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THE LION ROARS

Opposing Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide in the Spirit of Cardinal von Galen

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Part 1 of this essay begins with a snapshot of the life and preaching of Cardinal Clemens August von Galen, a man of courage who actively resisted the programmatic termination of the elderly, infirm, and disabled—the so-called "unproductive"—by the Nazis in Germany during World War 2.

Time has moved on, yet in Part 2 we will be disturbed to see, once again, the growing trend of eliminating "unworthy" lives through euthanasia and assisted suicide in our modern, throwaway culture. An overview of Church teaching in these areas will be given, including the new Vatican charter on healthcare and *Samaritanus Bonus* (Good Samaritan), a 2020 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) "on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life."

Part 1: The Lion Who Roared

Von Galen was known as the "Lion of Münster." Standing over six feet and six inches tall (around 2 meters), he was a German bishop—and later elected Cardinal—who roared against the Nazis during World War 2, particularly in his opposition to their euthanasia program.

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In his homilies and pastoral letters, von Galen criticized the Gestapo for their abuses against human rights. His motto was "Nec laudibus, nec timore" (commonly paraphrased: Neither praise nor threats will distance me from God) and he lived it to the full. He was unfazed upon receiving intimidating letters from Hermann Göring, the Reich Marshall of the Greater German Reich. Göring accused von Galen of sabotaging "the strength of resistance of the German people in the midst of a war,"[1] to which von Galen replied that he felt himself

> obliged to do so because of the actions of certain circles that, behind the back of the German troops, carry on a battle against the Christian religion and the Catholic Church and against reverence for the inalienable fundamental rights of the human person, and endanger the inner unity and power of resistance of the German people.[2]

Other opponents of von Galen included the notorious Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for the Nazis, who was hesitant to attack von Galen (other Nazis had suggested that von Galen should be hanged) as he feared the backlash from the bishop's supporters in his diocese, although he did state that "revenge should be enjoyed, not hot, but cold." In a conversation over dinner in July 1942, even Hitler told his companions that after Germany wins the war, he would reckon with von Galen "down to the last penny."[3]

The "Unproductive"

The Lion of Münster really roared upon hearing of the introduction of a euthanasia program organized by the Nazis. He preached three famous sermons in 1941 where he condemned the atrocities of the Third Reich, particularly their introduction of a program for killing those deemed mentally ill and "unproductive." The excerpts below are from von Galen's sermon on Sunday, August 3, 1941,

[1]D. Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster: The Bishop Who Roared Against the Nazis* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2016), 258.

[2]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 259.

[3]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 260.

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in St. Lambert's Church, Münster, Germany. The Sunday Gospel was taken from chapter 19 of St. Luke, where Jesus, surveying the happenings, weeps (Lk. 19:42ff).[4]

> These numerous unexpected deaths of the mentally ill are not the result of natural causes, but are deliberately brought about; that in these cases that doctrine is being followed, that one can put an end to so-called "worthless life," that is, can kill innocent persons, if one believes that their life is of no more value to the people and the state; a horrible doctrine, that would justify the murder of the innocent, that gives a fundamental license for the violent killing of those invalids, cripples, incurable sick, and weak old persons who are no longer able to work![5]

The bishop, ever attentive to the "signs of the times," gave concrete details of the events that were taking place.[6]

> Already on the 26th of July I had made a most earnest appeal to the Provincial Administration of the Province of Westphalia, which is responsible for these institutions, to which the sick are sent for *care* and *healing*. It was no use! The first transport of innocent victims condemned to death has gone from Marienthal! And I have heard that 800 patients have been transported from the Institute for Care and Healing of Warstein.
>
> So we must assume that these poor, defenseless sick people will sooner or later be killed. Why? Not because they have committed a capital crime; not because they have attacked their caregivers in such wise that these were left with no recourse to save their own lives in self-defence other than the use of violence against their attackers. These would be cases in which, in addition to the killing of armed enemies in a just war, use of force even to the extent of killing is allowed and, not rarely, required. No, not for such reasons do these unfortunate sick people have to die, but rather because, according to the judgment of some official, according

[4]There is no other way to do justice to such inspired sermons than to read them in full. The translation here comes from the excellent book by Fr. Daniel Utrecht (see footnote 1). Online English translations of the homilies can also be found in "Three Sermons in Defiance of the Nazis by Bishop von Galen" (available at http://www.churchinhistory.org/pages/booklets/vongalen(n).htm).

[5]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 238.

[6]See Matthew 16:3.

