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Don Pino: the most important beatification of the early 21st century

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In two weeks, on May 25, the Catholic church will celebrate what is quite possibly the most important beatification of the early 21st century. Italian Fr. Giuseppe "Pino" Puglisi will be recognized as a martyr in a Mass celebrated in Palermo on the island of Sicily, where he was assassinated in 1993 for challenging the Mafia's hold.

The event probably won't get a lot of media play outside Italy, especially since the pope isn't going to be on hand. Yet make no mistake: Puglisi is not only a terrific story, but his beatification marks a profound evolution in the Catholic understanding of martyrdom and "anti-Christian" persecution generally.

According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, approximately 100,000 Christians around the world have been killed "in a situation of witness" each year in the past decade. That works out to 11 Christians killed every hour. Other experts question that number, but even the low-end estimate puts the tally of Christians killed every day in circumstances somehow related to their faith at 20, meaning almost one per hour.

The rise of this new generation of martyrs is the most important Christian story of our time, and Puglisi is an ideal patron saint for making the defense of believers at risk a transcendent Christian cause.

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First, a brief recap of Puglisi's life and death.

By all accounts a funny, spitfire pastor, Puglisi dedicated his life to convincing youth in his crime-infested

neighborhood that there are ways forward other than the mob and to shaping a civil society in Sicily that challenged the Mafia's political influence.

His journey started as a young pastor in the 1960s in Godrano, in the hills 25 miles outside Palermo. When Puglisi arrived, there had been 15 recent murders in this village of scarcely more than 100 people, all related to a feud between two rival Mafia clans. Puglisi started going door-to-door, reading the Gospel with people and talking about forgiveness. He encouraged small groups to pray and to read the Bible, at first once a month, then every 15 days.

Eventually, one of the women hosting a group said she couldn't carry on until she had forgiven the mother of her son's assassin. Puglisi arranged reconciliation between the two women, which endured despite strong disapproval from many in the village. By itself, this outcome did not cancel the feud, but it was a start.

"Peace," Puglisi said, "is like bread -- it must be shared or it loses its flavor."

Puglisi later took over as pastor of San Gaetano Parish in the rough-and-tumble Palermo neighborhood of Brancaccio. He became famous for his strong anti-Mafia stance, refusing to take their money for feast day celebrations and not allowing dons to march at the head of processions. He strove to keep youth out of their reach, discouraging them from dropping out of school, robbing, drug-dealing and selling contraband cigarettes. He also declined to award a contract to a construction firm backed by the Mafia for the restoration of his church.

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He understood he was playing with fire. Members of a social improvement group in his parish found the doors of their houses torched and got menacing phone calls. Puglisi himself received multiple death threats and, according to the testimony of one of his hit men (who later confessed), Puglisi's last words were: "I've been expecting you."

As it happened, Puglisi was gunned down on his 56th birthday. Visitors to Brancaccio today can find his favorite saying scrawled all over its walls: "And what if somebody did something?"

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Entirely on his own, Puglisi is deserving of the honor. However, his beatification also represents a powerful impulse to reframe how Catholics perceive a wide variety of contemporary situations in which Christians are at risk.

Take the case of two Orthodox bishops kidnapped in Syria on April 23 whose whereabouts remain unknown.

So far, nobody has publicly claimed responsibility, though some eyewitness accounts have suggested the involvement of foreign Chechen extremists who've shown up in Syria to join the fighting. Given that kidnapping Christian clergy has become a cottage industry in Syria, it could be that the prelates were grabbed as part of a shakedown.

In February, the website Ora Pro Siria, operated by Catholic missionaries, reported that the going price to ransom a priest was \$200,000. Most of the kidnapping is being carried out by a bewildering variety of militias and criminal gangs, all seeking revenue streams.

I've done several radio and TV bits on the story of the Syrian bishops, and when I suggest the motive may be extortion, the response is usually something like, "So it might not have anything to do with religion?"

Although understandable, that reaction betrays a serious confusion. Whenever someone is threatened or harmed, there are actually two questions to ask: First, what are the motives of the attackers? Second, did the victims make choices that placed themselves at risk, and if so, why?

In the case of the bishops, one has to consider what they were doing on the road that runs between the Turkish border and Aleppo in the first place. As it happens, it's a grand irony -- they were returning from an effort to negotiate the release of two priests, one Orthodox and the other Armenian Catholic, who were kidnapped in early February.

The bishops clearly understood they were placing themselves at risk, but chose to do so anyway on the basis of pastoral concern for fellow clergy. Thus the answer to the question "So this might not have anything to do with religion?" is no. Religion has a lot to do with it, as long as we're bringing all parties into view.

