la synagogue de Vichy - De gauche à droite :
FFr. Bonetbeltz, Pflieger, Hegedüs, Pingicz, Angyal - 8 janvier 1982

In Rome, Italy ³

The Ghetto of Rome had been established in 1555, and by the time of the Second World War, was a little over 400 years old. The ghetto consisted of four cramped blocks around the Portico d'Ottavia, wedged between the Theatre of Marcellus, the Fontana delle Tartarughe, Palazzo Cenci, and the river Tiber. When Nazi Germany occupied Rome two days after the Italian surrender to the Allies on 8 September 1943, 8,000 Italian Jews were in Rome, one-fifth of all Jews in Italy. On the morning of 16 October 1943, 365 German security and police forces sealed off the Ghetto, turning it into a virtual prison. A total of 1,259 people, mainly members of the Jewish community—numbering 363 men, 689 women, and 207 children—were detained by the Gestapo. Of these detainees, 1,023 were identified as Jews and deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Of these deportees, only fifteen men and one woman survived.

In Rome and in other parts of Italy, many Christian professionals (writers, artists, doctors) attempted to save their Jewish colleagues; Christian employees aided Jewish employers; Jewish employees were helped by Christian bosses; and Gentile wives helped save their Jewish husbands and children.

It is within this context, that the efforts of **Brother Alessandro Di Pietro** came into play. He was the headmaster of San Leon Magno, a Marist school which was originally located at 124 Montebello Street in Rome. At the time, the school's enrolment was about 900 boys.



The Minerbi family (comprised of Arturo Minerbi, an engineer, his wife Fanny (née Ginzburg) and their son Sergio) lived in Rome. Fanny had gone to Warsaw in 1940 to bring her parents to Rome and had witnessed the Nazi brutality to Jews. After the October 1943 raid of the Rome ghetto by the Germans, the Minerbi family decided to leave their home at 24 Ravenna Street and take refuge with Catholic friends. Shortly afterwards, Fanny Minerbi decided to find a safer hiding place for her son. She turned to

Brother Alessandro asking his help. He in turn admitted her son, Sergio, into the school. During his stay at the school, Sergio was treated fairly and eventually became aware that among his fellow students there were more Jews, mostly Italian but also several refugees from Germany, France and Belgium

³ The following information has been taken directly from the historical records of Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

The Jewish children attended classes, mixing in with all the other students and shared life with the other boarding students, eating and sleeping on the site. Day and night, for all practical purposes, their safety was assured. In all, the school opened its doors to 24 Jewish boys and 10-12 Jewish adults and some Italian army deserters. ⁴

For obvious reasons, the safety of the adults who received their meals and lodging at the school was more problematic, especially at night. During the day, they ate and then left the school to go into the city. The big fear was that authorities would appear uninvited to carry out nighttime inspections. Thus, Brother Alessandro met with the men and planned what to do in the event of such a visit. A warning signal was agreed upon and an escape route devised: the men would use a staircase leading to safety in the Aurelian walls east of the school, remaining hidden until the undesirable visitors no longer posed a threat. If inspectors managed to find them, the men were to jump from the walls; if that became necessary, they knew the lowest jumping-off point along the wall. As things turned out, there were no inspections, and everyone was able to leave and once more know true freedom, even during the difficult days right after the War.

Over time, another Brother, Angelo Oreggia, was able to obtain counterfeit identity cards for the Minerbi family members and for some others from a local municipality clerk. While Arturo and Fanny and their fathers, all of whom survived the war, found shelter with different persons in Rome, Sergio remained at the school until the liberation of Rome on the 4th of June 1944. Alessandro's actions and those of his fellow Brothers were motivated by human and religious ideals. High risks were involved and there was never any expectation of receiving material compensation. **Dr. Sergio Minerbi**, a retired Israeli ambassador and former professor at the University of Jerusalem, never forgot his generous rescuer. On July 16, 2001, Yad Vashem recognized



Brother Alessandro Di Pietro as Righteous Among the Nations. In receiving this honor, Brother Alessandro stated, *“I am deeply grateful and accept this honor, not for myself, but as a representative of all of us brothers at San Leone Magno Institute who made up that community. Actually, it was the community's decision to open our doors to those 24 Jewish boys and some ten adults. All the brothers worked together, each in his own way, knowing that we all ran a grave risk.”*

In Bougainville in the South Pacific ⁴

Between 9 March and 5 April 1942 during World War II, forces of the Empire of Japan occupied the islands of Buka and Bougainville in the South Pacific. At that time, these islands were part of the Australian-administered Territory of New Guinea. A platoon of Australian commandos from the 1st Independent Company was located at Buka Airfield when the Japanese landed but did not contest the invasion.

⁴ The following information is taken directly from Brother Lawrence McCane's book, *Melanesian Stories: The Marist Brothers in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, 1845-2003*. Published by the Marist Brothers in 2004.

