

Jakob Gapp (1897-1943), one migrant among many



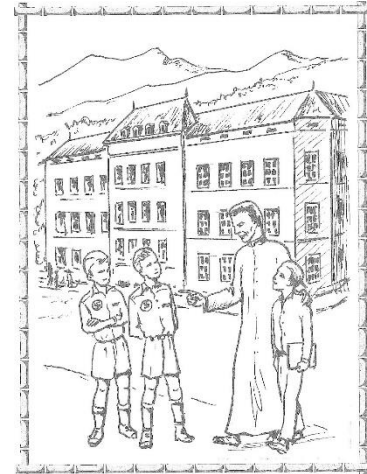
We know Blessed Jakob Gapp's uncompromising character and the analysis he made of the writings emanating from National Socialism: he was convinced "that Nazism and Catholicism are incompatible." He felt confirmed in this analysis by Pope Pius XI's letter: *Mit brennender Sorge* (With Burning Concern), secretly distributed and read in all Catholic parishes in Germany on March 21, 1937. He could not keep this truth to himself. He taught it to his students and to anyone else who would listen.

On March 12, 1938, Germany annexed Austria. Father Gapp was a teacher-educator in Graz. He was also committed to helping the poorest of the poor. The director of the Marieninstitut, fearing that the Nazis would take over the school, asked the religious to wear the swastika and make the Hitler salute, which Jacob naturally refused to do.

His superiors sent him to Freistadt, but the situation did not improve and he continued to teach the incompatibility of Nazism with Catholicism.

During the summer of 1938, when Father Jung was Assistant General, the situation was more than delicate (the schools had been seized by the authorities), and the religious were asked to go and work in other countries. As the Marianist schools had all been nationalized, Father Gapp took up a post as curate in a parish in the Tyrol, teaching catechism in the schools that still had some freedom to teach.

He answered young people's questions and showed them the incompatibility of Nazi ideology with the Christian faith. Denounced, he admitted the facts to the inspector and was suspended as a catechist. Taking refuge with his family, he worked at various jobs. On December 11, 1938, he preached in the parish of *Wattens*, where he was born. Despite his brother's warning, he denounced the Nazi campaign against the Peter's Pence. He also warned the people not to read Rosenberg's book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. The die was cast, he must leave, and quickly!



This political migrant, with a passport obtained from an acquaintance and a visa for France, took the train to Vienna and then Milan. After spending a few days at the Marianist school in Cannes, then in Montauban, he arrived in Bordeaux at the Chapel of the Madeleine. However, the mood is heavy with criticism of the Germans, lumping everyone together. Jakob, now Father Jacques (since he was in France), sometimes became too forceful in, defending his compatriots. Franco-German hostility was still strong after the First World War, and the rise of Nazism did not help matters. In addition, while Father Jacques helped in the community, he lacked mobility and human contact, since he was confined to the library of the Madeleine. He told his superiors that he would like to move to another community.

Spain could offer him a new refuge. On May 23, 1939, he left Bordeaux for San Sebastian, where, after an ill-timed Nazi salute from a young cleric, he felt he was in a more favorable climate than in France, but criticized the Spaniards for a lack of analysis of what was happening in Germany. Father Santiago Gapp experienced great inner instability and homesickness. He moved from one community to another: Cadiz, San Sebastian, Lequeitio, Valencia... and finally the deceptive "excursion" proposed by German "friends", which ended in Hendaye, where he was picked up by the Gestapo. Transferred to Berlin, after bearing witness to his faith and love for his country to the very end, he was declared a traitor to his country and executed on August 13, 1943.



The places where Fr. Gapp lived.

Jakob, like a hunted migrant, has much in common with today's migrants. Political exile, misunderstanding, prejudice and stereotypes are the lot of so many displaced people, sometimes treated like a child despite our good will. His experience invites us to take a broader look at the phenomenon of migration, to be wary of overly superficial analyses, and to dare to welcome others as they are, with their differences that can become shared wealth. Let us be touched by their lives, listen to their testimonies, the abuses they have suffered, open up to the geopolitics of their countries to better understand them.

How open are we going to be to these hunted people from elsewhere? Let us not forget to support them in prayer too, and entrust them to the intercession of Blessed Jakob Gapp: the exiled migrant who gave his life as a witness to the truth.