

Vatican Recognizes 38 Albanian Christian Clergy Martyred by Communism

38 Albanian Christian Clergy

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USPA NEWS - Pope Francis recognized the martyrdom of 38 Albanian Christian church leaders killed during the Communist terror of Enver Hoxha, who ruled the small and poor Balkan country from 1944 until his death in 1985

On April 26, Pope Francis recognized the martyrdom of 38 Albanian Christian church leaders killed during the Communist terror of Enver Hoxha, who ruled the small and poor Balkan country from 1944 until his death in 1985. Ecclesiastical affirmation of their martyrdom is an important step toward their sainthood. The "cause" favoring their canonization was initiated in 2002, under Pope John Paul II.

Communism ended in 1991 in Albania, which Hoxha had declared the first officially atheist state in the world in 1967, seeking to emulate the "cultural revolution" of his foreign patron of the time, Mao Zedong. Thousands of churches, mosques, Sufi shrines, and other religious monuments were turned over for secular use

Albanians are Muslim in their majority "with Islam claiming about 60 percent of the 3 million people in Albania and as much as 90 percent of the 1.8 million Albanians in Kosovo. But in both countries, as well as in Albanian communities in the United States and elsewhere abroad, Albanian Christians "Catholics and Orthodox" have played prominent roles in culture, education, politics, and the struggle for national independence. Relations between Albanian Muslims and Christians have generally been good, as the members of a small and culturally-isolated people find national unity more important than religious differences. Before communism, Albania's Catholic schools were of high quality.

Hoxha and his accomplices, however, did not consider the contributions of Albanian Christians to the people's common legacy when he took power in 1944. He was enraged particularly at the Catholics in the north of the country, around the city of Shkodra, where they formed and still comprise a probable majority. Catholics opposed his bid for power openly and fought his forces with arms. They would not be forgiven. The dictator grew bent on extermination of the Albanian Catholic populace.

Catholic clergy were close to the people and honored as protectors of local traditions. Since they would not accommodate the demands of the new rulers, they must be deprived of life and removed from memory, except as a caution to others. The last martyr in the roster of 38, archdiocesan priest Mikel Beltoja, was killed in 1974.

The Vatican's inventory of Albanian martyrs could include numerous additional names. In his 1967 book, Sinishta lists many more Catholic clerics dead or disappeared during the Communist tyranny. But the "cause" of the 38 shows that Christian belief and remembrance are alive in a place where religion was once believed snuffed out.

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