Therein lies the significance of the Puglisi precedent.

Historically, the church has recognized martyrs only if they were killed *in odium fidei*, meaning hatred of the faith. In effect, the test has been the motivation of the assailant, not the victim. Puglisi, however, is being recognized as a martyr who died *in odium virtutis et veritatis*, meaning hatred of virtue and truth. His assassins' motives had nothing to do with opposition to Christianity -- indeed, they understood themselves to be good Catholics. Yet Puglisi's reasons for standing in the firing line had everything to do with his faith.

The category of "hatred of virtue and truth" has always existed in classical theology. Over the centuries, writers have sometimes invoked it, for instance, to explain why the church regards St. John the Baptist as a martyr, who died not for refusing to renounce Christ but for criticizing Herod's immoral conduct.

The Puglisi beatification means it's being revived and potentially could accommodate many other similar situations.

To take just one example, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, the Vatican official handling the sainthood cause of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, suggested in a February interview with *NCR* that the Puglisi beatification sets a precedent for Romero, too.

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To be sure, there are legitimate cautions about an overly elastic concept of anti-Christian persecution.

For one thing, styling something as a religious conflict when other forces may be equally decisive can be inflammatory. One can get an exaggerated impression of Muslim/Christian animosity, for instance, by focusing only on the religious identity of jihadists in the Middle East without considering the political, economic and cultural factors that also foment violence.

Accurate diagnosis is also key to cure. If Christians are being targeted in Sri Lanka not just because of

their religious affiliation but because of lingering ethnic and political tensions related to that nation's civil war, protecting them may require solutions that have as much to do with statecraft as confessional rivalry.

(The point about Sri Lanka is hardly idle. At the moment, a group of more than 200 Tamil Catholic families are still living in an internally displaced persons camp after having been driven from their native village in 2007 by incensed mobs, who blamed them both for supporting the Tamil rebels and for undercutting the town's Buddhist identity.

"If we could go home, we wouldn't have to wait for other people to bring us food and clothing," one of the refugees told a reporter. "We want to earn our living, feed our children and get back to a normal life. Instead, we are stuck here to suffer.")

At the same time, it cheapens the witness of legions of victims to suggest their suffering isn't "religious" simply because their oppressors aren't motivated by explicitly religious concerns.

Among other things, grasping that point is crucial to waking up both the rank and file and the leadership of the churches about the true scope and scale of the threats facing Christians in the early 21st century. Most Christians today aren't being menaced because of their doctrinal convictions but because of moral choices rooted in their faith. That distinction doesn't make their suffering any less spiritually significant or any less deserving of concern.

Driving that point home, in short, is the promise of the beatification of Don Pino.

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Here's a small footnote to the story of the Syrian bishops. Today, the Greek Melkite community in Rome was scheduled to hold a Byzantine liturgy to pray for the bishops' release and for all those kidnapped in Syria in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. Passages from sermons delivered by the bishops were to be read aloud, as well as a message from the Greek Melkite Patriarch, Gregory III.

The Mass was to be celebrated by Fr. Mtanios Haddad, who represents Gregory III in Rome. Also set to take part was Auxiliary Bishop Matteo Maria Zuppi of Rome, who has long-standing ties to the Community of Sant'Egidio, and 91-year-old Archbishop Hilarion Capucci, the long-retired former vicar of the Melkite church in Jerusalem.

Capucci, to say the least, is a controversial figure. He was arrested by Israeli security forces in 1974 on his way back from a trip to Lebanon, after his Mercedes sedan was found loaded with TNT and rifles headed for the Palestinian Liberation Organization. At the time, Capucci belonged to Fatah, the Palestine Liberation Organization's main faction, and was a member of the PLO's parliament-in-exile.

Capucci was sentenced to 12 years in prison by the Israelis but released in 1977 after a personal appeal from Pope Paul VI. The idea was that he would stay out of the spotlight, but that hasn't stopped him from occasionally popping back into public view in sometimes awkward circumstances -- for instance, he was at the right hand of Tarik Aziz, Saddam Hussein's notorious deputy, when Aziz visited Assisi in February 2003.

Of course, it's natural that a Catholic prelate from a church with roots in Syria and the Middle East would want to express his solidarity for the kidnapped Orthodox bishops. However, doing so in public is potentially another matter, since Capucci's divisive profile may risk muddying the waters and politicizing what ought to be a strictly humanitarian case.

It's a lesson, perhaps, in how people at risk have to worry not just about their enemies, but also their friends.

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