

HENRY F. GERECKE

Champion of Christ's Forgiveness for All

BORN: **AUGUST 4, 1893** *Gordonville, Mo.*

DIED: **OCTOBER 11, 1961** *Chester, Ill.*

HENRY GERECKE IS BEST KNOWN FOR his service as chaplain to Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg trials, but that is certainly not his entire story. He grew up on a farm, but his family was active in church and he decided to become a pastor. At the age of 20, he entered St. John's College in Winfield, Kan., and five years later he was off to seminary in St. Louis. But after only one year, he decided to leave the seminary and marry. Nonetheless, he continued to study privately. With the assistance of individual professors, he was able to pass examinations and qualify for a call and ordination in 1926.

In 1935, Gerecke became executive secretary of the St. Louis Lutheran City Mission as well as pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Chapel. Here he devoted his ministry to St. Louis's neediest residents: the sick, the poor, the homeless, the imprisoned. He also developed a radio program that featured hymns, prayers and his own sermons.

In 1943, when he was just a few months shy of 50, Gerecke responded to the need for chaplains during World War II and joined the Army. After the Germans surrendered and the decision was made to put high-ranking Nazis on trial, Gerecke was selected to serve as chaplain because he was Lutheran, knew German and had experience ministering to prisoners. This was not easy. Gerecke had visited the infamous Dachau concentration camp and was very much aware of the horrors that these Nazi prisoners had perpetrated. But he knew that Christ had died for these men too, so he went to Nuremberg.

There he was assisted by Father Richard "Sixtus" O'Connor (six of the 21 prisoners were Catholic). Gerecke ministered to the men as best he

could — he conducted services, he counseled and prayed with them and he even communed four of those who had both confessed their sins and their faith in Jesus before their executions. He walked with five of them to the gallows and, with Wilhelm Keitel, head of the German High Command, he prayed aloud a prayer that each had learned from his mother just moments before Keitel was hanged. He stayed in Nuremberg until the trials and executions were complete.

After returning to the United States and to civilian life, Gerecke and his wife relocated to Chester, Ill. There he took a position as an assistant pastor and continued his institutional work at Menard Penitentiary. When he died, his body lay in state at the penitentiary chapel and 800 prisoners paid their respects.

For more information about the 175th anniversary of the LCMS, visit lcms.org/175.

DISCOVER MORE

Tim Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis* (New York City: William Morrow, 2014).

Frederick T. Grossmith, *The Cross and the Swastika* (Selsey, West Sussex: Henry E. Walter, Ltd., 1984).



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— 175 YEARS —

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