

It goes without saying that sin is ugly, because it causes so much pain. But the reality is that far greater than the power of sin is the power of love, which can transform even the darkest of situations - but for that to happen, one has to be willing to receive the love that is given to them as a gift from God, and one also has to be willing to give to others that which they are given. And one of the most unlikely of places this happened was a place that to the world was known for revealing the evil that humans are capable of, namely Nuremberg, the site where the trials of the Nazis were held following the conclusion of World War II.

Fr. Brian Jordan is a Franciscan Priest at Saint Francis College, and in October of 1977, he was an undergraduate at Siena College.

His philosophy professor was Father Richard O'Connor, O.F.M., and was giving a lecture in his course on political philosophy." They were discussing the line from Goethe's Faust, "What is religion to you?" Father Richard was keenly aware that Brian was struggling in his discernment to become a Franciscan priest. As the class progressed, one of his fellow Franciscan students asked, "Why does God send people to hell?"

Without any hesitation, Father Richard looked at Brian with an intense look in his eyes and replied, "I have never heard of God sending anyone to hell; people send themselves." That provocative answer inspired Brian to say "yes" to the call to join the Order of Friars Minor. The decision was made not only by the influence of those mere words but also by the example of the Franciscan who uttered those penetrating words: Father Sixtus (Richard) O'Connor, U.S. Army chaplain in General George S. Patton's Third Army during World War II and the lone Roman Catholic chaplain during the Nuremberg trial of 1945-46. He also witnessed all 10 Nazi war criminals being put to death for their dastardly crimes.

Fr. Richard died in 1983, the same year Fr. Brian was ordained.

Richard James O'Connor was born March 15, 1909, in Oxford, a small town in upstate New York. He took the religious name of Sixtus, pledged his solemn vows on Sept. 17, 1933, and was ordained in 1934, returning to his baptismal name Richard in 1968. Due to his fluent German and desire to teach, Father Sixtus was sent to the University of Munich in 1934 to study philosophy and the classics. Because of the growing Nazi influence in Munich, Father Sixtus transferred to the University of Bonn in 1936 for the same studies. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Father Sixtus was called back to the United States where he taught at Siena College. In 1942, he requested and received permission to serve as a U.S. Army chaplain.

He went to chaplain's school at Harvard University and, in 1943, was assigned to serve in General Patton's Third Army. Although Father Sixtus never shared with Brian the specific horrors of war, he did tell him that he often counseled the wounded and blessed the dead. Fr. Brian often thought of him when he encountered the horrors of war and terrorism during his years as a Franciscan ordained to serve. Fr. Brian would be a

chaplain at World Trade Center from Sept. 2001 to June 2002. During those months, he thought of the calm demeanor and dedicated professionalism of Father Sixtus. He kept remembering his telling him that priests were to be a light amid the darkness of fear, anger and hopelessness. "Jordan," as he frequently called him, "find inner strength through adversity."

As the war in Europe was coming to an end, Father Sixtus figured he would be sent home to teach again at Siena College. Then, in August 1945, General Patton personally asked Father Sixtus to accept a special assignment: to serve as a chaplain in Nuremberg. Once Fr. Brian asked Father Sixtus why he accepted this challenging assignment. With that ever-present intensity in his eye, he looked at him and bellowed, "Because that was my duty as an officer and as a priest, and I knew from the beginning that these were no gentlemen."

Originally, 24 Nazi war criminals were scheduled for trial, but two committed suicide, and one was ruled unfit for trial. Of the 21 war criminals tried, 15 were Protestant (a majority of which were Lutheran) and six were Roman Catholics. Only four of the six Catholics requested spiritual counsel. A non Catholic though whom he worked with was Hans Frank. He was Hitler's lawyer and man in Poland who instituted a reign of terror there.

Father Sixtus often celebrated Mass for Frank, who was responsible not only the occupation of Poland but also for putting down the Warsaw Uprising and running concentration camps, including Auschwitz–Birkenau. In Poland alone, at least 3 million Holocaust victims perished under Hans Frank. Due to his obedience to orders by Adolf Hitler, Frank has been accused of the murders of over 3 million people. According to official documents, Father Sixtus ensured that Frank's conversion to Catholicism was genuine before he baptized him in late 1945. According to Army prison psychologist Dr. Gilbert, Hans Frank said, "I am glad that you (referring to another chaplain) and Father Sixtus at least, still come to talk to me. You know Father Sixtus is such a wonderful man. . . .and religion is such a comfort — my only comfort now. I look forward to Christmas now like a little child." Father Sixtus walked with Frank on his way to execution and remained by his side when he was about to die. Frank's last words were "Jesus, have mercy!" In 1981, Frank's son, Niklas, visited Fr. Richard, saying to him the fact that his father asked for mercy, and is what gave the son some degree of consolation.