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> to the opinion of some commission, they have become "unworthy of life"; because according to this opinion they belong to the category of "unproductive" fellow countrymen. It is judged that they can no longer produce goods; they are like an old machine that does not work anymore; they are like an old horse that has become incurably lame; they are like a cow that no longer gives milk. What does one do with such old machines? They are scrapped. What does one do with a lame horse or an unproductive cow?
>
> No. I will not continue this comparison to the end, so frightful is its appropriateness and its illuminating power!
>
> We are not dealing with machines, or horses or cows, which are created in order to serve [human persons], to produce goods for [them]! One may destroy or kill such beings when they no longer fulfill this purpose. No, here we are dealing with people, our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters! Poor people, sick people, unproductive people, granted! But does that mean they have lost the right to life? Do you, do I, have the right to life only so long as we are productive, only so long as others acknowledge that we are productive?[7]

Speaking from the heart, with such frankness and courage, his preaching had a powerful impact. He continued:

> If that principle is accepted and made use of, that one can kill "unproductive" people, then woe to us all, when we become old and weak! If one can kill unproductive people, then woe to the disabled who have sacrificed their health or their limbs in the process of production! If unproductive people can be disposed of by violent means, then woe to our brave soldiers who return to their homeland severely wounded, as cripples, as invalids! Once it is granted that people have the right to kill "unproductive" fellow human beings—even if at the moment it affects only the poor defenceless mentally ill—then *in principle* the right has been given to *murder* all unproductive people: the incurably ill, the cripples who are unable to work, those who have become incapacitated because of work or war; then the right has been given to murder all of us, once we become weak with age and therefore unproductive.[8]

[7]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 240–241.

[8]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 241–242.

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The appalling image of wounded soldiers having survived battle and returning from conflict and yet potentially being put to death in their own land through euthanasia sent shockwaves through the German people and infuriated the Nazis. Von Galen continued his homily:

> All that will be required is for some secret order to come down, that the process which has been tested on the mentally ill should now be extended to other "unproductive" people, to those with incurable lung disease, to the infirm elderly, to the severely wounded soldiers. Then the life of none of us is safe. Some commission can put [anyone] on the list of the "unproductive" who are, according to its judgment, "unworthy of life." And no policemen will protect [them], and no court will take notice of [their] murder and subject the murderers to the prescribed punishment![9]

Copies of the homilies were made and distributed far and wide. Even the Allied powers were said to have used these as propaganda against the Germans! Von Galen also asks a very pointed question, one that makes us shirk in horror when we consider the travesty against life committed by many healthcare professionals and Christians today in their support for and lack of defiance against assisted suicide and euthanasia.

> Who will then be able to trust [their] doctor? Perhaps [the doctor] will report the patient as "unproductive" and receive the order to kill [them]. It is unthinkable what degeneration of morals, what universal mistrust will find its way even into the family, if this frightening doctrine is tolerated, taken up, and followed. Woe to humanity, woe to our German people, if the holy commandment of God, "Thou shalt not kill," which the Lord gave on Sinai amid thunder and lightning, which God the Creator wrote into the conscience of [humankind] from the beginning, is not only broken, but if this breach is tolerated and taken up as a regular practice without punishment![10]

[9]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 242.

[10]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 242.

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Part 2: The Situation We Now Face

Von Galen's homilies have much relevance for the situation today where various persons in society and the medical profession itself are campaigning for programs of euthanasia and assisted suicide. Von Galen mentioned that those targeted were the "unproductive"; this is echoed today, where

> the current socio-cultural context is gradually eroding the awareness of what makes human life precious. In fact, it is increasingly valued on the basis of its efficiency and utility, to the point of considering as "discarded lives" or "unworthy lives" those who do not meet this criterion.[11]

Pope Francis frequently laments the throwaway culture that we are living in as "human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a 'throw away' culture which is now spreading."[12] Lives deemed not worthy of living are increasingly being ended through euthanasia and assisted suicide.[13]

Euthanasia is currently legal in an ever-growing list of countries, including The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Canada, Colombia, Spain, and New Zealand. Assisted suicide is also permitted in Canada (Medical Assistance in Dying—MAiD), the United States (in California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington), and Australia (Voluntary

[11]Francis, address to the participants of the Plenary Session of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (January 30, 2020), *L'Osservatore Romano* (January 31, 2020): 7.

[12]Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 53.

