

Bl. Rupert Mayer: Apostle of Munich

Rupert Mayer was born on 23 January 1876 in Stuttgart, Germany. On completing his secondary education he told his father he wanted to be a Jesuit. His father suggested he get ordained first and enter the Jesuits later, if that was still his wish. Rupert took this advice and did philosophy studies at Fribourg in Switzerland and Munich. He then studied theology at Tübingen for three years before completing his final year at the seminary in Rottenburg. He was ordained priest on 2 May 1899 and celebrated his first Mass two days later.

He served for a year as a curate in Spaichingen, before entering the Jesuit novitiate at Feldkirch in Austria on 1 Oct 1900. Following his novitiate, he went to the Netherlands for further studies between 1906 and 1911. He then travelled through Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, preaching missions in many parishes.

Rupert's real apostolate began when he was transferred to Munich in 1912. There he devoted the next thirty-one years to migrants who came

to the city from farms and small towns looking for a job and a place to stay. He was totally committed to their needs, collecting food and clothing, looking for jobs and places for them to live. He also helped them preserve their Christian faith in a city that was rapidly becoming secular.

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Rupert at first offered his services to a camp hospital. But later he was made field captain and travelled together with his men to France, Poland and Romania, which brought him to the front line of battle. His courage and solidarity with his men became legendary. He was with them in the trenches and stayed with the dying to the very end. His courage was infectious and gave hope to his men in appalling conditions. In December 1915 he was awarded the Iron Cross for bravery, a rare honour for a chaplain. In 1916 his army career ended abruptly when a badly broken leg had to be amputated.

By the time he had fully recovered the war was over (1918) and Rupert returned to Munich and did all he could to help people get back to a normal life. In November 1921 he became director of a Marian Congregation (Sodality of Our Lady) for men and within nine years its membership had grown to 7,000, coming from 53 different parishes. This meant that Rupert had to give up to 70 talks a month to reach all of them. For the convenience of travellers, he introduced Sunday

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The Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Oranienburg, Germany

Masses in 1925 at the main railway station. He himself would celebrate the earliest Masses, beginning at 3.10 in the morning. In time, it could be said that the whole city of Munich had become his parish.

With huge social problems developing in Germany after the First World War, Munich saw the rise of Communism and other social movements. Rupert took a close interest in these. He attended their meetings and even addressed them. His aim was to highlight Christian principles and to point out the fallacies in other speakers' ideas that could mislead people. He was one of the first to recognise the dangers of Adolf Hitler and Nazism and again challenged Nazi policy with Christian principles. It was inevitable that he would come in conflict with the

Nazi movement.

When Hitler became chancellor in 1933, he began to shut down church-affiliated schools and began a campaign to discredit the religious orders. Preaching in St Michael's Church in downtown Munich, Rupert denounced these moves. As a very influential voice in the city, the Nazis could not allow him to continue his attacks on them. On 16 May 1937, the Gestapo ordered Fr Mayer to stop speaking in public places. This he did but continued to preach in church. Two weeks later he was arrested and put in prison for six weeks. At his trial he was found guilty but given a suspended sentence. He then obeyed his superiors' orders to remain silent, but the Nazis took advantage of this to defame him in public. His superiors then allowed

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him to preach again in order to defend himself against the Nazis' slanderous attacks. He was arrested six months later and served his formerly suspended sentence in Landsberg prison for five months. Then a general amnesty made it possible for him to return to Munich and work quietly in small discussion groups.

Fr Rupert Mayer resolutely spoke out against the Nazi regime's evil in his lectures and sermons. Before the Sondergericht – one of Hitler's 'special courts' – he declared, 'Despite the speaking ban imposed on me, I shall preach further, even if the state authorities deem my pulpit speeches to be punishable acts and a misuse of the pulpit.' His time in prison and the concentration camp had taken its toll, as had the enforced inactivity while under house arrest at Ettal.

However he was still seen as a threat and so was arrested again in November 1940 on the pretext that he had cooperated in a royalist movement. Now sixty-three years old, Rupert was sent to the notorious Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin. After a few

months, his health had deteriorated so badly that it was feared he might die in the camp and be seen as a martyr. So he was sent to stay in the Benedictine abbey in Ettal, in the Bavarian Alps. Fr Mayer spent his time there in prayer, leaving his future in the Lord's hands. He remained in the abbey for almost six years until freed by American forces in May 1945.

He at once returned to Munich, where he received a hero's welcome, and took up again his pastoral work at St Michael's. However the years in prison and the camp had undermined his health.

On 1 Nov 1945 Rupert was celebrant at the 8 a.m. Mass on the Feast of All Saints in St Michael's. He had just read the gospel and begun preaching on the Christian's duty to imitate the saints, when he had a stroke and collapsed. Facing the congregation, 'The Lord ... the Lord ... the Lord...' were his last words. He died shortly afterwards. He was sixty-nine years old. He was buried in the Jesuit cemetery at the Jesuit house of studies in Pullach, outside Munich, but his remains were later brought back to the city and interred in the crypt of the Burgersaal, the church next to St Michael's, where the men's sodality regularly met.

Rupert Mayer was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Munich on 3 May 1987. His grave was visited by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, whose parents had venerated him. He is remembered for his staunch opposition to Nazi inhumanity and for his selfless dedication in helping the poor.

This account was first published on Sacred Space, the website of the Irish Jesuits.