Father Sixtus also counseled Franz Von Papen, Vice Chancellor, Ernest Kaltenbrunner, chief of the Gestapo in Austria, and Arthur Seyss-Inquart, Nazi Governor of occupied Holland and a military adviser to Hitler.

Father Sixtus also reached out to the Protestant war criminals if they requested counsel. One who was later acquitted of charges against him was Hans Fritsche, a former deputy to Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda. In his memoirs, Fritsche wrote glowingly of the chaplain, "Father Sixtus enjoyed high regard of the Nuremberg prison's inmates, an admiration which was not confined to the Catholic prisoners. He

understood life's realities, and this circumstance was of great advantage for the exercise of his spiritual duties. He turned around Hans Frank and Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Austrian Gestapo chief. . . . This man, a cool and sober observer who spoke without prejudice to the high spiritual office he held, was the American Catholic chaplain of our prison in Nuremberg."

Franz von Papen (initially part of Hitler's early government before being purged) also wrote in his memoirs, "Father Sixtus O'Connor. . . was a great solace to me during this difficult period." Von Papen further stated that Father O'Connor was directly instrumental in the conversion of Hans Frank, who was baptized by Father Sixtus in Nuremberg. There seemed to have been a transformation in Hans Frank with his baptism and conversion. Von Papen wrote, "In his newfound faith, he looked death unswervingly in the eye for over a year, and one could only admire the new strength of character he had acquired. His conduct was marked in contrast with that of many of his fellow prisoners."

Chaplain Gerecke and Father Sixtus were both amazingly compassionate toward the Nazi war criminal defendants. When the trials ended and the judges were reviewing their decisions, the two chaplains convinced their superiors to allow the families of the defendants to visit them through a screen. Both chaplains and an officer were present during these visits.

According to a 1947 interview with newspaper reporter Jimmy Powers, Father Sixtus shared this reflection about the executions that both he witnessed "All the prisoners, except Alfred Rosenberg, accepted religious assistance from one of the chaplains or the other.

After the executions, Father Sixtus served their last few months as Army chaplains and eventually returned home to the States. Father Sixtus retired as a U.S. Army major and returned to teach at St. Bonaventure University.

His assignment at Nuremberg were among the most challenging for military chaplains in the U.S. armed forces during World War II.

Although Father Sixtus was asked over and over by many philosophical journals and secular publishers to write an article or short book of his Nuremberg experiences, he said that he would not. He did not explain why, but those who knew him well — like me, his philosophy student — knew that he could not and would not. Father Sixtus would never risk the possibility of breaking the seal of confession nor any secret entrusted to him in confidence — whether by a Catholic, Protestant or even an atheist.

Father Sixtus was a true priest, a great philosopher and a compassionate Franciscan. On May 14, 1983, Fr. Brian was ordained to the ministerial priesthood with seven other Franciscans. About a month later, when I had just finished a long stint of confessions in a church well known for confessions, I told Father Sixtus that I needed advice. He took me aside and, in the recreation room of the friary of St. Francis of Assisi Church in

Manhattan, he inquired what happened. I told Father Sixtus, without divulging names or specifics, that I had heard genuine confessions with sorrow and contrition for a couple of murders and told him that I absolved these particular penitents. Was I right in doing that? He looked me in the eye with his usual intensity and said, "Jordan, you are now an ordained priest and an educated man. Listen if the penitent is contrite for his or her sins — no matter what they are — murder, whatever — yes, you give them spiritual counsel, a worthy penance and unconditional absolution." Then he grabbed him by the arm and got closer to my face and uttered those memorable words that he will never forget. "Jordan, you absolve them of their sins but you don't absolve them of their actions!"

One month later, on July 10, 1983, Father Sixtus died peacefully in his sleep in his room in the Siena College Friary. Fr. Brian vividly recalls those conversations during the fall of 1977 both in and outside the political philosophy course at Siena College. He says he can now finally answer the question in Goethe's *Faust* "What is religion to you?" It is the prayer of a worshiping community to Almighty God that brings us together and it is the good that always triumphs over evil!