[13]Cultural factors that erroneously support euthanasia and assisted suicide include the notion that if a life does not have a sufficient quality then it is not worth living. A false compassion may also judge that it is better to die (or be killed) than to suffer. A third contributing factor is growing individualism where the other is viewed as a threat to one's freedom. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [CDF], *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part IV: "The Cultural Obstacles that Obscure the Sacred Value of Every Human Life" (available at https://bit.ly/2ZkpLUc).

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Assisted Dying [VAD] is allowed in Victoria, Western Australia, and, most recently, in Tasmania).

We can be sure that none of this legislation would have succeeded without some support from the healthcare sector. Such "legitimation of assisted suicide and euthanasia is a sign of the degradation of legal systems."[14]

Quality of Life

Discussions surrounding euthanasia or assisted suicide are founded at times on the premise of "quality of life."[15] In a recent article titled "The 'Quality of Life' Error," Fr. T. Pacholczyk, director of education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center, writes:

> The clearest rebuttal of the "Quality of Life" error I've come across was from a 64-year-old retired Boeing computer programmer named John Peyton (1945–2009). He lived in Kent, Washington, and had an unusually aggressive form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The disease made him totally dependent on Patricia, his wife of 40 years. She dressed him, fed him,

[14]CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part V: "The Teaching of the Magisterium," Section 1: "The prohibition of euthanasia and assisted suicide."

[15]Cf. CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part IV, which also gives a helpful explanation of some aspects surrounding "quality of life" judgments:

> Among the obstacles that diminish our sense of the profound intrinsic value of every human life, the first lies in the notion of "dignified death" as measured by the standard of the "quality of life," which a utilitarian anthropological perspective sees in terms "primarily related to economic means, to 'well-being,' to the beauty and enjoyment of physical life, forgetting the other, more profound, interpersonal, spiritual and religious dimensions of existence". In this perspective, life is viewed as worthwhile only if it has, in the judgment of the individual or of third parties, an acceptable degree of quality as measured by the possession or lack of particular psychological or physical functions, or sometimes simply by the presence of psychological discomfort. According to this view, a life whose quality seems poor does not deserve to continue. Human life is thus no longer recognized as a value in itself.

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and regularly shifted his body position in the living room recliner where he spent his declining months.

When he was interviewed by Laura Ingraham of Fox News, he said, "I'm one of those people who is somewhat of a target of the initiative and I don't know how we as a society could really consider making doctors into killers."

Laura countered: "John, I think a lot of people who are for this type of assisted suicide would say, 'Look, what about the quality of life?' 'Look, you know, people suffering like you—what kind of quality of life do you really have?' What do you say to those people?"

His reply was as brilliant as it was simple:

I have a marvelous quality of life! Right now I am totally dependent. I can do nothing for myself. I'm effectively paralyzed. But I have a family. I have friends. I have my church community. I have loving support all around me. I don't understand how anyone could deny that I have a very high quality of life, and it gets me to understand and be compassionate toward those without the support that I have. Rather than giving them the temptation to kill themselves, we should be trying to figure out how to help them to have the quality of life I enjoy.[16]

A Not So Pain-Free Death

Bernadette Flood, a pharmacist in Dublin, wrote a fascinating, if slightly gruesome, letter to the British Medical Journal in response to the news that Spain would become the sixth country worldwide to allow euthanasia and assisted suicide.[17] Her letter begins thus:

Dear Editor, many healthcare professionals, politicians and members of the general public who support the introduction of assisted suicide and/or euthanasia may be under the impression that the method of

[16]T. Pacholczyk, "The 'Quality of Life' Error," *Making Sense of Bioethics* (January 2021), available at https://bit.ly/3pzMfvd.

[17]A. Rada, "Spain will become the sixth country worldwide to allow euthanasia and assisted suicide," *British Medical Journal* 372:147 (2021).

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> dying they support would be achieved by the administration of "a pill". This is not the case.[18]

She then goes on to cite some reported complications of assisted suicide and/or euthanasia:

- The dying process can take up to 30 hours or more.
- Reports exist of people re-emerging from a coma and sitting up during the dying process.
- Family members have reported having to scrape powder from 100 plus capsules with toothpicks to produce bitter powder to be mixed with sugar syrup.
- A number of medicines used in assisted suicide and/or euthanasia were previously used in executions.

For many supporters of such a death by medication, her conclusion is eye-opening: "The process of assisted suicide and/or euthanasia cannot guarantee a peaceful, pain free, dignified death."

Church Teaching

Here we will take a brief overview of some pertinent points from relevant Church teaching.

