

Albanian Catholics to excommunicate participants in blood feud

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SHKODER, Albania -- Albanian Catholic leaders warned they would excommunicate anyone involved in the traditional "gjakmarrja," or blood feud, after complaints of worsening violence.

"People kill without hesitation in this bloody, barbaric system of revenge, often justifying their actions from a centuries-old tradition," Archbishop Angelo Massafra of Shkoder told a Sept. 18 news conference to present a pastoral letter against the blood feud.

"They attach more importance to human tradition than the law of God, and through their murderous behavior trample on the Gospel of Life and Cross of Christ," he said.

The pastoral letter was to be read in parishes Saturday and Sunday.

Massafra said church leaders were alarmed at priests' reports of an upsurge in murders during 2012, as well as of worsening "domestic violence, (use of) force in relations between people and acts of revenge."

He said they decided to issue the excommunication decree after the killing of a 17-year-old girl.

"The church's doors will remain open to those who repent and help calm the hearts of people," said Massafra, whose statement was carried Sept. 19 by Albania's Shekulli daily.

"But every person of the Catholic faith who kills for motives of vendetta will be excommunicated. They will be unable to participate in church services, attend confession, receive communion or be buried in a church cemetery."

Catholics traditionally make up 15 percent of Albania's population of 3.5 million, 70 percent of which is nominally Muslim, although no new figures have been compiled since a 24-year communist-era ban on religious practices was lifted in 1991.

A statement on the Shkoder archdiocesan website said "organized honor killings" were especially prevalent in largely Catholic northern Albania and reflected a "mentality of self-justice."

Speaking at the news conference, Bishop Lucjan Avgustini of Sape said the Catholic church would demand life sentences for murderers who claimed justification under "gjakmarrja" rules and would seek compensation for victims' families.

"To change mentalities, it will be important for citizens to be confident the courts will punish perpetrators, and that the state authorities are proper, fair and uncorrupted in their judgments," Avgustini said.

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