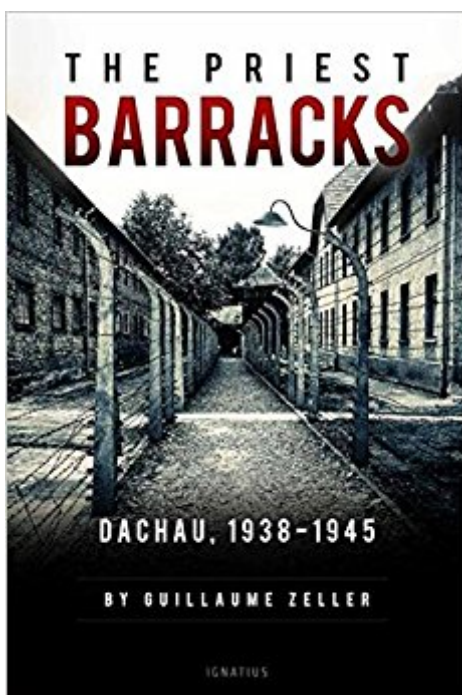


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# The Priest Barracks: Dachau 1938 - 1945



## Synopsis

At the Nazi concentration camp Dachau, three barracks out of thirty were occupied by clergy from 1938 to 1945. The overwhelming majority of the 2,720 men imprisoned in these barracks were Catholics—2,579 priests, monks, and seminarians from all over Europe. More than a third of the prisoners in the "priest block" died there. The story of these men, which has been submerged in the overall history of the concentration camps, is told in this riveting historical account. Both tragedies and magnificent gestures are chronicled here—from the terrifying forced march in 1942 to the heroic voluntary confinement of those dying of typhoid to the moving clandestine ordination of a young German deacon by a French bishop. Besides recounting moving episodes, the book sheds new light on Hitler's system of concentration camps and the intrinsic anti-Christian animus of Nazism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A frank, even touching, account of the thousands of clergy in the three barracks reserved for them at Dachau. The lesson to be learned in these lives is graphic. This book leaves little to the imagination about what can happen because it did happen."-- James V. Schall, S. J., Professor Emeritus, Georgetown University "This extraordinary book provides the reader with a window into both the triumphs and the tragedies of many priests interned in Dachau. The sufferings of these priests are unimaginable. I highly recommend it to understand much of the present crisis of secularism in our contemporary world." --Brian Mullady, O.P., Adjunct Professor of Moral Theology, Holy Apostles College and Seminary "Like the more famous saints of the concentration camps,

these men had to learn the meaning of the words of Christ to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. This book is an invaluable addition to the literature on the Holocaust." --Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., Professor of Philosophy, Fordham University "Zeller's powerful book reveals the heroic holiness that is proper to the Church in the midst of suffering. With the increased persecution of Christians throughout the world, this book comes at an important time." -- Fr. Paul Scalia, Author, *That Nothing May Be Lost*

Guillaume Zeller is a French journalist. He is the former editor in chief of *France 24*, a national news television channel in France. His other two historical books are *Un prêtre à la guerre* about a French paratrooper chaplain and *Oran, 5 juillet 1962* about the Algerian War.

So very interesting!

Powerful read.

I found the accounts riveting. I knew from past readings that Dachau housed many priests. As a young novice I had the privilege of living with one of the priests who was a guinea pig for Nazi experimentations. He was very reluctant to speak about his experiences. This is the first time that I have been gotten a bigger picture of what went on.

Dachau could have been imagined by Dante, if Dante could have imagined hell being brought to Earth and staffed by Germans rather than demons. The author of this book, Guillaume Zeller, powerfully presents the facts of the daily existence of the inmates of Dachau. Zeller presents in detail the multitudes of torture, suffering, and humiliations concocted by the Nazis to strip human dignity from detainees. Thus, we hear about how prisoners were starved, worked to exhaustion, used for hideous experiments that infected prisoners with gangrene, and sent away to Hartheim Castle for euthanasia when they were considered unable to work. Priests were also vulnerable to the cruelties of the common criminals and the Communists, who controlled the camp and vented their hatred on priests. The focus of the book is on the three blocks out of thirty that were dedicated to housing Catholic priests and some Protestant ministers, Orthodox priests and even two Muslim clerics of Albanian descent. 2,720 clergymen were sent to Dachau, including 2,579 Catholics, 109 Protestant ministers, 22 Greek Orthodox and 2 Muslims. 1,034 priests died in Dachau. Most of the priests were Polish, but there were 447 German priests