> With her mission to transmit to the faithful the grace of the Redeemer and the holy law of God already discernible in the precepts of the natural moral law, the Church is obliged to intervene in order to exclude once again all ambiguity in the teaching of the Magisterium concerning euthanasia and assisted suicide, even where these practices have been legalized.[19]

The Second Vatican Council taught that euthanasia and willful self-destruction (such as occurs through assisted suicide) "poison human society" and are, moreover, "a supreme dishonor to the

[18]B. Flood, "Assisted Dying Debate Should Include Discussion of Possible Complications," *British Medical Journal* 375:2498 (2021).

[19]CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part V.

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Creator."[20] In the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], we find the following teaching:

> Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible. (CCC 2276)

> Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus, an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, [their] Creator. The error of judgment into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded. (CCC 2277)

The 1980 *Declaration on Euthanasia* from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states:

> By euthanasia is understood an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated. Euthanasia's terms of reference, therefore, are to be found in the intention of the will and in the methods used. It is necessary to state firmly once more that nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying.[21]

When a sick and suffering person seems to be requesting assisted suicide, beneath this plea there is an underlying garbled cry for help, for love, and for life. The *Declaration* incisively teaches:

> The pleas of gravely ill people who sometimes ask for death are not to be understood as implying a true desire for euthanasia; in fact, it is almost always a case of an anguished plea for help and love. What a sick person needs, besides medical care, is love, the human and super-natural

[20]Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.

[21]CDF, *Declaration on Euthanasia*, Part II: "Euthanasia" (May 5, 1980), available at https://bit.ly/2XEhE4a.

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> warmth with which the sick person can and ought to be surrounded by all those close to him or her, parents and children, doctors and nurses.[22]

The same *Declaration* explains that even though a person may not be fully aware of their erroneous choice of euthanasia, it is still an objective wrong.

> It may happen that, by reason of prolonged and barely tolerable pain, for deeply personal or other reasons, people may be led to believe that they can legitimately ask for death or obtain it for others. Although in these cases the guilt of the individual may be reduced or completely absent, nevertheless the error of judgment into which the conscience falls, perhaps in good faith, does not change the nature of this act of killing, which will always be in itself something to be rejected.[23]

The 2017 Vatican charter for healthcare workers strongly denounces euthanasia as a defeat, a crime, a backward step, and a homicidal act which no end can justify.[24] It teaches further that "one's attitude toward the sick person in the terminal stage of [their] illness is a test of the professionalism and ethical responsibilities of health care workers."[25] The new charter also stresses the importance of good palliative care:

> A sick person in the terminal stage of [their] illness should receive all forms of care that allow for alleviation of the painfulness of the dying process. These correspond to so-called palliative care which[,] together with care for [their] physical, psychological, and spiritual needs, tends to create a loving presence around the dying person and [their] family members.[26]

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[22]CDF, *Declaration on Euthanasia*, Part II.

[23]CDF, *Declaration on Euthanasia*, Part II.

[24]See Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *New Charter for Health Care Workers* (Philadelphia, PA: National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2017), available at https://bit.ly/3vECJYO.

[25]Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *New Charter for Health Care Workers*, no. 145.

[26]Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *New Charter for Health Care Workers*, no. 147.

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The charter also underlines that euthanasia and assisted suicide are always a wrong choice.

> [Medical] personnel and other health care workers—faithful to their task of "always being at the service of life and assisting it to the end"—cannot lend themselves to any act of euthanasia, not even at the request of the interested party, much less of [their] relatives. Indeed, there is no right to dispose arbitrarily of one's own life, and for this reason no health care worker can become the executor of a nonexistent right.[27]

For this reason, "euthanasia and assisted suicide are a defeat for those who theorize about them, who decide upon them, or who practice them."[28]

Samaritanus Bonus (Good Samaritan) is a recent document "on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life" arising from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Here we will summarize some interesting points. The introduction to the letter points out that "every technical advance in healthcare calls for growth in moral discernment to avoid an unbalanced and dehumanizing use of the technologies especially in the critical or terminal stages of human life."[29] Discussing care for one's neighbor in the spirit of the good Samaritan who takes responsibility for the wounded patient, the document states that

> every individual who cares for the sick (physician, nurse, relative, volunteer, pastor) has the moral responsibility to apprehend the fundamental and inalienable good that is the human person. They should

[27]Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *New Charter for Health Care Workers*, no. 169.

[28]Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *New Charter for Health Care Workers*, no. 170.

[29]CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Introduction. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 22: "If technical progress is not matched by corresponding progress in [the human person's] ethical formation, in [her or his] inner growth (cf. Eph 3:16; 2 Cor 4:16), then it is not progress at all, but a threat for [humanity] and for the world."

