**Titus Brandsma’s Spiritual Journey**

As recounted by Constant Dölle (translated by John Vriend) in

**Encountering God in the Abyss**

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**Thematic Summary**

***Biographical Timeline of Titus Brandsma:***

* **Born:** 23 February 1881, named Anno Sjoerd Brandsma
* **Early years:** grew up near Bolsward in panoramic Frisian countryside; stable, strongly religious upbringing; 5 of 6 children became Religious.
* **Entered Minor Seminary (Franciscan):** September 1892
* **Joined Carmelites:** 1898 at Boxmeer – took religious name of “Titus” (his father’s name)
* **1st Profession:** 1899
* **Priestly Ordination:** 1905
* **Post-grad studies in Rome:** 1905-1909 (Ph.D)
* **School teacher:** 1909 at Oss; subsequently Head Teacher and active in founding a number of other Catholic schools
* **Professor of Philosophy:** 1923 at University of Nijmegen; subsequently **Rector** for many years; at the same time, he was **authorised examiner** to supervise final examinations at Catholic secondary schools in Holland; **Chair of Board** of Association of Roman Catholic High Schools & Gymnasia, 1925-42. (His struggle for the rights of Catholic schools led to increasing attention being paid to him by the German government)

“What the students especially appreciated in their professor was his understanding of everyone’s peculiar bent and ambition”.

* **Ecclesiastical Adviser to Catholic Journalists:** 1935
* His basic objection to Nazism was based on its distorted human image, whereby people are subjected to an all-powerful, strong hero, whilst they are stripped of their creativity and become subservient.
* Brandsma’s human image was that of a person able to live and think independently and maturely and who has acquired so much respect for life and so much inner freedom that he/she is receptive to the hidden signs of God’s presence in the world.
* He had great respect for the role of journalists and advocated for their professional training and development and the payment of just wages.
* He refused to place Nazi advertisements in the Catholic papers.
* **Arrest:** 19 January 1942 – detained in Scheveningen prison
* Wrote 7 chapters of biography of Teresa of Avila
* **Transferred to Amersfoort prison:** 12 March 1942
* At Amersfoort, he helps sick prisoner Jan Hoffmann, devoid of too much concern for his own suffering:
* *From* *within a circle of inviolable inner freedom;*
* *He was open to all … “impressive by virtue of his spiritual inviolability”;*
* He ministered from a world of inner serenity.
* Under the ruse of giving a lecture on Dutch literary history he gave a meditation on Good Friday on the religious meaning of the mysticism of suffering, addressing the questions:
* How can you make sense of your life of suffering that is inescapable?
* How can you keep yourself from being crushed by it?
* How can you learn to bear it?
* He spoke from the heart to the heart.
* Brandsma’s fellow prisoners recognised his inner freedom:
* “Freed from grim self-effort and fear, he was receptive to the power that comes from God”.
* The most mysterious aspect of this was that he was now more himself than ever before.
* **Verdict of Deportation to Dachau:** 6 May 1942
* **Transferred to Kleve holding prison:** 16 May 1942
* **Despatched to Dachau:** 16 June 1942
* Befriended by Br Raphael (Carmelite from Mainz), who post-war wrote a record of their experiences.
* In his final days, when his death was a certainty, he was nursed by Tatia. She related: *Whenever you came into the infirmary there was a group of sick people, all stooped and bent by fatigue and pain, standing around Titus’ bed. With a lonely death facing them they looked for a last moment of comfort in each other’s company. They found it especially by Titus’ bedside. There was in him something that gave people confidence.*
* **Died:** 26 July 1942, having being administered a fatal injection.
* **Beatified:** 3 November 1985

***About the Author:***

* Dölle knew Brandsma since he (Dölle) was 7 years old - Brandsma being a visiting Priest to his village. Brandsma was the examiner for Dölle’s final secondary school exams and used to visit the family home. Dölle later became a Carmelite Priest.
* Dölle’s mother found Brandma to be a simple man who inspired confidence and whom she could trust.
* Dölle became blind in the process of writing this book. Writing Brandsma’s biography became a process of reconciling himself to his own situation of ageing and becoming blind; he saw similarities with and drew inspiration from Brandsma’s experience of his journey to the end of his possibilities:

*What I learned from Titus is to accept oneself with one’s own possibilities and limitations … He opted in freedom to go the way he had to go …take life as it is.*

* “Although this book reflects the course of Titus Brandsma’s life, it does no more than set down how he, by searching, found his way in the untrodden landscape we call his ‘life’”.
* **“Ultimately, it is not the author or ‘narrators’ who speak to us from the platform of this book but the ‘readers’ who in reading it become conscious of the course of their own life”.**
* From Brandsma, others learn to entrust themselves to God in circumstances they do not understand but which shape their journey.

