

‘SAINTS’ OF THE WEEK

Remembering the fallen men and women religious of D Day Normandy

To mark the anniversary of D-Day, the Diocese of Bayeux and Lisieux unveiled a plaque at the cathedral to honour 138 little-known nuns, priests, and seminarians killed in the bombings. Below are profiles of some of these men and women, several of whom courageously risked their lives to save Jews and members of the Resistance.



The Battle of Normandy took place 80 years ago. Among the 13,000 civilians who lost their lives in Normandy during the D-Day landings, the Diocese of Bayeux and Lisieux honoured 138 nuns, priests, and seminarians who died in the bombings. A plaque bearing their name was unveiled at a Mass celebrated in Bayeux Cathedral on June 8. Father Pascal Marie, parish priest of Honfleur (Calvados), with the help of three parishioners, was responsible for this memorial project, which aims to give a new face to the men and women who disappeared in the rubble of the Liberation.

► *Mother Saint Mechtilde, and the Benedictine nuns of Notre-Dame-du-Pré*

On the morning of June 7, in Lisieux (Calvados), the Abbey of Notre-Dame-du-Pré was devastated by the Allied bombing raids that destroyed much of the town. The surviving nuns gathered amid the flames, the ruins of the monastery founded in 1050 by a relative of William the Conqueror, and the corpses of their sisters. “The officiant addressed the others, saying, ‘My sisters, we’re going to do what we know best, pray the office.’ And on the morning of June 7, they sang lauds for peace, freedom, and the world,” Father Marie recounted. Twenty-one Benedictine nuns died in the bombing, which killed 800 people in Lisieux. Among them was the prioress, Saint Mechtilde — born Georgette Graffet. This “extraordinary and courageous woman,” according to Father Marie, who retraced her life, was born on April 14, 1881, at Mesnil-Bacley, near Livarot in the Pays d’Auge. Serving as prioress since 1933, she willingly responded to the request of a lawyer from Pont-l’Évêque, Maître Féquet, after the persecution of the Jews began and opened the monastery guesthouse to young Jewish women. The other nuns referred to them as “our mother’s friends.” The abbey was denounced in a collaborationist newspaper, *L’Œuvre*. After the article was published and having written a right of reply to protect Saint Mechtilde and the nuns, Maître Féquet was arrested and deported to Dachau, where he died in 1945.

Another Benedictine nun killed by the bombings that day was Mother Lioba Baker, who “shouldn’t have been there,” said Father Pascal Marie. This Notre-Dame-du-Pré nun was indeed of English origin. As early as 1940, the Germans arrested any religious belonging to the Allied nations,” recalled the Norman priest. In the Diocese of Lisieux, more than 20 nuns were interned in camps in Besançon and Vittel. How did Mother Lioba manage to stay? This is proof that Mother Mechtilde had hidden not only Jews but also her sisters in her community.

► *Fr François Victor Bousso and the Caen hostages executed on the morning of D-Day*

"Whoever you are, if you are in need, this is your home. The inscription on the door of the presbytery in Oully-le-Tesson (Calvados) was written by the parish priest, Fr François Victor Bousso. Born in Morbihan in 1881, this Oblate of Mary Immaculate first served as a missionary in Canada before returning to France in 1923 for health reasons. On June 2, 1944, Abbé Bousso was preparing a burial in his church when he was arrested by the Gestapo, along with other members of the resistance network to which he belonged. "Father Pascal Marie explained: “Since 1943, he had been hiding young resistance fighters from the Obligatory

Labor Service (set up by the Vichy regime, forcing them to go and work in Germany in exchange for the return of prisoners). A small resistance group formed around him before joining a larger network, that of Dr. Derrien, in Argences.

The arrested resistance fighters were taken to Caen prison. "On the morning of June 6, just as D-Day had begun, the Germans brought 86 prisoners out of their cells, including Abbot Bousso, and executed them in a small courtyard," continued Father Marie. Their bodies were never found.