The Japanese invaded to construct naval and air bases to provide security for their major base at Rabaul, New Britain, and to support strategic operations in the Solomon Islands. After the occupation of Buka and Bougainville, the Japanese began constructing several airfields across the island. The main airfields were on Buka Island, on the nearby Bonis Peninsula and at Kahili and Kieta, while naval bases were also constructed at Buin in the south and on the nearby Shortland Islands. These bases allowed the Japanese to conduct operations in the southern Solomon Islands and to attack the Allied lines of communication between the US and the Southwest Pacific Area. It is in this context that the Marist Brothers continued their ministry to the people of the Pacific islands. The Marists worked hard, usually in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, bent on improving schooling and the physical circumstances of the students. To this end, they published books, adapted curricula, built classrooms, houses, dormitories, swimming pools and dams, and established gardens. These Brothers were dedicated to the work of improving the lot of the people of Papua New Guinea-Solomon Islands, particularly through education.



(From left) Brothers Augustine Mannes, John Roberts, Donatus Fitzgerald

In late 1940 and early 1941, Bishop Thomas Wade, SM, asked for Australian Marist Brothers to open a school in his Vicariate. The new Australian Provincial, Brother Arcadius, responded positively, and despite the looming Pacific war, committed three Brother for the North Solomon Islands. The three brothers-- **Augustine Mannes, John Roberts and Donatus Fitzgerald** -- arrived between August and October of 1941 to help run an already established school at Chabai.

Chabai was a catechetical boarding school, with a curriculum of basic English and Mathematics, religion, and practical subjects. It was well-organised, with a good balance of lessons, free time, and manual work in the school's extensive food gardens. At the time, the school had an enrolment of about 100 students; it was well-regarded, and the young men were happy there.

By mid-November 1942, the Japanese counterattack on Guadalcanal had been repelled and their whole southern thrust brought to a halt. The Marists of the South Solomons were out of danger. In the North, however, the changed fortunes of war were reflected in Japanese treatment of the missionaries. Those from enemy countries were weeded out.

Starting in March of 1942, the Japanese came to Bougainville and Buka and began searching for anyone who may be supplying the American forces with information via radio communication. In May 1942, the Japanese visited the school, and after the students, who were instructed to go home or face death by the Japanese, left, only the three brothers

remained. The Japanese, who suspected the Brothers were spies, made repeated visits to their school and required them to report regularly to the Japanese headquarters on Sohano Island. On 15 August 1942, a week after the first battered aircraft from Guadalcanal returned to Buka, the three Australian Marist Brothers were taken from the catechist school at Chabai and imprisoned on Sohano. They were never seen again.

The most likely scenario is that the Brothers were brought to Sohano to be interrogated. Of course, the Brothers had no information to provide, as they had only arrived on the island in October of 1941. At some point the Japanese commander decided that the Brothers were of no further use to his cause and ordered their execution in either late October or early November 1942. They were beheaded by Japanese war sword and their bodies burned on Sohano Island.

In November 1943, Allied forces landed on the west coast of Bougainville as part of the latter stages of Operation Cartwheel and began building air bases to assist in the isolation and neutralisation of Rabaul. Eventually, the U.S. Marines landed at Cape Torokina and established a beachhead within which the Allies would construct three airfields. The invasion force was later replaced by U.S. Army soldiers in January 1944, and these were replaced by Australian Militia troops in October 1944. The campaign ended with the surrender of Japanese forces in August 1945. While the war ended, the story of these three courageous Brothers lives on in those to whom they ministered as well as their fellow Marist Brothers.

The Mission lived from Marist Attitudes

Our Rule of Life encourages us to “*go out to meet children and young people where you find them. Draw close to them, taking an interest in their lives and welcoming them into yours. Journey with them in their struggles, their searching, their suffering... Be a brother to each of them: close, accessible, human. You will win their confidence by your attentive and hospitable presence.*” [ROL #85]⁵ The Marist Brothers mentioned in this reflection did just that. They recognised that God had given them gifts and talents and asked them to use them in many ways in the service of Christ and the young people entrusted to their care. They followed the example of Christ and lived lives of *courageous generosity*. Could this be the narrow way taught by Jesus---the way that asks us to put ourselves second, the way that turns our hearts of stone to hearts of flesh and allows us to see the face of God in one another? I think so.

These Marist Brothers made their lives and their work “*a prophetic sign of God’s reign and God’s abundant love.*” In very human and subtle ways, they never forgot that they were sent on mission as a sign of God’s maternal tenderness and the fraternal love that they shared in Christ. May we never forget their courageous generosity.

Brother Ben Consigli, FMS
Marist Brothers’ Generalate, Rome, 25 May 2020

⁵ *Wherever You Go: The Marist Brothers Rule of Life*, published in Rome, Italy, 2020.