***Brandsma’s spiritual journey:***

* His upbringing was stable; this was the way of life he experienced both in his family and in the Church; stability was a focus and ideal.
* After minor seminary, Brandsma opted for the Carmelites, having developed a strong interest in Carmelite spirituality. He was powerfully drawn to the mystical side of life in the monastery at Boxmeer, where he undertook his initial formation. He was struck by the sign “Silentium perpetuum”, which he regarded as a personal invitation into a process.
* “He described his cell in detail; he is obviously at home in it. It is his inner world. He will be at home everywhere. “My cell” can be understood as the key phrase for Titus’ experience of God’s nearness. In the final phase of his life it returns – in a poem which became widely known in the post-war years. In his first letter he wrote about his cell and his fellow brothers; in his last writings what is left is only his cell; but again he writes that his is happy there. His cell is his mighty fortress, the ever-living wellspring of life. There he became familiar with God’s nearness”.
* As a student, Brandsma began publishing, his first work being a translation of select works of Teresa of Avila.

*In Teresa, he recognized something of himself. She could be restlessly at work without losing herself. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the challenges she faced, she decided to do whatever she was capable of.*

* Brandma’s motto: *Take the days as they come*. It indicates his being in touch with reality, but wanting to do things that are important. His realism creates balance in his life.
* During difficult times in his studies, he immersed himself in the experiences of mystical writers with which he could identify. He turned his gaze inwards: he was in “his cell”.
* Activity alternated with silence throughout his life.
* He understood Carmelite life as having a two-fold goal:
1. “To meet our obligations”
2. “Already in this life to some extent taste in our heart and experience in our spirit the gracious impact of the divine presence and the sweetness of the heavenly glory”.
* Brandsma’s life coincided with a period of restoration of the Church in Holland. There was a focus on externals and a wariness of the **mystical dimension** of faith. **Titus, however, believed that this was the foundation of the true recovery of the Church and it motivated him, no matter how busy he was.**
* He was very involved in the advancement of Frisian culture and the development of the Frisian people. However, the renewal of the spiritual life of Dutch Catholics was his primary objective. He believed/demonstrated that **persons touched by an abundance of grace will also be caught up in an abundance of activity in their life**.
* Brandsma was an eclectic philosopher, but the mystical life was his strong suit. He immersed himself in the experiences of the mystical authors. He was conscious of the inexhaustible mystery of life’s connectedness (past and present). **His central idea was that God is inexpressibly near to us in this world:** *To believe in God is to live in God.*
* The theme of “balance” or “equilibrium” frequently surfaces in his writing.
* His teaching that the mystical person continually lets go of him/herself was Brandsma’s secret for being able to do so many things.
* When Brandsma spoke of mysticism, Godfried Bomans (student of Brandsma’s) “infallibly sensed that Titus’ words did not proceed from academic theories but had to do with his own experiences”.
* In spiritual talks, Brandsma used the image of the “enclosed garden”, a metaphor for the ideal world (paradise) at the beginning of creation. He wrote: *We must turn our heart into a garden* and *We must make our hearts into a Carmel.*
* The God about whom Brandsma speaks is a God who wants to be near, uniquely present to people. This same idea is present in Teresa of Avila’s poem:

