



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918  
Engelbert Krebs, "On the Meaning of Sacrifice" ["Vom Opfersinn"] (1914-15)

Engelbert Krebs (1881-1950) was a Catholic theologian who wrote this sermon during the war. Protestants and Catholics alike subscribed to a "war theology," providing a powerful representation of the war, which it framed in the light of divine will and German destiny. As a religious and ideological justification for self-sacrifice, Krebs praised the subordination of the individual to the communal good of the German nation. A fierce critic of anti-Semitism, he was eventually banned from his university post by the Nazis.

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Yes, we were living in an age of "living life to the fullest." Then came the war! And with terrible gravity, it pulled all of us into the school of decay and decline. With merciless power, it forced us all to recognize that if we do not wish to go to ruin mentally and internally, we must be ready to die for something higher than the individual, for the Fatherland, for our German way of life and customs. Those who praised an individual's "living life to the fullest" as the highest goal were shown to be wrong. The seed must die to bring forth fruit – this lesson was once again acknowledged by everyone. And had it not been acknowledged, Germany would be destroyed today.

The lesson does not apply, however, only in wars among nations; rather, it applies as well in the life of each and everyone at all times. Our life must always be the service of war (Job 7, 1). For the urge to sin, which stems from original sin, and the whisperings of Satan who begrudges our going to heaven, must ceaselessly be overcome if we want to enter heaven. Only when the seed dies, can it bring forth fruit. Only if our selfishness disappears into the love of good, into obedience to God, can our moral and physical powers bring forth fruit.

[ . . . ]

O pious ones, it is a time of war, a bloody, grave, most difficult time. The nations are waging terrible battles to achieve a great, decisive victory. But sadly, all too often this war takes on a raw, unchristian form in the hearts of many. Many are filled with hatred and an unchristian thirst for revenge toward the nations with whom we are at war. Then the admonishment of this, the month of the Sacred Heart comes at just the right moment – the admonishment to reflect on the sacrifice of the Sacred Heart, from which love was born, including love of our enemies. *"I say unto thee: love thine enemies"* (Matthew 5, 44). *These words remain true, dearly beloved, even in time of war.* Had Jesus not loved his enemies, we would be lost. For because of our sins, we were his enemies. But he loved us as if we were his friends, and he sacrificed his life for us. – Let us become simple in our thoughts, dearly beloved, even in this bloody time, and let us in the simplicity of our hearts make the sacrifice of loving our enemies too, because God desires it. To be sure, with an iron fist our army is turning back our enemies from the borders that they wickedly attacked. And the army is doing the right thing. But the hatred that many wish to

foment in us at this time—we must not allow it to prevail, even if doing so requires sacrifices of us. In the depths of our hearts we must also love our enemies, and we must “pray for those who persecute us.” (Matthew 5, 44)

The sacrificial love of God proves itself in charity. It proves itself as well, however, in something else that this war has inflicted on us amply: it proves itself in *patience and suffering*. We say so often: the Fatherland demands many sacrifices of us in this war. – In truth, dearly beloved, God demands it. He has given us our brothers, whom He has called back from us in this war. He has given us fathers, sons, friends, and loved ones, whom he now demands back. He has given us our life itself, which he now wishes to see offered up by so many. He has given us our possessions, which he has suddenly taken from so many. In suffering and enduring, all of us have had to sacrifice in this war. Let us make sacrifices with heartfelt simplicity, saying with David: “Everything is Thine. Therefore I have gladly sacrificed everything to Thee.”

[ . . . ]

Yes, dearly beloved, let us be serious in this prayer that Jesus has taught us to say: “Lord, Thy will be done.” And let us gladly say it with the simplicity of an upright heart, following the Master who, sweating blood in his torment, said: “Father, not my will, but Thy will be done.” (Luke 22, 42)

Should all the bloodily sacrifice of the war reawaken this word in many of the hearts that have been affected by it, and should it cause them to make it the basis of their whole lives, *then the earth would be more beautiful after this war than before*, despite all the devastation, for it would be more like *Christ, its Savior*.

Source: Engelbert Krebs, "Vom Opfersinn" ["On the Meaning of Sacrifice"], in Joseph Schofer, ed., *Die Kreuzesfahne im Völkerring: Erwägung, Ansprachen und Predigten* [*The Cross Flag in Civil War: Contemplations, Speeches, and Sermons*]. 8 volumes, Freiburg, 1914-1915. Vol. 8, pp. 71-72, 77-78, 79.

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