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> adhere to the highest standards of self-respect and respect for others by embracing, safeguarding and promoting human life until natural death.[30]

The document points out that the cross of Christ provides a point of reference for the sick person. Many were at the cross—functionaries of the Roman state, soldiers, mockers, those distracted/indifferent/resentful. They are at the cross but do not "remain" with the suffering one. "In intensive care units or centers for chronic illness care, one can be present merely as a functionary, or as someone who 'remains' with the sick."[31] This is an important part of Christian witness—not to abandon the sick at their most vulnerable but to be with them.

> Those who assist persons with chronic illnesses or in the terminal stages of life must be able to "know how to stay", to keep vigil, with those who suffer the anguish of death, "to console" them, to be with them in their loneliness, to be an *abiding with* that can instill hope. By means of the faith and charity expressed in the intimacy of the soul, the caregiver can experience the pain of another, can be open to a personal relationship with the weak that expands the horizons of life beyond death, and thus can become a presence full of hope.[32]

Working Hard for the Grim Reaper

Many groups are working hard for the grim reaper. Compassion & Choices, a U.S.-based dignity-in-dying group, proudly boasts of its achievements in campaigning hard in its mission to legalize assisted suicide: "We [have] organized hearings … and inspired strong and robust grassroots efforts. Volunteer advocates shared their stories and support through emails, phone calls, lobby days, social media and videos."[33]

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[30]CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part I: "Care for One's Neighbor."

[31]CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part II: "The Living Experience of the Suffering Christ and the Proclamation of Hope."

[32]CDF, *Samaritanus Bonus*, Part V.

[33]Anonymous, "New Mexico Makes History Passing Innovative Bill," *Companion & Choices Magazine* (Summer 2021): 4.

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In front of such convinced, if slightly deranged, campaigns, the Christian response is often one of apathy, indifference, commodity, silence, or mediocrity. Von Galen, recalling a statement in a homily by Cardinal Pacelli (who later became Pope Pius XII), said,

> I thank God every day that He has allowed me to live in these times. Good and evil are ranged against each other in a gigantic struggle. We can be proud to take part in this battle. Now no one has a right to mediocrity.[34]

Conclusion

We are all called to do our part, to go out of our way to write, to read more, to arm ourselves, to speak out about the beauty of life and the inhumanity of intentionally killing others. Healthcare professionals, in particular, are called to be ministers of life and never agents of death.[35] We have to be like the Good Samaritan who goes over to the wounded man, pouring oil and wine on his wounds. As Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, "the person who is 'a neighbor' cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another."[36] Von Galen did not, could not, pass by the suffering of others. What gave him such courage to speak out?

Pope Benedict XVI, in the Eucharistic celebration for the beatification of Bishop von Galen, explains.

> Where did this insight come from in a period when intelligent people seemed as if they were blind? And where did he find the strength to oppose it at a time in which even the strong proved weak and cowardly? He drew insight and courage from the faith that showed him the truth and opened his heart and his eyes.

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[34]Utrecht, *The Lion of Münster*, 327.

[35]John Paul II, address to the Association of Italian Catholic Physicians (December 28, 1978), *Insegnamenti* I (1978): 438.

[36]John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (February 11, 1984), no. 29, available at https://bit.ly/3CdUd0z.

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> He feared God more than [human persons], and it was God who granted him the courage to do and say what others did not dare to say and do. Thus, he gives us courage, he urges us to live the faith anew today, and he also shows us how this is possible in things that are simple and humble, yet great and profound.
>
> Let us remember that he often used to make pilgrimages on foot to the Mother of God in Telgte, that he introduced perpetual adoration at St. Servatius and that he frequently asked for the grace of forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and obtained it.
>
> He therefore shows us this simple Catholicity in which the Lord meets us, in which he opens our hearts and gives us spiritual discernment, the courage of faith and the joy of being saved. Let us give thanks to God for this great witness of faith and pray to him that he will enlighten and guide us.
>
> Blessed Cardinal von Galen, at this very moment, pray for us.… Amen.[37]

We pray, too, for the intercession of Blessed Cardinal von Galen, the Lion of Münster. Perhaps we cannot roar quite like him, but collectively we can all raise our voices even slightly: "The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken—who can but speak out?" (Amos 3:8).

[37]Benedict XVI, greeting of his holiness Benedict XVI at the end of the Eucharistic concelebration for the beatification of the Servant of God Cardinal Clemens August Graf von Galen (St. Peter's Basilica: October 9, 2005), available at https://bit.ly/3vF8Is3.

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