News



Women hold candles as they attend a vigil in memory of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny at the Campidoglio (Capitoline Hill) in Rome Feb. 19, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)



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A senior Russian Catholic has urged church leaders abroad to commemorate the opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, as armed police dispersed citizens mourning his death at age 47 in a remote prison camp.

"When I heard he was dead, I recalled the words of St. Luke's Gospel, 'Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace' — he did everything he could for his country, and I thank God such people still exist," said the Moscow-based lay Catholic.

"The Catholic church in Russia doesn't speak out on sensitive issues — though we've been here for centuries, we still feel like we're in a ghetto, keeping quiet so no one will notice us. But I really hope memorial services will be held in other countries — that even the pope might join prayers in his memory."

The Catholic, who asked not to be named, spoke as Navalny's family requested handover of his body, amid international revulsion at the veteran dissident's suspicious death.

In an OSV News interview, she said fellow Catholics in Russia had long feared Navalny's end was being "brought closer" by his harsh detention conditions, which included 27 punitive spells in solitary confinement over three years.

She added that some church members had defied police pressure and requested prayers in his memory, while grieving his death as "a pain and tragedy, and a loss of hope."

"Although not all Catholics agreed with everything he said and did during his short life, no one would deny his courage," said the Catholic, a university lecturer who also works with Caritas.

"Sadly, however, I can't believe Navalny's death will mark a turning point by provoking mass protests and changing things. Many others have died under the

current regime, and their names are already barely remembered by young Russians, while hundreds of political detainees still suffer in prisons and labor camps."

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Navalny's death at the strict-regime IK-3 arctic Syberian penal colony in Russia's Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region, where he was serving a 19-year sentence, was reported Feb. 16 by the Tass Russian news agency, which said the Federal Penitentiary Service had attributed it to "sudden death syndrome."

Speaking Feb. 20, the Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, dismissed media claims the dissident was poisoned with the Novichok nerve agent, and criticized "arrogant" and "unacceptable" condemnations by Western leaders.

On Feb. 16, U.S. President Joe Biden said he was both "not surprised" and "outraged" by reports of the death of Navalny.

"He was so many things that Putin was not. He was brave. He was principled ... dedicated to building a Russia where a rule of law existed and was applied everywhere, and to an evolving belief that Russia, as he knew it, was a cause worth fighting for, and obviously even dying for."

Meanwhile, as of Feb. 20, at least 400 Russians were reported to have been arrested while commemorating Navalny across the country, as police removed flowers and candles in his memory.

Speaking Feb. 16 in Rome, the Vatican's Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin said news of Navalny's death has caused "sadness" and surprised the Holy See, adding that he had personally hoped the opposition leader's plight could be "resolved differently."

Meanwhile, the chairman of the German bishops' conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing, said in a social media post the "shocking" death showed "human lives don't seem to count" for Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, whose "inhumane system" allowed human rights to be "trampled underfoot in a supposedly constitutional state."

However, a source at the Russian bishops' conference said he was unable to comment publicly on the "tragedy," while another prominent lay Catholic told OSV

News church members feared for their safety if they spoke out.

In her interview, the Catholic lecturer said Russia's government counted on Navalny's death "passing unnoticed" as "an ordinary incident soon to be forgotten."

"News of his death is already disappearing from internet sites, even from those gloating or laughing at it," the Catholic told OSV News.

"Presidential elections are approaching, so the authorities are suppressing past investigations by Navalny's team, while his body is unlikely to be handed over any time soon since a public funeral could provoke unrest. The authorities will try to destroy any memory of Alexei, just as they're already eliminating any spontaneous memorials to him," she said.

Navalny ran for president in 2018, despite a court ruling him ineligible, and was jailed in January 2021 for violating parole after receiving life-saving treatment in Germany for Novichok poisoning in Siberia.

The dissident, whose three-and-a-half-year sentence was later extended, described himself as a Christian convert from "militant atheism" at his 2021 trial, adding that the Bible offered him guidance and gave him "fewer dilemmas in life."

In the court speech, reported by the now-disbanded Moscow Helsinki Group, he said he also had "no regrets" about returning to Russia to face certain arrest.

Navalny's death coincides with apparent Russian battlefield advances in Ukraine, as well as preparations for March 15-17 elections, in which President Putin, in power since 2000, is assured of a fifth term after the forced elimination or marginalization of possible challengers.



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his wife, Yulia, are pictured in a file photo walking during an opposition rally in Moscow. Navalny died at age 47 Feb. 16, 2024, at a remote prison camp. (OSV News/Reuters/Maxim Shemetov)

Leaders of Russia’s Catholic Church, whose four dioceses represent just 0.5% of Russia's 146 million inhabitants, according to Vatican data, have voiced fears that minority religious communities could be targeted during the campaign.

However, in a Feb. 13 letter to Moscow's mayor, Sergei Sobyanin, Italian-born Archbishop Paolo Pezzi of the Archdiocese of the Mother of God at Moscow condemned "unfair and offensive" protests Jan. 14 and Feb. 4 outside the capital's Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, during which nationalists branded Catholic clergy "enemies of Russia."

"These statements and actions were clearly aimed at inciting religious hatred and disrupting Sunday services — it is of particular concern that law enforcement officers remained inactive," said Pezzi, who urged a "merciful approach" to Alexei Navalny, without "torture and mockery" when his Anti-Corruption Foundation was forced to

close offices in May 2021.

"I hope the Moscow government will intervene to protect Catholics from encroachment on their right to practice their faith without threat to safety and dignity."

Media reports said Navalny's mother was told Feb. 20 she must wait 14 days to receive the dissident's body pending a "chemical examination," fueling suspicions of poisoning.

Meanwhile, the opposition leader's wife of 24 years, Yulia Navalnaya, accused Putin in a Feb. 19 video of killing Navalny "without ever looking him in the eye or even mentioning his name," and she vowed to continue his struggle.

In a Feb. 19 statement, Amnesty International urged the Russian government to end its "callous" campaign against citizens wishing to commemorate Navalny, and demanded "a prompt, independent and impartial investigation" into the circumstances of death, "which should be carried out with full transparency and the involvement of his family."

It added that a bishop from Russia's independent Orthodox Apostolic Church, Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko, had suffered a heart attack after being arrested while attempting a requiem in St. Petersburg for the dissident, as part of a nationwide "campaign to silence dissent and instill fear."

The priest, who is now hospitalized, was apprehended near his residence as he headed to a memorial site for Soviet political repression victims.

The detained priest was on his way to the Solovetsky Stone in St. Petersburg when he was apprehended and taken into custody on Feb. 17, The Moscow Times reported.

Reportedly many Catholics had participated in Stations of the Cross ceremonies across Russia for Navalny, as well as posting messages and prayers for the dissident on social media.

In her OSV News interview, the Moscow-based lay Catholic said clergy from Russia's predominant Orthodox church, which is tightly controlled by the Kremlin, had also held "private liturgies" for Navalny, despite "every possible preventive effort" by their bishops.

"It would be difficult to call Navalny a Christian martyr — for me, he's a martyr for the ideals of freedom he considered so important," added the lay Catholic, who said she had been urged by family members not to give her name, despite not wishing to "hide behind anonymity."

"Alexei Navalny urged us not to be afraid, as did St. John Paul and Christ himself, so this is the moment to step beyond our fear. I would be so pleased if the Catholic Church recalled the value of human dignity at this time, and joined in deploring the inhumane conditions in Russian prisons."