News



Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, retired archbishop of Vienna, celebrates the Sept. 6, 2025, beatification Mass of Archbishop Eduard Profittlich at Freedom (Vabaduse) Square in Tallinn, Estonia. The German-born Jesuit, now Estonia's first beatified Catholic, stayed with his flock and died for his faith during an era of Soviet persecution. (OSV News/Courtesy of Fr. Leszek Gesiak, Polish bishops' conference)

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Estonia celebrated a historic milestone Sept. 6 when Archbishop Eduard Profittlich, a German-born Jesuit, became the country's first Catholic to be beatified.

At the time of his installation, he was Estonia's first bishop in more than 400 years, since the time of the Reformation, and one who gave his life during Soviet persecution.

The beatification Mass at Freedom (Vabaduse) Square in Tallinn, Estonia, was presided over by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn — who retired as an archbishop of Vienna in early 2025 — representing Pope Leo XIV. Attendees included representatives from Lutheran and Orthodox Churches, clergy — especially fellow Jesuits — from many parts of the world, and Estonia's President Alar Karis.

Blessed Profittlich was born in 1890 in Birresdorf, Germany. He entered the Jesuit order in 1913 and was sent to Estonia in the early 1930s. In 1931, he became apostolic administrator and later archbishop in 1936.

He quickly learned Estonian, gained citizenship and became deeply involved in the small Catholic community, which at the time numbered only a few thousand faithful. His episcopal motto, Fides et Pax ("Faith and Peace"), guided him throughout his mission.

Arrested in 1941 by the NKVD — a brutal interior ministry and secret police of the Soviet Union — he died in a prison camp in Kirov, Russia, in February 1942, weakened by illness and mistreatment.

Auxiliary Bishop Stephan Lipke of Novosibirsk in Siberia, himself a Jesuit, explained to OSV News that the sainthood process itself carries symbolic weight.

The process "was initially started in the Moscow Archdiocese, where he died. Only later was it transferred" — which is "a strong encouragement" that such processes are possible and "that the holiness of martyrs during the Soviet years is valued," he said.

In general, for sainthood two verified miracles occurring through the intercession of the sainthood candidate are needed, one for beatification and one for canonization. However, for martyrs, their death for the faith is considered a heroic sacrifice,

allowing them to be declared "Blessed" without a miracle. However, one further verified miracle is still needed for canonization.

Schönborn in his homily emphasized Profittlich's decision to remain with his people despite the dangers he faced: "He did not want to abandon them and thus did not return to Germany — fully aware that this decision would almost inevitably lead him to death."

The cardinal added that "his steadfastness is a beacon of hope and a testament to unwavering faith."

The Catholic Church in Estonia is one of the smallest in Europe, counting about 7,000 members nationwide. Fr. Wodzislaw Szczepanik, a Polish priest serving in Estonia, told OSV News that the beatification was "an unprecedented event" for the local church.

"Catholics here make up only about half a percent of the population, so the recognition of Archbishop Eduard Profittlich is a true reason for pride, joy and profound gratitude to God for such an extraordinary gift to our small community," he said.

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He recalled that during the beatification Mass, the liturgy emphasized Profittlich's choice to stay with his flock despite repeated offers to evacuate — the Jesuit archbishop was arrested a few days after the German Third Reich attacked the USSR in the midst of horrors of World War II.

"His answer was unambiguous: 'Where the sheep are, there is also the shepherd.' Blessed Eduard stayed with his people, becoming a true pastor after the example of Christ," Szczepanik said.

He added that the ceremony brought together Catholics from different countries, as well as cardinals, bishops, priests, religious and laity. "It was an extraordinary experience of the universality of the church and its connection with the pope," he said.

Szczepanik also noted the presence of Estonian dignitaries and ecumenical guests, highlighting that the day before the beatification there was a continuous 24-hour reading of the names of over 22,000 Estonians who had suffered under Soviet repression. "It was a reminder that this beatification is not only about one person but honors all victims of the Soviet regime in Estonia," he said in a conversation with OSV News.

Jesuit Fr. Boguslaw Steczek, who has ministered in Russia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan, told OSV News that Profittlich's beatification carries significance far beyond Estonia.

"Through his beatification, the church also honors all of those who died in the Soviet era. Today, he is a special intercessor not only for the church in Estonia, but also in Russia and other post-Soviet republics," he said.

His martyrdom "gives deep meaning to the difficult work of missionaries in the East. They give their lives every day, often serving small communities under challenging conditions. Proclaiming the Gospel in such circumstances requires criteria very different from those we usually follow in the world," the Jesuit priest underlined.

He said Blessed Profittlich's life "is a visible proof that the future of the church depends more on authentic witnesses than on statistics" — pointing to Estonia's tiny flock.

Another fellow Jesuit, Fr. Wojciech Mikulski, editor-in-chief of Polish Radio's Catholic newsroom, attended the ceremony and told OSV News that the recognition of martyrdom was decisive for the beatification process.

"He truly died for Christ. Even though he had the possibility to leave, as a shepherd he stayed in Tallinn. This decision led to his arrest and eventual death in Kirov," he said.

Mikulski described the ceremony as a visible sign of vitality: "The celebration was uplifting. It revealed the beauty of Christ's church, which has always had and continues to have witnesses like Archbishop Profittlich."

He also highlighted the growth of the church in Estonia: "The local cathedral pastor recently reported welcoming 30 new Catholics this year" — adding that now the Estonian church is a full diocese rather than an apostolic administration, and its own blessed only makes it stronger.

Asked what Profittlich's witness means today, Mikulski said: "First, fidelity to the values you choose — even if that fidelity costs you your life. Second, joy, not fear, marks true martyrdom. These are the two things Blessed Eduard shows every believer today."

For Lipke, Blessed Profittlich's witness also bridges nations and cultures.

"It can give courage to be faithful to our Lord and to His people, never to leave them and take good care of them. Blessed Eduard bridges Germany and Poland, Estonia and Russia; he chose to be Estonian and stayed through Soviet oppression. He can be a saint of understanding and peace. ... God's love knows no boundaries — and that is what was celebrated."