

Who was Fr. Richard Henkes S.A.C?

On May 25, 2003, in the St. Mary's Church of the Pallottines, the Bishop of Limburg Franz Kamphaus opened in a solemn vespers the Episcopal inquiry into the beatification process for the Pallottine Father Richard Henkes. That morning, the Czech Bishop of Ostrava-Opava Frantisek Lobkowitz had celebrated a Pontifical Mass in St. Mary's. In his diocese, Father Henkes had worked in the parish before his arrest by the Gestapo. In the Holy Year 2000, the Czech Bishops' Conference had unanimously pledged its support for a beatification. In January 2001, the provincial chapter of the Limburg Pallottines recommended to the provincial council that the Diocese of Limburg be asked to initiate a process of beatification for Richard Henkes together with the Pallottines. Father Henkes came from the Westerwald, but worked faithfully for most of his priestly life in the then German East as a teacher, retreat master, and as a sought-after preacher. Especially in light of his beatification, the heroic actions of Fr. Richard Henkes should be honored. He volunteered to care for those with typhoid in block 17 of the concentration camp Dachau. He became infected and died on February 22, 1945, shortly before the end of World War II. His first biographer, Georg Reitor, calls him a witness of faith and a martyr of charity.

Richard Henkes was born on May 26, 1900 in the village of Ruppach near Montabaur. He visited the High School of the Pallottines in Vallendar. Before he was summoned to Griesheim and Darmstadt for military service in 1918, he passed the one-year exam at the High School in Montabaur. At the end of 1918, he was able to return to Vallendar, graduated from high school in 1919, and entered the Pallottine community in Limburg. In 1921, he made the first consecration, was ordained a priest in Limburg in 1925, and from 1926 was an inspiring teacher in the Pallottine high schools in Schoenstatt, the Alps and, after a year of interruption by a severe pulmonary tuberculosis, again in Schoenstatt. In 1931, he was transferred to the school in Katscher in Upper Silesia and in 1937 to Frankenstein / Silesia. In addition to his teaching profession, religious confrontation with the national socialism became his second great calling. This socialism represented an unchristian belief, fought the Christian churches, killed disabled people, and above all increasingly persecuted the Jewish people and sought to destroy them. During this time, Fr. Henkes courageously and publicly represented the values of Christianity in the school, in numerous retreat courses for the youth, and in his homilies. Already in 1937, he was brought before the Gestapo after a homily in his homeland Ruppach. A few months later, he was charged in Katscher with alleged denigration of the Führer and a trial was held against him at the Special Court in Breslau, which remained unaffected because of the amnesty law after the annexation of Austria to the German Reich. In 1938, the superiors took the endangered brother completely out of school. Then he worked as a youth pastor, retreat master - especially in Branitz - and as a sought-after preacher in Upper Silesia, most recently as a parish representative in Strandorf (1941-1943) in the Hultschiner Ländchen. He held close contact with Prelate Joseph Martin Nathan, the Vicar General of the German-speaking part of the archdiocese of Olomouc. Through these activities and his open language, he became more and more a thorn in the side of the state rulers. Several times he was summoned and warned by the Gestapo.

On April 8, 1943, Richard Henkes was finally arrested by the Gestapo in Ratibor / Upper Silesia for a homily in Branitz. After several weeks in solitary confinement, he was deported to the Dachau concentration camp. There, like everyone else, he had to do forced labor

under inhumane conditions. He remained strong in faith, sharing his food parcels with many others and encouraging his fellow prisoners. In the concentration camp, he met the future Prague archbishop and Cardinal Josef Beran whom he esteemed. During this time, he continued a Czech language study started in Chuchelna because he wanted to remain after the war as a pastor in the East. From 1944, Fr. Henkes worked as a canteen-keeper on Block 17. When the end of the war was already foreseeable, the second major typhus epidemic broke out in the Dachau concentration camp. Before February 11, 1945, volunteers among the German priests were being sought for care. Father Richard Henkes, aware of his own mortality, volunteered to be locked up with those suffering from typhoid from Block 17. After a few weeks, he became infected and died within five days. Richard Henkes had followed his Master Jesus Christ, who said: „There is no greater love than one who gives his life for his friends (Jn 15:13).“ His body was able to be burned individually and the ashes were secured. The ashes were buried on June 7, 1945 after the end of the war on the Pallottine cemetery in Limburg.

The Pallottines see Richard Henkes as a courageous fighter against any form of human contempt and a model witness of the Christian faith and charity. They pray that the Church elevates him as a martyr to the glory of the altars. Surviving priests of the Dachau concentration camp have formally proposed his beatification in 1985. The Pallottines and Czech bishops hope that Father Richard Henkes and the Czech Archbishop Josef Beran, for whom a process of beatification has already been initiated, will become bridge builders of reconciliation between the two peoples. However, Poland must also be involved in this process because the most important places of activity of Fr. Richard Henkes (Katscher, Branitz, Frankenstein and the Upper Silesian cities) now belong to Poland, while Strandorf lies beyond the border in the Czech Republic. Through his work in Block 17, Fr. Henkes finally has significance for the whole of Europe, because inmates from all over Europe have been transferred to the Dachau concentration camp through this access block.