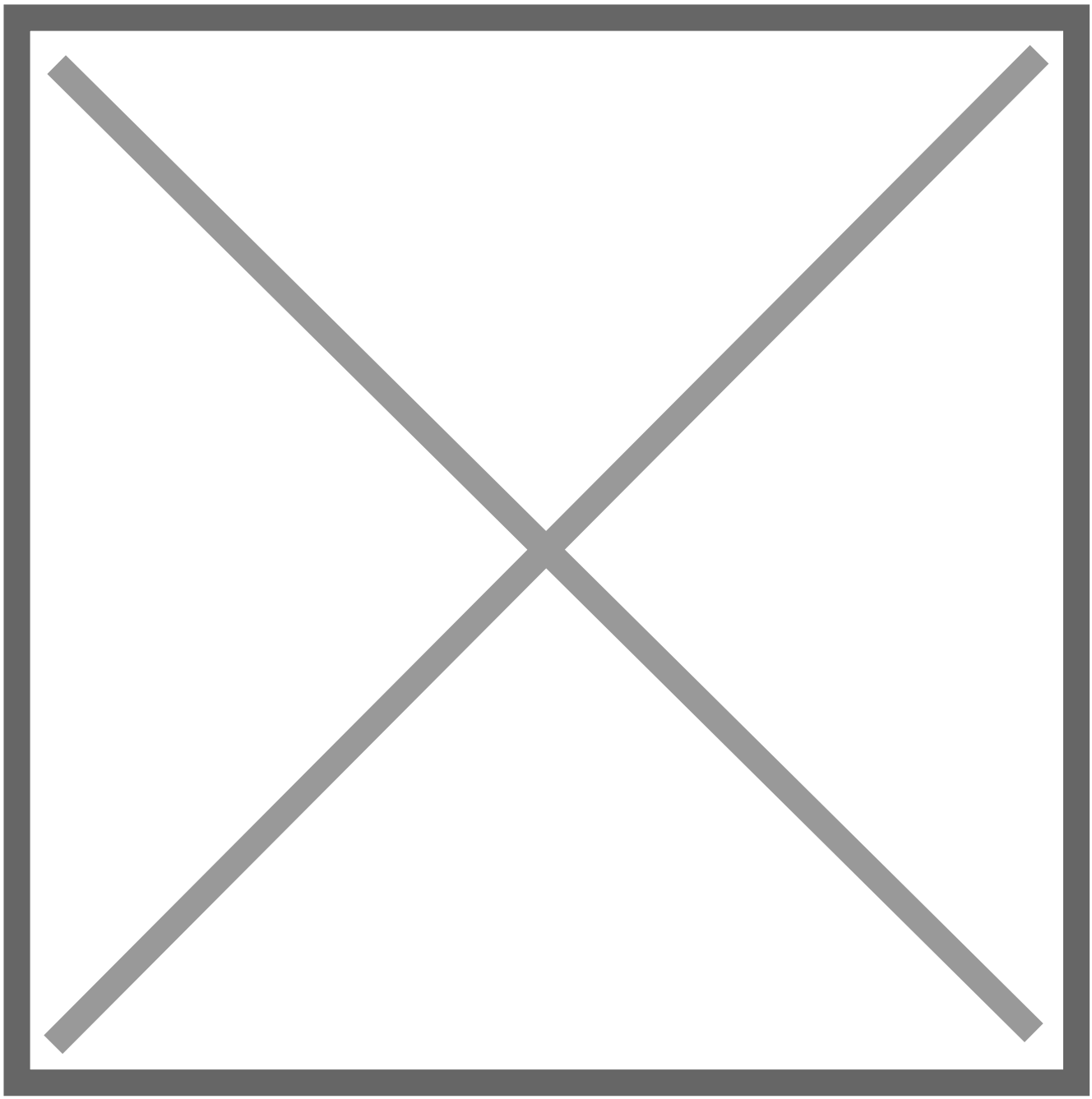
News



Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, center, is seen at the Sanctuary of St. John Paul II in Kraków, Poland, on June 6, 2026, as he concelebrates the beatification Mass for nine Polish Salesian priests killed in German Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Cardinal Grzegorz Rys of Kraków, Cardinal Reinhard Marc of Munich-Freising and Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, longtime personal secretary of St. John Paul II, are also at the altar. (OSV News/Courtesy of Malgorzata Latawiec)

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Krakow, Poland — June 16, 2026
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Nine Polish Salesian priests killed in German Nazi concentration camps during World War II were beatified June 6 at the Sanctuary of St. John Paul II in Kraków during a Mass that highlighted not only their martyrdom but also their lives as educators, pastors and mentors to young people.

Pope Leo XIV, speaking after the Angelus prayer June 14 recalled the newly beatified, saying, "All were beatified as martyrs, as victims of the persecution by totalitarian regimes because of their fidelity to Christ."

The new blesseds — Fr. Jan Swierc, Fr. Ignacy Antonowicz, Fr. Karol Golda, Fr. Wlodzimierz Szembek, Fr. Franciszek Harazim, Fr. Ludwig Mroczek, Fr. Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr. Kazimierz Wojciechowski and Fr. Franciszek Miska — died in Auschwitz and Dachau, two of the most notorious German Nazi concentration camps, between 1941 and 1942, after being arrested during the German occupation of Poland.

