

Blessed Fidelis Chojnacki (1906-1942)



orn at Lodz on the Feast of All Saints in 1906, Hieronim was the last of seven children born to Waclaw and Leokadia Sprusinska. He was baptised on 4 November 1906. At home he received an exemplary religious education, attending the parish of Holy Cross. On finishing high school he enrolled in the military academy. After his studies he could not find work. Thanks to the help of relatives he worked for a year at Szczuczyn Nowogrodzki at the Zaklad Ubezpieczen Spolecznych (ZUB or Department of Social Security). He then worked at the Warsaw central post office. As an employee he was well known for his reliability. Meanwhile, with his uncle Fr. Stanislaw Sprusinski, he worked in the organisation of Catholic Action.

He was engaged in a campaign against alcohol, being rather abstemious himself. Working within Catholic Action he was aware of the need to deepen his interior life. Therefore he entered the Secular Franciscan Order at the Capuchin church in Warsaw. His noble qualities gained for him the trust of the people, and he even managed to reconcile feuds. At that time he and Blessed Anicet Koplinski, the famous questor of Warsaw, became friends. His constant contact with the Capuchins aroused in him his religious vocation.

On 27 August 1933 he received the Capuchin habit and the name Fidelis at Nowe Miasto. Despite his twenty seven years and life experience, he got on well with everyone. During the novitiate he concentrated on learning the principles of the interior life and was committed to advance in the spiritual life.

He made temporary vows on 28 August 1934 and went to for Zakroczym to study philosophy. Here, with the consent of his superiors, he founded a "Circle of Intellectual Collaboration" for seminarians. He continued his activity in the area of alcohol related problems and founded a Circle for non-drinkers. He also collaborated with the Secular Franciscans.

At the beginning of 1937 he passed the final philosophy exam with flying colours. On 28 August 1937 he made perpetual vows. At the outbreak of the Second World War he was in his third year of theology. In a letter to his uncle, Fr. Stanislaw Sprusinski, on 18 December 1939, he expressed a real disappointment and dejection because he could not live or study in a normal way-

One month after Christmas, on 25 January 1940, he was arrested and jailed in Lublin Castle. With calm, and even with a certain sense of humour, he endured the difficult prison conditions, with no room to move and the lack of air. After five months, on 18 June 1940, he was transferred with the whole group to the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen near Berlin. This was considered a model camp, well organised and disciplined, efficiently organised for the destruction of the individual. Here he lost his optimism. The inhuman treatment of the prisoners stunned him and reduced him to pessimism.

On 14 December 1940 he was transferred in a convoy of priests and religious to the concentration camp of Dachau near Munich in Bavaria. There his state of mind deteriorated even further. His arm was tattooed with the prison number 22,473. News of continuous German victories on

the military front extinguished any glimmer of hope for the prisoners about leaving the camp. Hunger, work and persecution weighed ever more upon him. "The ability to get by, the will to live abandoned them." Work well beyond his strength, hunger and inadequate clothing afflicted the lungs of Fr. Fidelis with a grave malady.

One morning in the winter of 1942 he and a companion were carrying a very heavy pot of coffee from the kitchen when he slipped. The boiling coffee upturned and burned him very seriously. The cruel punishment inflicted on him by the block warden weakened him even more. Br. Cajetan Ambrozkiewica, a fellow inmate in the camp, describes Br. Fidelis' demise. "I will never forget that Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1942 when Br. Fidelis left our barracks 28 to transfer to the invalid block. He was strangely quiet and absorbed. His eyes even displayed glimmers of serenity. Already they were reflections of another world. He kissed us all, He greeted us with the words of Saint Francis, "May Jesus Christ be praised. We will meet again in heaven."

A short time later, on 9 July 1942, he died in the camp hospital. His body was burned in the camp crematorium

Translation from the article in *Sulle orme dei Santi*, 2000, p. 132-134.