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Charost, Alexis-Armand

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Charost, *Alexis-Armand* (Monseigneur Charost, Monsignor Charost, Mgr Charost, Evêque de Lille, Bishop of Lille)

French Catholic bishop

Born 14 November 1860 in Le Mans, France

Died 07 November 1930 in Rennes, France

Alexis-Armand Charost was bishop of Lille and a key notable during the occupation, playing an important role in protesting against German demands and encouraging charitable works. His complex sermons criticized the republic and portrayed the war as a punishment, but he also preached a patriotic faith in Allied victory.

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Introduction

In November 1913, Alexis-Armand Charost (1860-1930) became the first bishop of the newly-created bishopric of Lille, formed from the division of the diocese of Cambrai. Soon afterwards, in September 1914, Lille, along with much of the Nord department, was invaded by the Germans, who [occupied](#) the area from October 1914 until October 1918. Charost remained at his post during the invasion and, as a local notable, was among the first individuals taken hostage by the Germans to secure the good behavior of the population.

Occupation Role

Charost continued to play an important role during the occupation. Alongside the mayor of Lille, [Charles Delesalle \(1850-1923\)](#), the prefect of the Nord [Félix Trépont \(1863-1949\)](#), later acting prefect [Maurice Anjubault \(1876-1930\)](#), he met the German governor of Lille multiple times a week throughout the war. All three frequently protested against German orders at these meetings and via letters. Charost mostly intervened regarding perceived humanitarian issues, for example calling for the release of imprisoned clergymen or civilians, especially those of lesser means. His most vociferous protest expressed disgust at the April (Easter) 1916 deportation of 20,000 men, women and children from Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing. He argued that this breached [international law](#), and threatened the institution of the family and morality more generally.

Charost encouraged charitable and social works, notably organizations combatting prostitution and juvenile delinquency, or providing goods to the destitute. Further, he tried, as far as possible, to maintain normal religious life in his diocese, which was cut off from the Vatican and financially strained. He thus stubbornly but vainly opposed the German requisition of Church property and goods, a serious problem from late 1916 when copper requisitions resulted in church bells being taken, melted down, and used for munitions.

Preaching a Complex Message

Charost's understanding of events was complex. Before the war, he was an anti-modernist royalist, heavily critical of the Third Republic's anticlericalism. The war and occupation simply reinforced his opinions: he preached that the suffering of the French and specifically of the occupied population represented God's punishment for the sins of the republic; the local people under occupation were "expiatory victims for the faults of France." Yet not all of his sermons were innocent: in March 1916, Charost upset the congregation by claiming that an explosion at a munitions factory in January 1916, in which 134 people were killed and 400 injured, was divine punishment because most victims were not "for the church" and the children did not go to catechism.

However, Charost supported the [Union sacrée](#) and worked with lay notables during the occupation to attempt to protect the population. He also preached unwavering faith in an Allied victory, proclaiming in March 1916, for instance, that the French would win the [Battle of Verdun](#) and end the war. He hoped that when this came, given Catholic participation in the war effort, the Church would reclaim its rightful place in public life. [Diaries](#) and memoirs attest that such patriotic sermons had a positive effect on local morale – as did Charost's protests.

After the Occupation

Charost was present at the liberation ceremonies of October 1918, and published his own account of the occupation and liberation later that year. He was remembered as a key occupation personality, often featuring and receiving praise in inter-war memoirs. Charost remained bishop of Lille until June

1920, when he was transferred to Rennes, eventually becoming its archbishop and remaining in this position until his death.

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