News



The grave marker of Richard Henkes in the Pallottine cemetery outside Limburg Cathedral in Limburg, Germany (Wikimedia Commons/Karsten Ratzke)



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The Diocese of Limburg, Germany, celebrated its first beatification Sept. 15 in a ceremony that drew an estimated 1,000 guests from Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic.

Cardinal Kurt Koch represented Pope Francis at the beatification of German priest Richard Henkes, a fiery preacher imprisoned at Dachau for resisting the Nazis. Although Henkes died of typhus in the concentration camp, Pope Francis designated the German priest as a martyr.

"Due to Fr. Henkes' selfless abandonment of his life for other people, even unto death, Pope Francis has recognized him as a martyr," said Koch in his sermon. "The Holy Father decided that Fr. Henkes would be beatified. Fr. Henkes stands out to us as a martyr of charity, who sacrificed his life for Christ and therefore holds a share of Christ's cross."

Henkes, a fiery Hessian priest who resisted the Nazis, was born in the small village of Ruppach in Germany's Westerwald region known for its forests and mountains. His father was a stonemason; Henkes and his seven siblings were raised Catholic. He had a hardy and vigorous disposition. He was inspired to become a missionary after meeting Pallottine priests visiting his parish from Cameroon. "Above all I want to be a self-sacrificing priest who bears crosses for others," he wrote. He became severely ill with tuberculosis and was unable to become a missionary but still remained committed to priesthood.

Henkes, ordained in 1925, was sent far from his home to Silesia, in Germany's eastern fringes, to be a schoolteacher. The area was rife with tensions between ethnic Germans and Poles as Nazism gained ground in the early 1930s.

Henkes, a blunt and straightforward man, was strongly against Nazism and made no secret of his views. He was arrested by the Gestapo after declaring aloud to hosts at a dinner that Hitler should have been blown up in the 1937 Hindenburg airbus explosion — then all of Germany's problems would have been solved, said Henkes. For his remark, he was put on trial in 1938. However, history intervened to stop the court proceedings—Germany, celebrating the Nazi Anschluss annexation of Austria, granted prisoners general amnesty.

Henkes walked free and afterwards continued to challenge the Third Reich. He instructed students to analyze Nazi songs in the classroom and question whether the regime truly represented the good of individual Germans. Henkes broadcast his dissent loudly from the pulpit during sermons.

"Fr. Henkes perceived with his own eyes of faith, very early on and very clearly, that the Nazi ideology was in no way compatible with the Christian image of the human person, because it did not coincide with human and Christian dignity but instead propagated neo-pagan ideas," said Koch. "In the face of this neo-pagan ideology, Fr. Henkes noticed that God was being minimalized everywhere and repressed from the public eye — and that the human person, also, was being minimalized."

Fellow Pallottine priests decided to banish Henkes because they were afraid his defiance would incur punishments on them from Nazi authorities. Henkes was relieved of his job and exiled to an obscure rural village called Branitz. There he was supposed to lead countryside retreats and minister to travelers. However, fortune brought literally thousands of people into contact with Henkes, as it turned out that the village was a popular tourist destination. Here Henkes openly criticized the Nazi state-run euthanasia program, calling it murder, and protested the removal of ill patients from local hospitals. He spread leaflets of Pope Pius XI's famous encyclical, *Mit brennender Sorge* ("With Burning Concern"), against the Third Reich.



Gates at the main entrance to Dachau concentration camp, in 1945 (National Archives Records of the Office of War Information)

The determined priest's rebellion came to an end in 1941 after he was assigned to lead a parish in a small Czech town. Prior to his arrival, Nazi authorities had expelled all the Czech priests from the parish. An atmosphere of hatred existed between local Germans and Czechs. Henkes decided to mediate. He began learning to speak Czech and became an advocate for local Eastern Europeans, again challenging Nazi policies from the pulpit. For this, and also for previous anti-Nazi statements, Henkes was arrested and sent to concentration camps Ratibor and Dachau.

Henkes worked as a forced laborer and cared for fellow inmates, encouraging prayer and celebrating daily Masses for other prisoners. He continued to make special efforts to minister to persecuted Czechs. His selfless approach cost him his life at Dachau, after the camp was stricken with a typhus epidemic in late 1944. As scores of victims succumbed to the fatal disease, the SS abandoned entire sections of the camp to avoid infection. They shut ill victims inside barracks and left them to die.

Ignoring the health risk, Henkes regularly brought food and water to the sick, prayed with them and accompanied them in their final hours. Ultimately Henkes contracted typhus and died on Feb. 22, 1945, at age 44.

After his death, fellow prisoners smuggled Henkes' ashes out of the crematorium in the hope of giving him a proper burial. His remains today are interred in the Pallottine cemetery outside Limburg Cathedral.

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"Fr. Henkes did not seek martyrdom, but he freely and voluntarily accepted it as a consequence of his loyalty to his Catholic faith," said Koch.

Henkes' beatification was met with great celebration in Germany. The Limburg Diocese held a large outdoor fest following the Mass. The ceremony was broadcast live on several German radio stations and livestreamed. Henkes, who is widely venerated in the Czech Republic and Poland, has since become the subject of a German graphic novel and is featured in a special history exhibit in Limburg called "Witnesses for Humanity: The Resistance of German Christians in the Sudetenland 1938—1945." The exhibit is sponsored by a German-Czech postwar reconciliation group.

"The beatified and the saints are God's answers to the questions of us humans," said Koch in his sermon. "They have not only read and interpreted the word of God, but they witnessed it for everyone with their own lives. This is especially true of Blessed Fr. Richard Henkes."

[Zita Ballinger Fletcher has reported extensively on Germany's Catholic Church for Catholic News Service.]