



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 20, 2011,  
*saint Bernard*

**Dear Friends,**

**"R**EMOVE these crucifixes from the rooms right away!" The officer in uniform was adamant—the law of the German Reich, which was all-powerful in early 1940, prohibited this religious sign in public places. However, none of the people present carried out the order. Several days earlier, during the opening of a new hospital wing in Mödling, a sister had taken responsibility for hanging a crucifix in each room, something that no one else had dared to do. Declared blessed on June 21, 1998 by Pope John Paul II, this nun, Restituta Kafka, was the first female martyr of Austria.

Helena Kafka was born on May 1, 1894 in Brünn-Hussowitz, in Moravia (now Brno in the Czech Republic). Her father, a humble shoemaker, worked hard to feed his seven children. The family soon moved to Vienna. Although Helena's childhood was marked by poverty, she received a strong Catholic upbringing. At the end of her compulsory schooling, she worked first as a domestic, then in a business. In 1913, drawn to serving the sick, Helena began working as a nurse's aid in the Vienna-Lainz hospital. There she encountered some nuns—the Franciscans of Christian Charity, more commonly known as the "Hartmann Sisters," after the street their motherhouse was on. The young woman decided to enter this congregation in order to devote herself more completely to the service of her neighbor through a life dedicated to God. As a postulant, Helena stayed a year working in Lainz. Her candidature was then examined by three sisters. She did not have the dowry that in theory was mandatory—her family did not have the means to give it. But her piety and zeal spoke in her favor. She was accepted into the novitiate and, with fourteen other young women, received the habit on October 23, 1915. She was given the religious name of Sister Restituta—Saint Restituta was a virgin Roman martyr of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The novice mistress instilled in the young religious some very simple practices that could nevertheless take them far on the path of perfection—regular confession, daily Communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and the Rosary. Sister Restituta would remain faithful to these, and would draw great strength from her devotion to Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows. In October 1916, she made her first vows. She arrived at the hospital in Mödling, outside Vienna, in 1919, and was soon named first assistant in the operating room. The head doctor of the clinic, Doctor Stöhr, was a demanding, difficult man, who had



Blessed Restituta Kafka

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already discouraged a number of sisters. Yet the surgeon and his assistant quickly reached an understanding. Helena's difficult childhood had taught her patience, and to adapt to the character of others while still standing her ground when necessary. She loved her work and her patients—her imaginative mind was full of ideas to improve the care they received.

## Sister "Resoluta"

**I**n Mödling, it was soon realized that the things Sister Restituta attended to turned out well. Short and already rather portly, she worked quickly and well. Her determined nature would earn her the nickname Sister "Resoluta". In the community of sisters, she was a source of infectious gaiety. During recreations, and especially during the time of carnival, she was irresistible. She knew that feasts and relaxation in common helped the sisters to overcome weariness and sadness. She thus represented a "bridge" between Doctor Stöhr and those whom this doctor's sometimes brusque behavior hurt from time to time. She always found a solution when someone was in need. "No beds available!" was said one day to an ill woman who had come for an operation. Immediately, Sister Restituta arranged for a bed to be put in a common room so that it could temporarily serve as a hospital room.

Admittedly, Sister Restituta was a rather unconventional nun. She often visited her former patients in their

homes. Sometimes, after an exhausting day, she would go to unwind in a nearby bar where the proprietor offered her a plate of goulash, her favorite dish, and a mug of beer. All this was outside the normal practice in her community. The other side of Sister Restituta's determined nature was a certain abruptness, which could catch people off guard—she did not mince her words, and had her own way of looking at things. Some of the nuns were a little afraid of her! All these shortcomings—which she confessed each month to the community in the “chapter of faults”—did not keep her from being loved and valued. Every evening she would be seen going—even if it was very late—to regain her spiritual strength in a long talk with JESUS at the tabernacle.