and a number of other priests from occupied Europe. The priests were brought together in Dachau because of the intervention of the papal legate who sought to consolidate priests in a single location, presumably so that their treatment could be monitored. Dachau was treated as a parish itself and had the bishops necessary to secretly and legally ordain a Catholic seminarian. Priests were treated harshly by the Nazis. There is a popular canard that the Catholic Church supported the Nazis. This is entirely false, of course. Zeller notes: "Christians quickly became the targets of the authorities and their police. Fifteen thousand establishments were closed. Religious associations were gradually suppressed.<sup>14</sup> While Catholic youth associations were compelled to disband because of repeated harassment, enrollment in the Hitlerjugend was made obligatory in 1936. The omnipresent Gestapo kept everything under surveillance,<sup>15</sup> from processions to sermons from the pulpit. Several leading figures in German Catholicism were assassinated on June 30, 1934, during the Night of the Long Knives, such as Erich Klausener, director of Catholic Action; Fritz Beck, director of the Aid for Catholic Students in Munich; and the journalist Fritz Gerlich. The Church's reactions multiplied in response. Prior to the election, the Church had opposed the Nazis: "incompatibility. During the elections that followed, the results in favor of the Nazi Party (or NSDAP)<sup>4</sup> were inversely proportional to the percentage of Catholics in the population.<sup>5</sup> The conference of German bishops in Fulda made the Church's defiance official in August 1932: "It is inexcusable that many Catholics should join the National Socialist Party as long as the latter adheres to a religious and cultural program that is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, we read in its conclusions.<sup>6</sup> The Church feared the threat of the NSDAP looming over the youth activities, clubs, and professional organizations for which she was responsible. The memory of the Kulturkampf was still alive, and Catholics wanted to avoid a repetition of that episode. Zeller also offers some examples of the resistance of individual Catholic clergy to the Nazis. There is another canard where internet atheists will show pictures that they claim are Catholic priests and bishops giving the Hitler salute. Although these pictures are actually Lutheran bishops, the truth is that not giving the Hitler salute could result in a trip to Dachau. Zeller observes: "Father Gustav G rsmann, dean in Gellenbeck in the Diocese of Osnabr ck, was sent to Dachau on October 3, 1941, for having spoken to French prisoners.<sup>28</sup> He had already had a police record for having recommended, on a card posted at the entrance to his rectory, the use of the traditional greeting *Gross Gott* which literally means, "May God greet you, the equivalent of "Hello, good day" instead of the obligatory Heil Hitler! Other

examples of individual resistance leading to internment in Dachau include: “In the months following the Anschluss, fourteen priests were arrested and sent to the camps.<sup>14</sup> Among them were Matthias Spanlang, a priest in Sankt Martin im Innkreis, a village about twenty kilometers [twelve miles] from Braunau am Inn, the town where Hitler was born. Spanlang was from the countryside, a bit rough around the edges, and was a longtime opponent of Nazism, which he had denounced in his sermons and newspaper articles ever since the first militant Nazis burst into his parish in 1931. Arrested on May 24, 1938, he was imprisoned and then taken to Dachau. Father Otto Neururer, the twelfth child of a miller, was a priest serving in Gmünd, to the west of Innsbruck, who met with a similar fate. His gentle gaze, supported by round wire-rimmed glasses, was combined with a temperament of steel. After persuading a young woman to decline a marriage proposal to a Nazi thirty years her senior, he was arrested on December 15, 1938, for “the desecration of Germanic marriage” and taken to Dachau in March 1939. He and Father Spanlang were transferred to Buchenwald on September 26, 1939. The two men converted a prisoner there, which got them convicted and hauled away to the disciplinary bunker. Although the circumstances surrounding the death of Father Spanlang remain unclear, he is said to have died on June 5, 1940, at the age of fifty-three. Those surrounding the death of Father Neururer are well known: he was hanged by his feet and died after thirty-six hours of suffering on May 30, 1940, at the age of fifty-eight. Korbinian Aigner, a Bavarian priest, was arrested in November 1939 for having preached about the Fifth Commandment (“Thou shalt not kill”). Likewise: “The slightest hint of defiance toward the regime led to immediate sanctions and for many, to Dachau. Four hundred forty-seven German clergymen went to, passed through, or died in Dachau from 1940 to 1945, thus forming the second-largest priestly contingent of that camp, far behind the Poles. Ownership of a forbidden book, clippings from tendentious newspapers, personal letters critical of the regime, signs of religious proselytism: the Gestapo used every possible means to justify the incarceration of priests on whom they had kept dossiers, sometimes for years. The reasons mentioned in the files are sometimes strikingly inconsistent. Father Heinrich Hennen, assistant pastor at Holy Spirit Church in Münster, was arrested on November 20, 1941, for having declared in a sermon that there was no longer any objective book on Church history.<sup>27</sup> Father Gustav Girmsmann, dean in Gellenbeck in the Diocese of Osnabrück, was sent to Dachau on October 3, 1941, for having spoken to French prisoners.<sup>28</sup> He had already had a police record for having recommended, on a card posted at the entrance to his rectory, the use of the traditional greeting *Grüßes*



“The notion of original sin would have seemed incomprehensible to a people with an intact racial character. . . . Certainty that one is a sinner is a bastard attitude,” he thought.<sup>7</sup> According to Rosenberg, Christ is a major but not central figure in the history of civilization. On the other hand, the Church, through its expansion, is responsible for the internationalization of the “Jewish national uprising.”<sup>8</sup> If Judaism is (to use the Nazi metaphors) a “pathogenic bacillus” threatening civilization, the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches are the carriers of it. The institution of a “positive Christianity,” in this perspective, necessarily leads to the eradication of ecclesial institutions. Thus it is difficult to see what can remain of Christianity, even in the “positive variety,” in the Nazi Weltanschauung. The book ends with some interesting insights into the role that Dachau played in fostering ecumenism. Dachau forced the breaking down of the walls that had previously existed between Catholicism and other faith communities by the fact that common survival could not be found if Protestants and Catholics continued to isolate themselves from each other. This is an interesting and educational book that treats the subject factually and fairly and serves to correct some false impressions that might exist.