While Auschwitz became the largest German extermination camp in occupied Europe, Dachau became the principal concentration camp for imprisoned Catholic clergy. Nearly 2,800 clergy were held there during the war, including about 1,780 Poles, according to Poland's Institute of National Remembrance.The group ranged in age from their 30s to their 60s. Some were parish priests, others teachers, seminary

professors, school administrators and youth ministers.

In October 2025, Leo approved a decree recognizing that they were killed "in hatred of the faith," clearing the way for their beatification. The other two martyrs approved by Leo were Frs. Jan Bula and Václav Drbola, diocesan priests from former Czechoslovakia, executed between 1951 and 1952 under the communist rule of the country.

The Kraków ceremony to beatify the Salesian priests drew thousands of the faithful, along with bishops, priests and religious superiors from Poland and abroad.

The nine martyrs belonged to the Salesians of Don Bosco, a religious congregation founded in the 19th century by St. John Bosco and known worldwide for its work with young people.

Before the war, the Salesians in Poland operated schools, vocational centers, youth homes and seminaries.

"They gave their lives because they educated young people, and because of that they were dangerous to the occupier," Fr. Dariusz Bartocha, provincial superior of the Salesian Province of Kraków, told OSV News. Bartocha said that the Nazi occupation authorities regarded Polish clergy, teachers and intellectuals as obstacles to their plans to destroy national identity and suppress resistance.

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Thousands of priests were arrested, imprisoned or killed during the war. "Anyone who preserved the identity of a nation, anyone who strengthened its spirit and unity, was inconvenient for an occupier," Bartocha said. "Young people who were given dignity, freedom and a sense of identity are not what an oppressor wanted."

For Fr. Pierluigi Cameroni, postulator general of the Salesians, the significance of the new martyrs extends far beyond wartime history.

Quoting St. John Paul II's description of the martyrs of the 20th century as often "unknown soldiers in God's great cause," Cameroni told OSV News that the nine Salesians show that "when death seems to have achieved victory, the true victors are those who, suffering because of faith, participate in an extraordinary way in the

Cross of Christ and adhere to his saving plan."

The martyrs also offer what he called a powerful witness of hope. "The longing for eternal life, considered the one true good worth preserving even at the cost of earthly life, guided Fr. Swierc and his companions to adhere completely to the will of God," Cameroni told OSV News.

The postulator said witness' testimonies gathered during the cause consistently emphasized the courage shown by the future blesseds. "They were fully aware of the danger and the cruelty being inflicted by German soldiers on the population," Cameroni told OSV News.

"Nevertheless, the servants of God decided not to flee, not hesitating to hand themselves over to German soldiers in order to save the lives of others." One example frequently cited by Salesians is Wojciechowski, who knowingly presented himself to German authorities in place of an elderly pastor.

Bartocha noted that another of the martyrs, Szembek, likewise volunteered to accompany an older confrere targeted by the occupiers.

"That is an expression of love, an expression of brotherhood," Bartocha said. "It is the truest kind of love, the kind that gives one's life for another." Among the nine martyrs, Golda has attracted particular attention. Cameroni told OSV News that he became known as "a martyr of confession."

"He administered the sacrament of reconciliation where priestly activity had been declared prohibited," the postulator said. "He also heard the confessions of SS soldiers, thereby becoming aware of facts and information that were inconvenient for the regime," he told OSV News. The SS (Schutzstaffel, or Protection Squads) was the elite guard of the Nazi Reich and Hitler's executive force.

The beatification Mass was celebrated by Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, with three other cardinals present: Cardinal Grzegorz Rys of Kraków; Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, longtime personal secretary of St. John Paul II; and Cardinal Reinhard Marx, whose Munich-Freising German diocese's territory includes where the Dachau camp was located.

The location of the beatification Mass, Kraków's Sanctuary of St. John Paul II was especially significant: Several of the future blesseds had ministered in a Salesian

parish where a young Karol Wojtyla prayed and discerned his vocation.

The future pope witnessed the arrest of some of the Salesians who would later be recognized as martyrs. Bartocha noted that Wojtyla later recalled the Salesian environment as crucial to the growth of his vocation. "He said that here he found the people and the environment that helped his vocation grow," Bartocha told OSV News.

Bartocha, who supervised the organizational and pastoral matters of the beatification, said organizers intentionally highlighted personal artifacts during the ceremony rather than relics that would focus on suffering and death.

"We wanted to show the whole of their lives," Bartocha told OSV News. "Instead of relics, parish representatives and family members of the new blesseds carried items that reflected the men's lives: a doctoral diploma, eyeglasses, letters, notebooks and personal documents," he emphasized.

One particularly symbolic moment came when a testament left by one of the martyrs was placed alongside an urn containing ashes from Auschwitz. "People were crying," Bartocha told OSV News. "For two days afterward, everyone kept talking about what they had experienced."

"The beatification is a strong message for the contemporary world," Cameroni told OSV News. "It reminds us that faith has a cost, and that education and responsibility toward young people require coherence and courage."

"The new Salesian blesseds show that true victory is born from fidelity, and that the meaning of life is discovered in the gift of self."