Over the course of her many years of service in the operating room, Sister Restituta gained a real competence, to the point that young doctors sometimes had the impression that she was the practitioner. They had no need to ask her for a surgical instrument, for it was already in her hands! Although overweight and with pain in her feet, and forced to spend all day standing, she nevertheless “ruled” in the operating room, and everything seemed as though it was simple for her. This situation of influence allowed her to exercise an apostolic role on the patients and the medical staff. It became customary in Mödling to consult with Sister Restituta when difficulties arose—for advice, financial assistance, a word of comfort... Religious from other Institutes who had been her patients asked her to care for them in their convents. But this professional and human success created jealousy. Young doctors did not appreciate that she categorically forbade them from smoking in the antechamber to the operating room—they thought that she overstepped her bounds and overshadowed them.

### **“May God be present...”**

**A**fter Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, the government strove to increase its control over every sector of social life, attacking the Catholic Church in particular. The Nazis sought to secularize the hospitals by suppressing any Christian presence as much as possible. Unfortunately, totalitarian states do not have a monopoly on such policies. In November 2009, a decree by the European Court of Justice tried to force Italy to remove the crucifixes from its public schools. In opposition to this aggressive secularism, Pope Benedict XVI said, on August 15, 2005: “In public life, it is important that God be present, for example, through the cross on public buildings, and that He be present in our community life...; otherwise, disputes become impossible to settle, for our common dignity is no longer recognized.” Then, on December 17, 2010, the Pope thanked the Italian ambassador for his government's resistance to the decree against the crucifixes: “[I]t is unthinkable to pursue authentic social progress by taking the way of marginalization or even of the explicit rejection of the religious factor, as in our times there is a tendency to do in various ways. One of these, for example, is the

attempt to eliminate from public places the display of religious symbols, and first of all of the crucifix, which is certainly the emblem par excellence of the Christian faith but which, at the same time, speaks to all people of good will and, as such, is not a discriminating factor.”

One of the doctors at the clinic, Doctor Stumfohl, was ambitious and an avowed Nazi, a member of the S.S. His presence soon became a menace for the nuns, and in particular for Sister Restituta, whom he detested. For her part, Sister Restituta made no secret of her opposition to the principles of National Socialism, which were irreconcilable with Catholicism. Frightened, some of the sisters told her: “Don't talk so much, hold your tongue.” Informers enabled Stumfohl to spy throughout the clinic. He forbade the nuns from calling a priest to the bedside of the dying, unless the patient had expressly asked for it. One of the nuns had to leave the clinic for having called a priest one evening to minister to a dying man. Sister Restituta opposed this incompetent practitioner's methods, in particular one time that he was about to amputate a patient's foot for no reason. She refused to cooperate, calmly pointing out to him that this action, which was medically unnecessary, would needlessly handicap this patient for life. Furious, Stumfohl had to acquiesce. Another time, when he had refused to allow a priest to administer Extreme Unction to a Polish man, Sister Restituta placed a crucifix in the sick man's hands, and prayed with him until he died peacefully. The doctor then warned the nun that if this happened again, she would suffer the consequences.

### **A carbon paper accuser**

**O**ne morning in December 1941, Sister Restituta entered the office of a secretary in the radiology department. She had in her hand a satirical poem about Hitler that was secretly circulating among Austrian soldiers enlisted in the German army. She asked the secretary to copy it on the typewriter—but in her impatience, the nun had not taken the essential precaution of closing the door. As she dictated the poem, an eavesdropping ear heard everything. Dr. Stumfohl was jubilant—he even found the carbon that had been used to make a second copy. He seized the occasion to report this sister who exasperated him to the Gestapo. For two months, nothing happened, and the sisters felt reassured. But on February 18, 1942, Ash Wednesday, four officers from the Gestapo entered the operating room where Sister Restituta, in a white coat, stood beside Doctor Stöhr, who made them wait. When the operation was over, they arrested the nun and immediately took her away. That very evening, the superior general told all the nuns to keep this all secret, “in the prisoner's interest.”