*And if, by chance, you do not know*

*where you will find Me,*

*do not wander to and fro,*

*for if you want to find Me,*

*you must find Me in you.*

*Because you are My dwelling place,*

*you are My house and home,*

*and so I call out at any time,*

*whenever in your thoughts*

*I find the door closed.*

* Brandsma’s refusal to place ads in the Catholic papers as directed by the government in 1941 led to his arrest and detention (at Scheveningen). He entered a cell in which the hours no longer held sway over the person, where there is a timeless silence and where God’s world totally enveloped him … a mystic’s view.
* Brandsma detached himself inwardly from the grip the Nazis had on him – and turned a disadvantage into an advantage … ***I am happy in my cell*** *-* **“A cell becomes sweeter to the degree it is more faithfully inhabited”**(Thomas á Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*)
* The way in which Brandsma reacted to his imprisonment is characteristic of people with a strong will to live. He did not allow himself to be overpowered by the space in which he was confined.
* Like Teresa of Avila (writing about the castle of the soul), Brandsma – both in his 1st letter home after entering the monastery as a boy and in writing about his prison cell, writes about the room at the centre of the building.
* Brandsma could be “in his cell” everywhere. To “stay in one’s cell” means to seek out the silence, to be by yourself.
* Brandsma lived in his own inner world – not a separate world – but in the world in which he lived.
* “In the greatest desolation, Titus Brandsma could be happy” – he had joy from within.
* Brandsma drew on Carmelite spirituality – a bridge between Christianity, Judaism and Islam, drawing on the inspiration of Elijah. Its deepest ground is the search for the living God.
* In jail in Scheveningen, Brandsma was realistic about the consequences of his statements and actions; the poem he wrote there (cf. Extract, p. 118) expresses his acceptance of the consequences of his behaviour:
* This poem is a form of dialogue, expressing powerlessness and emptiness on the one hand and a deep desire to somehow reach the ears of God who is silent.
* Brandsma felt himself being absorbed into the sacred.
* It follows a previous time of emptiness and dread.
* His call now is to a place of quiet encounter.
* He returned to himself and to Him who sustained his life: he experiences peace and being loved by God;
* He is opening to God as one renouncing one’s self-centredness.
* He expresses an “I – Thou” relationship with God: wonder, emotion, fear, gratitude.
* His use of “friend” indicates intimacy.
* He reveals an eye for the person behind every façade.
* He reveals a challenge for which he draws strength in his inner life.
* He shows resignation in a time of suffering and disaster.
* He demonstrates the Mystics belief that suffering has a positive meaning … one becomes transformed in God – a source of power and hope.
* He is freed from attachment to self-preservation; he worked for the liberation of people.
* Amid all the violence, he encounters the love of God … his life is rooted in God, not himself.
* Brandsma inhabits the mystical space of solitude in which one experiences freedom
* Silence and solitude took him into the space of his own heart;
* Within the clear, plain walls, in the intimate light of his cell, he finds the inner silence and refined attention which makes him sensitive to the friendly presence of God;
* He is always, wherever he is, in the inner silence of his cell.
* **Increasingly, Brandsma became the Carmelite that the Carmelite Rule envisages.**
* A contemplative encounter with God: God is near.
* Brandsma retained a sense of humour in his predicament: *the fact that in my old age I ended up in a jail cell, tended more to make me laugh than that the tragedy of it could depress me …*
* **Brandsma witnessed that we see God when we allow ourselves to be transformed in his infinite silence.**
* Over many years, Brandsma had practised silence as a way of life.
* His favourite text from Teresa of Avila:  *Let nothing disturb you; let nothing alarm you. All things pass, only God never changes. Patience conquers all. Those who hold onto God lack nothing.*
* Throughout a month and a half in Sheveningen he wrote seven chapters of a biography on Teresa of Avila for which he had been commissioned. He wrote this text in the margins of another book he had because he had no other writing materials.
* Brandsma experienced a personally testing time at Amersfoort, as expressed in the poem:

*Grief would come and lay me low,*

*No chance to make it go away,*

*Nor with any tears allay,*

*Else had I done it long ago.*

*Then it came and on me weighed,*

*Till I lay still and no more wept,*

*Learned to watch and patience kept;*

*Thereafter it no longer stayed.*

*All that is passed and set aside’ from far away I still recall*

*And cannot understand at all*

*That ancient grief nor why I cried.*

* “What comes across in this poem is not the language of power. It is the language of a person who has been sidelined, who is no longer a factor to be reckoned with, but who has nevertheless positioned himself in reality in a way that is entirely his own, which, consequently, is still there. He has his memories of past years, memories of a well-ordered life of praying and working, and the security he found there. Now he has found a new security which no one can take from him because they themselves do not know this security”.
* Brandsma achieved an inner security in which he knew his cries of anguish were being heard; a security embedded in the all-embracing presence of God, a security found in waiting and being patient.
* “A person who has thus experienced this acceptance as a favour and himself as altogether open and desirous of this favour can say of himself that he is happy in his cell”.
* “We do not belong to ourselves – both our origin and our destiny is given to us”.
* On May 16 1942, Brandsma arrived in Kleve, a transit station on the way to Dachau.
* In this prison, fear destroyed his inner peace; his cell was no longer a place in which he could be alone and find rest. God seemed far away and silent.
* Brandsma had to go through a “dark night” of solitude and helplessness:
* No other comfort than inner capacity for listening (cf. John of the Cross: *O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn.*
* Brandsma reached a point of “relinquishment” (leaving events to themselves), meaning he had to relinquish himself. “Those who relinquish themselves to God find themselves again as they have never been before, but do not recognize themselves. They find the most essential nature of their existence that lies deeply concealed in the unknown depths of their life”.
* He adjusts to “take the days as they come”: in a new and purified way, this gave him rest.
* For Titus, “relinquishment” meant surrendering everything to him who is greater than we and will not drop us.
* At the end of his life, Titus relinquished the desire to be at home in his cell. *He was at home nowhere*. In this respect he was walking in the footsteps of the first Carmelites who relinquished Mount Carmel, not knowing where that might lead.

