Vatican



A Mass in which the Vatican beatified the Polish Ulma family, including small children, who were killed by the Nazis in 1944 for having sheltered Jews in the Ulmas' home village of Markowa Poland, was held on Sunday, Sept. 10, 2023. (AP Photo)

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In an unprecedented move, the Vatican on Sunday beatified a Polish family of nine — a married couple and their small children — who were executed by the Nazis during World War II for sheltering Jews.

During a ceremonious Mass in the village of Markowa, in southeastern Poland, papal envoy Cardinal Marcello Semeraro read out the Latin formula of the beatification of the Ulma family signed last month by Pope Francis.

In his homily Semeraro noted that for their "gesture of hospitality and care, of mercy" the Ulmas "paid the highest price of martyrdom."

A contemporary painting representing Jozef and a pregnant Wiktoria Ulma with their children was revealed near the altar. A procession brought relics taken from their grave to the altar. It was the first time that an entire family has been beatified.

At the Vatican, speaking to the public from a window in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis said the Ulmas "represented a ray of light in the darkness" of the war and should be a model for everyone in "doing good and in the service of those in need."

The pope then invited the crowd below to applaud the family, and he clapped his hands. Those gathered in Markowa watched Francis' address on giant screens placed by the altar.

Last year, Francis pronounced the deeply Catholic Ulma family, including the child that Wiktoria Ulma was pregnant with, martyrs for the faith. The Ulmas were killed at home by German Nazi troops and by Nazi-controlled local police in the small hours of March 24, 1944, together with the eight Jews they were hiding at their home, after they were apparently betrayed.

Jozef Ulma, 44, was a farmer, Catholic activist and amateur photographer who documented family and village life. He lived with his 31-year-old wife Wiktoria; their daughters Stanislawa, 7; Barbara, 6; Maria, 18 months; and sons Wladyslaw, 5; Franciszek, 3; and Antoni, 2.

With them were killed 70-year-old Saul Goldman with his sons Baruch, Mechel, Joachim and Mojzesz, along with Golda Grunfeld and her sister Lea Didner with her

little daughter Reszla, according to Poland’s state Institute of National Remembrance, IPN, which has meticulously documented the Ulmas’ story.

Giving the orders was Lt. Eilert Dieken, head of the regional Nazi military police. After the war he served in the police in Germany. Only one of his subordinates, Josef Kokott, was convicted in Poland over the killings, dying in prison in 1980. The suspected betrayer was Wlodzimierz Les, a member of the Nazi-controlled local police. Poland's wartime resistance sentenced him to death and executed him in September 1944, according to IPN.



The Vatican also beatified the Ulmas' unborn child, saying it was born during the killings and was baptized in the martyred mother's blood. (AP Photo)

The Catholic Church had faced a dilemma in beatifying Wiktoria's unborn child and declaring it a martyr because, among other things, it had not been baptized, which is a requirement for beatification.

The Vatican’s Dicastery for the Causes of Saints issued a clarification saying the child was actually born during the horror of the killings and received "baptism by blood" of its martyred mother.

The clarification was issued Sept. 5 by Cardinal Semeraro, who is the prefect of the Vatican's saint-making office.

Polish President Andrzej Duda along with the ruling party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, as well as Poland’s chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich, attended the celebration in Markowa, and thousands of pilgrims came from across Poland to take part.

Poland's conservative ruling party has been stressing family values and also the heroism of Poles during the war and the beatification ceremony added to its intense political campaigning ahead of the Oct. 15 parliamentary elections in which the Law and Justice party wants to win an unprecedented third term.

After the Mass, Duda, who is the ruling party's ally, spoke to thank Francis for beatifying the Ulmas. He also stressed that the ceremony had a political dimension because it "told the truth about the Nazi German occupation" of Poland during the war. Poland's government is seeking reparations from Germany for wartime damages, but Berlin says the matter had been closed.

The Ulma beatification poses several new theological concepts about the Catholic Church’s ideas of saints and martyrs that also have implications for the anti-abortion movement because of the baby in the mother’s womb, said the Rev. Robert Gahl, a professor of ethics at the Catholic University of America and Rome’s Pontifical Holy Cross University.

The Vatican stated that the child was "born" at the moment the mother was executed. In doing so, the Vatican also affirmed that the killers intended to kill the child out of hatred for the faith, a requirement for a martyrdom and beatification declaration, Gahl told The Associated Press.

After beatification, a miracle attributed to the Ulmas' intercession would be necessary for their eventual canonization, as the church’s sainthood process is called.

Israel's Yad Vashem Institute in 1995 recognized the Ulmas as Righteous Among Nations who gave their lives trying to save Jews during the Holocaust.

In Poland, they are a symbol of the bravery of thousands of Poles who took the utmost risk while helping Jews. By the occupying Nazis' decree, any assistance to Jews was punished with summary execution. A Museum of Poles Saving Jews During World War II was opened in Markowa in 2016.

Poland was the first country to be invaded by Nazi Germany, on Sept. 1, 1939. Around 6 million of its citizens were killed during the war, half of them Jews.