Using torture, the Gestapo tried in vain to make Sister Restituta reveal the name of the person who had given her the offending text. In early March, it was learned that Sister Restituta had been transferred to the regional prison in Vienna—the case was serious. She stayed there

thirteen months. She suffered from the solitude—she missed the community terribly, all the more because visits from the sisters were rare. In moments of despondency, she bitterly asked herself: “Have they forgotten me so quickly, when I worked so hard for the congregation?” She did not know that mail and visits were drastically limited—one visit every other month, and one letter a month. Nevertheless, the prisoner united herself spiritually with the community. She wrote to her superior general: “There, by the tabernacle, we are all united, and no abyss can separate us.”

Her fellow prisoners noticed the gentleness and attention to others of this small woman, whom they nicknamed “Restl”. This nun who found herself in darkness and the shadow of death quickly became a light in the darkness for her fellow captives. She cared in particular for one of the women, who had been imprisoned for infanticide. This poor woman suffered from a skin disease and was not even able to pick up her food in her hands. The other prisoners yelled at her: “You let your baby die of hunger—now it’s your turn!” but Sister Restituta fed her with her own hands. She knew that JESUS had come to call not the just, but sinners.

### ***“This will end well”***

**I**n the Nazi prison, milk and butter were reserved for people of “German blood”—the others did not have a right to them. Sister Restituta shared her portion with the non-German women, Jews and others. To those who spent their time complaining and uttering words of despair, the nun always said, “This will end well, all will end well. Evil cannot triumph.” When the rumor spread that she was going to be sentenced, all her fellow prisoners took up her refrain: “This will end well—we will pray for you,” even those who said they were atheists. But she calmly replied, “No, I will not be back. I am going to die.”

On October 29, 1942, Sister Restituta was brought to trial before the “People’s Court” of Vienna. She was accused of having “written a subversive poem” against the Führer and of having “published a pamphlet hostile to the State.” In reality, the accused was not the author of the poem, and the pamphlet in question consisted of a single carbon copy. Hitler’s regime was searching for a pretext to strike the Catholic Church in the person of a nun particularly known for her resistance. She was remembered to be the one who had put the crucifixes on the hospital walls. At the end of this parody of a trial, the accused was sentenced to be beheaded “for conspiring against the homeland and attempting high treason.” She calmly received this sentence that horrified her sisters present in the audience. When he learned of the sentence, in tears Doctor Stumfohl exclaimed, “I didn’t want that!”

A number of attempts were made to save the Franciscan nun’s life. Doctor Stöhr asked that she be par-

doned on account of her professional competence; the sister vicar (first assistant) left for Berlin; the Archbishop of Vienna himself intervened on her behalf. On January 1, 1943, the congregation began a perpetual novena for this intention to the apostle Saint Jude Thaddeus, who is greatly venerated in the Germanic countries. All these efforts ran up against the inflexible will of Martin Bormann, the Führer’s “*éminence grise*”, who considered this execution—which would be the only one of its kind of a nun from the “German race”—as indispensable for intimidating the clergy and the entire Catholic Church.

From then on, Sister Restituta was imprisoned in the cell for those condemned to death, where she would remain for five months. However, her fellow prisoners managed to come close to her. Anna Haider, a Communist who escaped the death penalty, related, “Sister Restituta was sitting, saying the Rosary. I knelt in front of her and saw that she was crying. I told her, ‘My God, Restl, now it’s your turn!’ She replied, ‘Do not think that I am crying because I must die. I am crying with joy, because you will live.’ At the end, she told me, ‘I have lived for Christ, and for Christ I will die... yes, I will die!’ These words are forever engraved in my heart.”

### ***The doctor of souls***

**J**ESUS CHRIST, the doctor of souls, decided to care Himself for this nurse who had become a patient. He broke her rough exterior like a nut, using the cruelty of the Nazi regime to make visible the heart hidden inside, burning with supernatural charity. At the clinic, Sister Restituta worked hard, but she had decision-making power. She was, as they say, “an institution.” In prison, she was nothing more than an “enemy of the people”, humiliated, starved, and destined for the guillotine. On this nun, who was used to getting up at three-thirty in the morning, brimming with activity, God imposed passivity—the rules forbade her from leaving her bunk before six-thirty. She liked to be in charge—but she had to obey her jailers and allow herself to be led “like a sheep to the slaughter.” Her wealth was her ability to lavish care on the sick—yet she no longer could give them anything but her silent annihilation offered up for them.