***Lessons from Brandsma’s life:***

* Opening lines of a poem from his prison cell at Scheveningen explains the source of his inner strength: *O Jesus, when I see you, I know again that I love you and that also your heart loves me ...*
* The experience of those with him at Dachau was that Brandsma’s serene inner peace came from a deep source: *Your nearness makes all things well within me* – enabling him to be so serene in the midst of so much activity and so many concerns.
* Brandsma taught that our orientation towards God comes from within ourselves: *The indwelling and inworking of God must not only be the object of intuition but also manifest themselves in our life, come to expression in our words and deeds, and radiate from our whole being and behaviour.*
* In his 1932 Foundation Day Rector’s speech at the University of Nijmegen, Brandsma said: *The idea of God is not immutable like rock but manifests itself in our lives in ever-shifting images which do not mean an essential change but place our idea of God in a different light.* **Titus calls for great openness to this variability of the idea of God. We must seek the Eternal One in time.**
* **God is the deepest ground of our being**

… a person notices that he/she is being moved and shaped by forces that come from the core of his/her being;

… to open oneself up to the inner world is to experience it as mystery. It is not from oneself … it is given to us.

God’s life in us is dynamic – continually coming to power in us: God is an inner power who impacts us in a liberating and clarifying way and causes us to look a the world differently.

**This sense of God in/with him enabled Brandsma to be at home anywhere, whether in the midst of people or in the silence of his cell.**

* Brandsma taught that God works in humans in such a hidden way that all that is human remains and is not destroyed and that **in the inner life of every human being there are moments of waiting and receiving – alongside a time for decision, action and self-giving**.
* Real life is shaped and led by what we can understand and is rational but also by the accidental.
* Brandsma taught: ***Kneel before the image of God in your brother****.*
* Brandsma’s respect for people arises from the fact that they are connected with each other in and through God. This respect for others induces a person to give his/her fellow humans the space in which they can be themselves.
* On June 16 1942, Brandsma was dispatched to Dachau, where he was stripped of all dignity, known only as number 30492.
* He conducted himself as if he lived in freedom. His inner silence was something no one could take from him.
* Terrible indignities suffered at Dachau. From this time on, Titus died continually: he let go of what he expected from this human existence, and abandoned himself to what became possible in the eyes of God. His deepest base was the certainty of his being beloved … *O Jesus, when I look on you My love for you becomes more true. And yours, I know, will never end: You see me as a special friend.*
* Raphael repeatedly mentions the serenity and balance which Brandsma displayed.
* Brandsma remained totally serene … he displayed the mystic’s spirit of “disinteredness”.
* “The man who beat and kicked him could not touch his interior life”.
* “The Capuchin pater Othmarus comments: *An eternal smile full of patience and inner serenity, a smile of mystical resignation in the all suffering he had to bear, marked Titus. He had been maltreated so badly that his teeth literally hung loose in his mouth. He repaid all that with the prayer of Christ: ‘Father, forgive them’. Neither I nor anyone else ever heard him complain. He was a saint.*
* “In Scheveningen and Amersfoort he lived and spoke from the riches of his knowledge and experience, as that became evident from his interrogation, his defence, his speech about Geert Grote. In Kleve and Dachau he realized that he had been abandoned by the authorities. This realization shocked him deeply. After a severe
* inner conflict he surrendered. He no longer expected a rescue. The only thing that was strongly alive in him was the realization that he was in God’s hands and that his dignity was ‘inviolable’”.
* His reflection in Scheveningen, *I know that You love me*, sustained him.
* On 26 July 1942, Brandsma was administered a fatal injection and died.