



n this photo taken with a smartphone, a sculpture, depicting five Spanish missionaries who were killed in 1597, stands outside the Nativity of Our Lady Catholic Church in Darien, Georgia, on Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2026. (AP Photo/Russ Bynum)

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Savannah, Ga. — October 30, 2026

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Nearly 430 years after they were killed in a bloody uprising by Native people they came to the New World to baptize, five Spanish missionaries will be elevated to a step away from sainthood during a religious ceremony in Georgia.

The Catholic Diocese of Savannah expects 10,000 people Saturday for its ceremony of beatification for the Franciscan friars slain in 1597. After decades of research, advocacy and bureaucratic review, the Vatican concluded last year that the five missionaries were martyred defending Christian values and therefore eligible for the title "blessed."

The friars' self-sacrifice makes their story stand out more than four centuries later, said Bishop Stephen Parkes, who leads the Savannah diocese.

"Likely we will not be called to be martyrs, especially living in a country where we enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," Parkes said. "It's an opportunity for each person to ask: What am I so passionate about that I would give my life?"

Savannah's beatification ceremony is only the sixth to take place in the U.S. Interest was so great that the special Mass will be celebrated at the city's convention center rather than a church. Among the thousands of expected visitors are bishops from Spain, Rome and Africa.

It comes barely a month after a St. Louis football stadium hosted 50,000 for the beatification of Archbishop Fulton Sheen, a pioneering figure in TV and radio evangelism.

Killings predate America's English colonies

Unlike Sheen, who died in 1979, the Spanish missionaries — known locally as "the Georgia martyrs" — perished so long ago that they were largely forgotten except among members of the Franciscan Order in which they served and scholars of America's past before the British colonies.

Present-day Georgia was a part of Spanish Florida when the friars arrived in the late 16th century to minister to the Guale, an Indigenous chiefdom spread among coastal villages. European colonization would ultimately destroy those communities, leaving

the Guale enslaved and scattered.

In the late 1500s, Spain had come to rely on missionaries as its foremost ambassadors to the Guale, said John Worth, a historical archaeology professor at the University of West Florida. Friars would move into Guale villages and set up churches and living quarters.

"They would go out and act like a Peace Corps, helping them navigate the Spanish system and bringing in iron tools to help them farm," said Worth, who has studied the Guale for four decades. "But they simultaneously expected conversion to the Christian way of life."

The five missionaries had lived peacefully with the Guale for about two years before an argument over marriage values turned violent on Sept. 14, 1597.

Friar Pedro de Corpa infuriated the nephew of a Guale chieftain who planned to take a second wife as allowed by Guale tradition. The friar admonished the man, a baptized Christian known as Juanillo, telling him that polygamy violated God's law.

Juanillo later led a group of warriors to de Corpa's hut as he prepared for morning Mass. They killed the friar with stone clubs.

In the following days, Guale warriors attacked other nearby missions and killed four more friars — Blas Rodriguez, Miguel de Anon, Antonio de Badajoz and Francisco de Verascola.

For Native Americans, Spanish colonization was 'often violent'

Records of the killings, including a report on the Spanish government's investigation and an account published 20 years later by a Franciscan friar, tell the story from the colonizers' perspective.

The Guale chiefdom in Georgia was eventually decimated by raids that captured its people as slaves for English settlers. By the mid-1700s, remaining Guale had fled to Cuba or were absorbed by other tribes. They have modern descendants among the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

"The events of 1597 occurred during a complex and often violent period of Spanish colonization, when Indigenous peoples struggled to preserve their sovereignty,

cultural traditions and ways of life," said RaeLynn Butler, secretary of culture and humanities for the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

"While the killing of the friars was tragic, the history of the Guale people extends far beyond those events."

Were the missionaries true martyrs? Motive was critical

Some historians have argued that the friars may not have been the primary targets of the attacks, but were killed in a violent power struggle between Guale political rivals.

Motive was critical to those pressing the missionaries' case with the Vatican. Absent evidence of a miracle, beatification requires proof of martyrdom — that someone died at the hands of religious persecutors.

In an October 1597 letter to Spanish Florida's governor, surviving Friar Pedro Fernandez described the missionaries as "little lambs, at the moment of martyrdom." He also wrote that a Guale leader carrying the hat of one of the slain friars had proclaimed "in a loud voice that there was no longer any Christianity" in the area.

Several Guale men interrogated about the killings told Spanish authorities that the friars had interfered with their ancestral traditions — including men taking multiple wives.

"A strong historical case had to be made to Rome to do this," said the Rev. Pablo Migone, who spent the past decade as the Savannah diocese's chief promoter of the friars' beatification, long after the effort began.

U.S. bishops initially proposed the missionaries as potential candidates for beatification in the 1950s and members of the Franciscan Order began doing research. The Diocese of Savannah got involved in 1984.

Finally, in 2007, a Franciscan historian carried a finished report of nearly 500 pages in a sealed box across the Atlantic Ocean to Rome.

The case awaited the Vatican's approval for nearly 20 more years. Committees reviewed the historical records and checked for any clashes with Catholic doctrine.

Meanwhile, the Savannah diocese launched projects to increase awareness — a detailed website, a documentary film and a bronze monument to the friars outside a church.

In January 2025, a few months before his death, Pope Francis signed a decree recognizing the friars as martyrs — allowing for their beatification.

Sainthood would require evidence of a miracle resulting from prayers to the friars.

"We would not solicit a miracle," said Parkes. "But we never know in the mystery of our faith what will happen. So we put that into God's hands."

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