► *Sister Pacifique, Sister François-Régis, Sister Saint-Philibert... nuns under the rubble*

Sister Pacifique, born in Shanghai in 1900, was Little Sister of the Poor at the convent in Lisieux. On June 7, 1944, during the bombing raid that devastated the city, "Ma maison," the hospice of the Little Sisters of the Poor, was largely destroyed. Thirteen of the community's 17 nuns and 60 elderly residents were killed. "Sister Pacifique was injured, blocked by a huge bookcase that fell on her," recounted Father Pascal Marie. "When the rescuers, who had been working tirelessly for several hours, approached her to try to free her, seeing them tired, she said, 'But you must be hungry? Go and eat, then come and look after me.' When they returned, after sharing a tin of sardines unearthed by a rescued nun, Sister Pacifique was dead," continued Father Marie.

The parish priest of Honfleur found other vivid accounts of nuns killed in the bombing, sometimes at the bedside of the wounded they were caring for. For example, Sister Saint Philibert (in civilian life Yvonne Halley), a Sister of Mercy, a congregation of nursing nuns, was killed in the Caen bombardment on June 7 at the age of 32, along with 15 other nuns from her community, after a day spent tirelessly caring for the wounded, as was Sister Saint Hildegarde. Her family members will be at the Mass in Bayeux on June 8. Thérèse Enault, aged 100, will also attend the Mass in memory of her sister, Madeleine Belhache, Sister Saint François-Régis, a Providence de Lisieux nun who died at the age of 23 on June 7, 1944. Madeleine took the habit in September 1943," she recalled. She disappeared in the flames of her convent along with 19 other nuns from her congregation." "The bodies of the Sisters of Providence, buried under the rubble, were not found until 17 years later during excavation work. "Many families were unable to mourn immediately after the war, as there were no graves or memorial sites," confirmed Father Marie.

► *Fr Jacques Leclerc, the man who hid airmen in his bell tower*

Fr Jacques Leclerc, 31, vicar in the parish of Dives-sur-Mer, was hiding airmen in his church tower when he was arrested on July 3, 1944, taken to Pont-l'Évêque prison, tortured, and then executed by the Gestapo, as the fighting in this corner of Normandy lasted until the end of August. The priest's body was found in a mass grave in 1946, along with those of 27 other victims. He was identified by his breviary, marked on the July 9 page. Abbot Leclerc worked hard to feed the children at the oratory during the war. Speaking English, he provided translation services for the British who parachuted into the region. Involved in the Resistance and aware that he was risking his life, this only son, whose parents had died, decided in 1943 to file a will with a notary, bequeathing the family inheritance to "needy Catholic charities." In the 1960s, his inheritance was used to build the *Secours Catholique* building in Caen.

The story of Jacques Leclerc resurfaced in 2019 at a market in Marrakesh. Alain Pignel, a Parisian on vacation in Morocco, found a chalice for sale bearing the name of Abbot Leclerc. He then investigated to find a Jacques Leclerc ordained in 1941 and to understand how his chalice ended up in Morocco, in perfect condition, decades later. The sacred object is believed to have been stolen by the French mistress of the Gestapo officer who had the Norman priest executed and fled to Morocco after the end of the war in Germany. The restored chalice was used at the Mass celebrated in Bayeux Cathedral on June 8.

Among the other sacred vessels used at the June 8 Mass was a chalice belonging to Fr Jean Daligault. Fr Daligault, who was also a priest of the Bayeux diocese, did not live through the Normandy Landings. An early Resistance fighter, he was arrested by the Gestapo on August 31, 1941, in Villerville, a fishing village between Trouville and Honfleur, before being deported to Germany. Executed at Dachau on April 28, 1945, the day before the camp's liberation, this priest-artist created tiny works during his deportation — 200 of which have been found and are now on display at the Musée de la Résistance et de la déportation (Museum of the Resistance and Deportation) in Besançon and the Mémorial de Caen — which bear witness "to Nazi barbarism, but also and above all to the spiritual strength and artistic instinct of which man is capable in the face of the most absolute adversity," Father Marie explained.