Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis waves as he arrives for the Angelus noon prayer from the window of his studio overlooking St.Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, July 2, 2023. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Francis has set up a special commission tasked with identifying those he calls the "new martyrs" of the 21st century — Christians who have been slain in some cases simply for attending Mass or for helping the poor.

The Vatican on July 5 released a copy of a letter in which the pope announced the commission will be part of the Holy See’s saint-making office.

"As I have said so many times, martyrs 'are more numerous in our time than in the first centuries,''' of the Church, Francis wrote in the letter dated July 3. He was referring to the early years of Christianity, when many were slain for refusing to renounce their faith, seen as a threat to Roman imperial rule.

Modern-time martyrs include clergy as well as "lay people and families, who, in various countries of the world, with the gift of their life, offered the supreme proof of charity,'' Francis wrote.

The martyr initiative is timed to coincide with a church jubilee, or Holy Year, scheduled for 2025 that will draw to Rome "pilgrims of hope,'' the pontiff noted.

At the pope's direction, the commission's members will research cases of non-Catholic Christian martyrs, too.

The commission is tasked with "working up a catalogue of all those who have shed their blood to acknowledge Christ and to give witness to His Gospel,'' Francis wrote in his letter. "The martyrs of the Church are witnesses to the hope that derives from faith in Christ and inspires true charity,'' he said.

Francis is building on a drive started by St. John Paul II to give rank-and-file faithful more recent role models among the saints. John Paul raised to sainthood, for example, a Spanish priest who was assassinated in 1936 during the opening days of the Spanish Civil War.

"There are not few, indeed, who, while aware of the dangers they ran, showed their faith or participated in Sunday Eucharist,'' Francis wrote. "Others are killed in the efforts to charitably help the life of those who are poor, in taking care of those rejected by society, in taking care of, and promoting, the gift of peace and the strength of forgiveness."

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In his letter, Francis didn't cite any persons he considers to be 21st-century martyrs nor any countries or regions where people have been slain for their faith.

But nuns and priests working in parishes or charitable organizations in Africa and elsewhere in recent decades have been slain.

Just two months ago, the Vatican formally recognized 21 Coptic Orthodox workers who were beheaded by Islamic militants in Libya as martyrs with their own feast day.

Francis announced the inscription of the 21, most of them Egyptians, in the roll call of saints celebrated liturgically in the Catholic Church. He made the announcement during an audience with the Coptic Orthodox pope, a significant gesture aimed at forging unity between Catholic and Orthodox churches.

"In a world in which it sometimes seems that evil prevails, I am certain that the working up of this catalogue," the pope wrote in the letter, "will help believers" to see "the reasons of life and of good" by drawing inspiration from the new martyrs.

The 10 members of the new commission include several clergy, among them a Togo-born theology professor at a pontifical university in Rome and a Vietnam-born Franciscan friar who has worked in the Vatican's missionary offices. There are two lay academics on the commission.

The Vatican offered no estimate of how many martyrs might be identified by the new commission.

Beatification, the last major step before possible sainthood, requests that a panel certify that a miracle occurred through the candidate's intercession. A second miracle after beatification is needed for the person to be raised to sainthood, unless the candidate was a martyr.

Even after the 2025 Holy Year, the commission will continue its research to identify martyrs, Francis said.