

WITNESSES TO FREEDOM

MARTYRS OF COMPIÈGNE

Veni, Sancte Spiritus

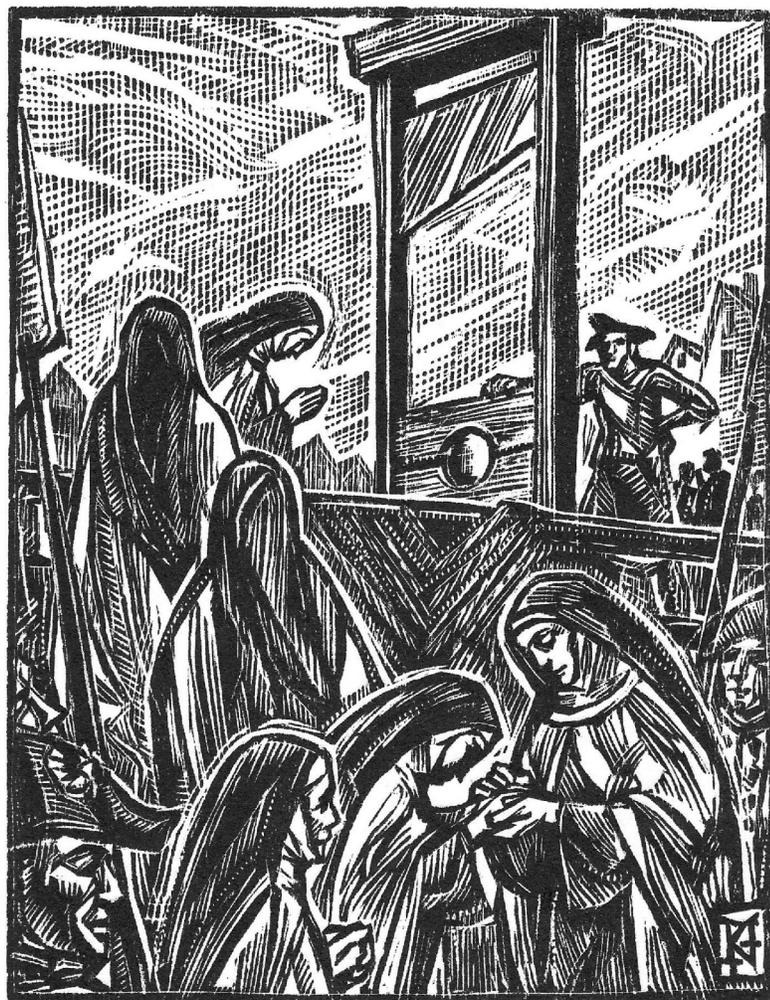
They offered their lives as a sacrifice to restore peace to France and to the Church. As the Revolution raged around them, boiling over to the Reign of Terror, their prayer came to a climax when sixteen sisters fell victim to the guillotine.

The Revolutionaries regarded the Catholic Church with scorn, because they saw the institution as too tied to the order they sought to upend. Contemplative orders, like the Carmelites, were targeted because they were not active. The Carmelites offered nothing useful to France, in the eyes of the Revolutionaries.

In 1792, the community of Carmelite nuns at Compiègne was split up, forced to abandon the habits they wore, and kept under watch. The sisters continued to meet and pray, and two years after their expulsion from the monastery, they were apprehended and jailed by the Revolutionaries.

On the day after a brief show trial, the sixteen Carmelite nuns were to be executed. They were paraded through the streets of Paris wearing their habits, because their secular clothes were being washed. As they approached the scaffold, they chanted the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and other hymns. Each one ascended the stairs, renewed her vows before her prioress, Mother Teresa of St. Augustine, and then calmly placed her head in the guillotine.

With each fall of the blade, the singing diminished, voice by voice. After the sixteenth and final sister had died, there was silence. This was unusual. Typically, an execution was preceded by a drumroll, and following the beheading, the crowd erupted in cheers, paradoxically believing that they were cheering for values such as freedom, equality, and reason. This time, the mood was somber. There were no drums nor cheering. The crowd dispersed in silence.



(The 16 Carmelite martyrs of Compiègne; woodcut by Robert F. McGovern. Copyright by and used with permission of ICS Publications, Washington, DC)

The nuns offered their lives in the hopes that God would bring peace to their land. Ten days after their execution, the Terror ended.

From the beginning of the Church, Christians have loved the land of their birth, and offered their lives for their countries, even when facing persecution. These Carmelite sisters shared in Christ's sacrifice in a most perfect way. They show us how to live and love with grace and dignity in a time of upheaval.

May Teresa of St. Augustine and Companions, Blessed Martyrs of Compiègne, pray for us!



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