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Pope Leo XIV presides over a commemoration of the martyrs and witnesses of the faith of the 21st century with representatives of other churches and Christian communions in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome, Sunday, Sept. 14, 2025. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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Pope Leo XIV on Sunday honored hundreds of Christians who have been killed for their faith in the 21st century, praising their courage and lamenting that their numbers were growing in many parts of the world.

The Vatican has been documenting these Christian martyrs, not as part of its saint-making process but to merely collect and remember their stories. Their numbers include cases of Christians being killed by Islamic militants, mafia groups or Amazonian ranchers upset at their defense of the rainforest and poor.

Leo presided over a Holy Year evening prayer service to honor them, inviting Orthodox patriarchs and Christian ministers from over 30 Christian denominations. It was part of the Vatican's ongoing effort to underline what it calls the indiscriminate "ecumenism of blood" that unites Christians who are persecuted and killed for their faith, regardless of their particular denomination.

"Many brothers and sisters, even today, carry the same cross as our Lord on account of their witness to the faith in difficult situations and hostile contexts," Leo said. "Like him, they are persecuted, condemned and killed."

The service, at the basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, came 25 years after St. John Paul II presided over a 2000 Jubilee commemoration of new martyrs held at the Colosseum.

Leo cited a few examples of martyrdom since then, including Sr. Dorothy Stang, an American nun who spent three decades trying to preserve the Amazon rainforest and defend the rights of poor settlers who confronted powerful ranchers seeking their lands. She was gunned down in 2005 in a hit ordered by ranchers.

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"When those who were about to kill her asked her for a weapon, she showed them her Bible and replied, 'This is my only weapon,'" Leo said.

Leo lamented that despite the end of the "great dictatorships of the 1900s," when Christians were persecuted in parts of Europe, Christians were still being killed and in some places, in even greater numbers than before.

A Vatican study commission created in 2023 has documented more than 1,500 cases of martyrs since 2000, including the 21 Coptic Orthodox workers beheaded by Islamic militants in Libya in 2015. The commission has also documented stories of Christians killed by criminal organizations or simply because their presence and defense of Christian principles was bothersome, said Andrea Riccardi, vice president of the commission.

At a briefing last week, Riccardi said the complete list of names wouldn't be released now because of ongoing security concerns in parts of the world. But he provided the breakdown of the martyrs the commission had added onto its list:

— 643 in sub-Saharan Africa, most killed in Islamic militant attacks.

— 357 in Asia and Oceania, including the victims of the Eastern Sunday 2019 suicide bomb attacks on three churches in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

— 304 in the Americas, including missionaries and activists targeted for defending the Amazon.

— 277 in the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom were Christians of other, non-Catholic denominations.

— 43 in Europe, but Riccardi noted that among those killed elsewhere there were 110 Europeans, mostly missionary priests and nuns.

While the study commission is part of the Vatican's saint-making office, Riccardi stressed that it's work was completely separate from the process of beatification and canonization, which also considers martyrs for possible sainthood.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.