The Franciscan nun had noticed a pregnant prisoner who was at risk of losing her baby due to malnutrition. She regularly gave her part of her meager portion of potatoes. In November 1942, a little girl was born in prison, and her mother wanted her to be baptized Restituta. Prudently, “Restl” dissuaded her. The little girl would be named Helena, the baptismal name of the woman who had saved her through her sacrifices. The prisoners’ admiration grew. One of them declared, “Such faith, such kindness, such selflessness, is absolutely unique!” For his part, the prison chaplain, Msgr. Köck, later confided, “She was a great support for me in my ministry among the prisoners.”

## **"Yes, my Father!"**

One month before her death, the prisoner wrote to her superior general: "Each day, I wait for my way of the cross to reach Mount Calvary... whether it be now or later, may the holy Will of God be done. In this holy Will I find all my consolation. Each day, I say, 'Yes, my Father!' and all goes well." Three days after her condemnation, she had her "will and testament" sent to her sisters. She asked for their forgiveness for all the trouble she had caused them, and thanked them for the benefits she had received. She forgave those who had done her harm, especially Doctor Stumfohl. She asked them not to cry, but to pray that she might have a good death. She was able to write, on January 31, 1943: "I have abundantly experienced the fact that the Saviour and His Mother never abandon us. I know that I will not have to carry my cross a second longer than God has prescribed. It is not through my merit that I walk this path with so much courage, but thanks to the innumerable prayers and sacrifices that daily rise toward Heaven on my behalf."

On March 30, 1943, the condemned was brutally told that the moment of her execution had come. Trembling, she renewed the total offering of herself she had made on the day of her religious profession. They took her ring of profession and all her clothes, which were replaced with a paper tunic—she would die in the poverty of Saint Francis. Msgr. Köck and another priest, Father Ivanek, assisted her. At the moment that she was

led to the guillotine, she asked Father Ivanek to make the sign of the cross on her forehead. A moment later, the priests heard the thud of the falling blade: "We thought at that moment that Heaven had become richer with one more soul loving God." A fellow prisoner who survived would testify, "Many of us, even those condemned to death, said, 'I would like to die like Sister Restituta.'"

On December 4, 1942, the Nazis, fearing that Sister Restituta might be venerated as a martyr, forbade her body to be returned to the congregation, and so it was thrown in the common grave. The terrified nuns did not dare even to mention her. However, Father Ivanek could not remain silent; he told them about Sister Restituta's edifying death and quoted her last words, "I have lived for Christ; I want to die for Christ." Her confessor, Father Schebesta, in turn would testify, "Sister Restituta's gruff and very determined nature always surprised me, because deep down, she was a tender soul... I well thought that God had reserved for her a heavy trial. ... I have no doubt about it—in prison, she became a saint." The first beneficiary of the martyr's heavenly intercession was Josefine Zimmerl, an elderly woman who had been a fellow prisoner of Sister Restituta's. The mother of a resistance member who had been executed and in the resistance herself, she could hardly hope for clemency from the authorities. Nevertheless, one day Sister Restituta had told her, "The first thing I will do when I am with God will be to ask Him to free you." On April 1<sup>st</sup>, two days after the nun's execution, the authorities came to tell Josefine she had been freed.

During Sister Restituta's beatification, John Paul II emphasized, "It was her witness to the Cross of Christ that cost her her head. She kept this witness in her heart and renewed it just before her execution, when she asked the prison chaplain to make the Sign of the Cross on her forehead. ... Looking at Blessed Sister Restituta, we can see to what heights of spiritual maturity a person can be led, if she abandons herself to the benevolent hands of God. ... Many things can be taken from us Christians. But the Cross as a sign of salvation will not be taken from us. We will not allow it be removed from public life! ... Thank you, Blessed Sister Restituta Kafka, for having swum against the tide of the times!" Then, speaking to the youth, the Pope exclaimed, "Plant the Cross of Christ in your life! The Cross is the true tree of life!"

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