That truth is what we have celebrated throughout the Easter Season, and today as we mark Pentecost and the sending of the Spirit, we are reminded how we are all brought together through the love of God, called to overcome that which divides the body of Christ - namely sin. The Spirit gives us the tools to make that happen.

Fr. Sixtus did not just whitewash what had happened - for he said the actions still remained. But what he did was to bring the people he ministered to to a place where they could open themselves up to God's mercy. Hitler took advantage of what evil can do by dividing people against one another; Fr. Sixtus used the power of the Holy Spirit and replaced the darkness with the light. And all of us are called to be like Fr. Sixtus and Hans Frank - we are called to receive the mercy and pass it on.

Now you hear Hans Frank and you think heavens, at least I'm not like that. But really we can sometimes just pacify ourselves by convincing ourselves that we are overall "pretty good" and that is good enough. Truly if we had our lives edited down to just our sins, it would be a pretty ugly tape. And Paul lists for us what he calls the "works of the flesh: immorality, impurity, lust, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like." All of it's there. And we always need to take a look at ourselves with how we deal with it.

With respect to sins, there are all kinds, but note Paul's focus is on two types, namely sins of the flesh and acts that divide. Sins of the flesh are a common human struggle, and on the one hand we acknowledge that they can occur due to emotion, to stress, powerful feelings, etc., it's worth asking ourselves a basic question when you hear that list: do we objectify people? Do we see them as body and soul? The Nazis and other hate groups certainly dehumanized people. But we can too. If we want to grow in holiness though, we'll see people for who they are on the inside and the outside, body

and soul. Sexual sins can be a slippery slope where people become mere objects, not humans.

Just as those sins divide the person, so too do other sins divide the human race. Hatreds, rivalries, jealousies, factions as Paul says. Again, all something we saw in Nazi Germany. But if we really do an examination of conscience, we'll see that in our own lives too. We hold grudges. We avoid certain people. We gossip. We form cliques. God though does not want us divided. So it's worth asking ourselves too, how are we divided? How is our energy spent on fostering the animosity or the anger? How are we not letting go? Many people would have looked at those tried as monsters and saw no human at all, but just people to hate. Fr. Sixtus instead looked at them as human beings and because of that, brought some to true conversion.

Paul then gets into the fruits of the spirit.

The first is love. Love is the biggie; it is unconditional. It's not just some passing feeling. It expects nothing in return; and the Cross is the example of that. Love then leads to joy, when we put God at the center of our lives and do all things for Him and His glory, in an attempt to bring God into the here and now. As Mother Teresa said do not worry about great things, do the smallest things with great love and you will be happy. For Fr. Sixtus, it was going with Patton to Europe and then to Nuremberg. For you, it might be visiting a nursing home, talking to your children, or volunteering. No matter how big or small the act seems, how we do it matters, and it has the power to transform.

The rest are the consequences of love. When we are patient, we think of the other, not ourselves. Impatience often comes from someone not doing something on our time or our terms. If our life though isn't about us or our ego, we are patient. When we are kind, we show the love in simple ways. Kindness can be lived out in simple acts we can do each day to affirm that the only way to respond to a person is in love. Being kind to the telemarketer rather than hanging up. Sending a thank-you-note. Saying "how are you doing" as a true question and not just a statement. When we are gentle we remind others that we are an ambassador of Christ and let others know we can help them come to know Him just as Fr. Sixtus did at Nuremberg.

Ultimately, all of these fruits of the Spirit help us to grow closer together. So powerful is the love of God that it converted a one-time persecutor named Saul into one of the Church's greatest leaders; and it reached some of the most evil people the world has ever known at Nuremberg. Fr. Sixtus in a special way through his ordained ministry had the power to forgive sins as we hear in the Gospel; but all of us through our power as members of the body of Christ has the ability to bring people to God. Paul has given us our marching orders as Christians. It starts with ourselves, asking ourselves how we can daily use the grace of God to overcome our sins by acknowledging them. And then it continues with us going out into the world and doing what the apostles did through our daily actions of showing all that we encounter the love that we are given. Sadly, there will always be evil in the world because Fr. Sixtus was right: people do send themselves to hell. But so many go to heaven because people choose to go there by living a life of

virtue and showing others the way. Paul has given us our marching orders. So let's uncover our actions, passions, our attitudes, our thoughts and desires that are contrary to the Gospel and own up to them by turning them over to God, and then walk in the way of the Spirit to set the world on fire with the love of God.