The author (and, I assume, the translator) sensitively shares the struggles of the priests at Dachau. For someone like me who didn't know much about the imprisonment of priests in the concentration camp, the facts and figures and dates were most helpful. The sharing of the priests' stories of survival and of helping each other and other prisoners was well done without being overstated. I especially was touched by the story of the ordination that occurred. Definitely worth a read.

It is amazing that so much dehumanization can lead to greater faith and joy, greater humanity within those who struggle to survive.

I find that as much as I appreciate books about the Holocaust, and wars, I seldom love them. These are books that we need to read, they are books that we should read, but other than the triumph of the human spirit in these horrendous situations these books are often very hard to read. Prior to reading this book I was aware of some stories of some Christians, specific Catholics who had spent time in the concentration camps, but I was not aware of the extent of it. I was unaware of how many Catholic Priests were interned in the camps. I was unaware of the persecution they suffered, how they were singled out by the SS for extra punishment and torture. Reading this book by no means

diminishes the atrocities that the Jewish people and others suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany. But it tells another piece in that larger story. There are some incredible stories of sacrifice, service and true Christ like character in this chronicle. The sections in this book are: Map of the Dachau Concentration Camp Introduction I. A Camp for Priests 1. The Precursors 2. Centralization 3. The Largest Diocese in Europe 4. Organization of the Camp 5. Zugänge 6. Blocks and Commandos 7. Jobs II. *Das Land der Not* 8. Hunger 9. Dying in Dachau 10. Typhus 11. Anti-Christian Hatred 12. Medical Experiments 13. Himmelfahrts Transport III. A Spiritual Home 14. A Chapel in Dachau 15. The Eucharist 16. Sacramental Life 17. Liberation 18. The Fruits of Dachau 19. Witnesses and

Blesseds Conclusion Appendices Glossary Abbreviations Chronology The Priests in Dachau:

Statistics Bibliography Some of the stories that really hit home for me were those about specific Pallotine fathers. The parish we attend and that is associated with my children's school is served by priests from this order. The example the priests lived in the camps is character I have seen in the half dozen members of this order I have known over the years. This is the Chronology of priests at Dachau: March 22, 1933: The camp in Dachau opens. 1938: Arrival of the first priests from Austria. December 1940: Priests are grouped together in Dachau. December 14, 1940: 525 priests arrive from Mauthausen. January 21, 1941: First Mass at the chapel. February 1, 1941: Severe punishments for the priests of the snow commando. March 10, 1941: Start of the *privileges*. September 1941: End of the *privileges*, except for the German priests gathered in Block 26. Father Ohnmacht replaces Father Prabucki as chaplain of the priests. October 30, 1941: Arrival of a convoy of 487 Polish priests. January 9, 1941: Fathers Pawłowski and Grelewski are hanged. March 28, 1942: Beginning of the *Holy Week persecutions*. April 19, 1942: Non-German priests without a work assignment join the plantation commandos. Spring 1942: Beginning of the *transports of the disabled*. September-December 1942: Medical experiments conducted at peak operation. October 28, 1942: The priests, except for the Germans, are deprived of Brotzeit for four weeks. November 1942: Start of large-scale experiments on phlegmons. End of 1942: Individual packages are allowed. December 19, 1942: Priests of all nationalities are regrouped in Block 26, except for Poles and Lithuanians. December 1942: Epidemic of typhus and quarantine. January 26, 1943: Death of Bishop Michał Kozal. March 14, 1943: Quarantine lifted. March 16, 1943: Father Schelling replaces Father Ohnmacht as chaplain. Spring 1943: Start of *leisure activities* and sports events. March 14, 1944: Priests are



dismissed from the postal commandos. March 30, 1944: Priests must leave all infirmarian positions at the Revier. Summer 1944: French priests arrive in great numbers. Polish priests are tolerated at the chapel. November 12, 1944: The camp in Dachau is raised to the rank of deanery by the Archbishop of Munich. December 1944: Beginning of the typhus epidemic. December 17, 1944: Priestly ordination of Karl Leisner. April 26, 1945: Partial evacuation of the camp: some German priests join the "death convoy". April 29, 1945: Liberation of the camp. From early on until the end of the war there were two barracks dedicated to housing catholic priests, at the peak there were three full barracks dedicated to these men. This was a very important book to read. I am thankful that it came across my desk. I have been inspired by many of the stories. I have been encouraged by the faith these men lived and that over a third gave their life for. The research and writing was excellent, and I hope that someday Zeller's other books are translated into English as well. I recommend this book, read it so that we do not forget, read it so we are challenged, and read it so that we may be inspired.

A very disturbing and eye opening account of how terribly priests suffered due to the fact that they provided hope and the Nazi's knew that hope was their greatest challenge.

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