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Franciscan martyrs hailed during beatification in Czech Republic

by Catholic News Service

Prague — Fourteen Franciscan priests were beatified in the Czech Republic, four centuries after they were tortured to death by Protestant forces in a Catholic monastery.

Presiding at the Oct. 13 ceremony at historic St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, Cardinal Angelo Amato, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Saints' Causes, described the men as "heroic monks" whose actions in the face of violence can serve as an inspiration to modern-day people of faith to overcome evil with good.

"Today, too, we need peaceful coexistence and understanding, so we must nurture this good seed until it becomes a mighty tree, bearing flowers and fruits of a humanity joined in reconciliation and brotherhood," Amato said.

Ecumenical ties with Protestants would be strengthened rather than weakened by the ceremony for Fr. Frederick Bachstein and 13 companions from the Order of Friars Minor, he told the 250 priests, leaders of the Franciscan order and 6,000 Catholics in attendance.

"Far from living in hatred, these blessed martyrs prayed, worked and acted for good, as penitent witnesses to Christ's love," Amato said.

The friars, mostly from France, Netherlands, Germany and Italy, were sent by their order to Protestant-ruled Prague in 1604 to learn the Czech language and rebuild Our Lady of the Snows monastery, which was destroyed in earlier religious wars.

However, when Catholic forces under Austrian Archduke Leopold Habsburg sacked the city in early

1611, local residents accused the friars of collaborating and brutally murdered them in the monastery.

A movement to beatify the priests began later in the century and was relaunched in the 1930s only to be interrupted when then Czechoslovakia was under communist rule from 1948 to 1989.

Speaking at the Mass, Cardinal Dominik Duka of Prague said the "earthly tragedy and posthumous glory" of the friars was important for the whole of Europe because of the priests' diverse nationalities.

He added that their deaths, a decade before a Bohemian revolt against Habsburg rule sparked Europe's Thirty Years' War, occurred at a time of "moral crisis" across the continent, characterized by "uncertainties, malignments, fears and calls for atonement, as well as radicalism and the suppression of basic human responsibility toward others."

Pope Benedict XVI recalled in his Angelus message Sunday that the Franciscans had been killed because of their faith and were the first to be declared blessed during the Year of Faith observance.

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