



Roman Martyrology: In the village of Krasic, Croatia, Blessed Alojzije Stepinac, bishop of Zagreb, who firmly rejected the doctrines opposed to faith and human dignity and of their fidelity to the Church, after prolonged imprisonment, victim of disease and misery, egregiously ended his episcopate (1960) .

Beatification date: October 3, 1998 by Pope John Paul II at Marija Bistrica, Croatia.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Born on May 8, 1898 at Brezarić, Krasic, Croatia as Alojzije Viktor Stepinac. Raised in the large Catholic Croatian family of Josip and Barbara (nee Penic) Stepinac. Graduated high school on 28 June 1916. Soldier in the Austrian army in World War I, fighting at several points in Italy. Following the collapse of the front in September 1918, he was imprisoned, then released and demobilized in December 1918.

Studied briefly at the Faculty of Agriculture in Zagreb, Croatia, but returned to work at home. He considered marriage, but realized a call to the priesthood, and began his studies in 1924. Studied at the Pontifical Germanicum-Hungaricum College, and earned doctorates in theology and philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy. Ordained 26 October 1930. Parish priest in the archdiocese of Zagreb. He worked especially in the poor neighbourhoods, and established the archdiocesan Caritas on 23 November 1931.

Named Co-adjutor Archbishop of Zagreb on 29 May 1934 by Pope Pius XI. Created twelve new parishes in the archdiocese, established close ties with lay associations and youth groups, promoted the Catholic press, and helped protect the rights of the Church from the Yugoslavian state. Succeeded Archbishop Bauer on 7 December 1937.

In 1936, the rise of Nazism prompted Stepinac to support a committee helping people fleeing the Reich. Instituted the Action for Assistance to Jewish Refugees in 1938. This period galvanized him a stout defender of human rights regardless of race, religion, nationality, ethnic group or social class, a fight he would continue the rest of his days. During the war, Stepinac helped hide countless people, mainly Jews, in monasteries and other Church property; some remained there throughout the war.

By 1945, Yugoslavia had replaced the oppression of the Nazis with the oppression of the Communists. Stepinac, wrote a biographer, “treated the new authorities...in accordance with the Gospel” but fought for the rights of the Church and the interests of Croats. After publishing a letter denouncing the execution of priests by communist militants, Stepinac was arrested for the first time.

Following the Archbishop’s release, Yugoslavia’s new leader, Josip Broz Tito, tried to persuade him to have the Catholic Church in Croatia break from Rome. The Bishops of Yugoslavia issued a pastoral letter on 22 September 1945 in which they referred to the promises made – and broken – by the Belgrade government to respect freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and private ownership of property. The Bishops demanded freedom for the Catholic press, Catholic schools, religious instruction, Catholic associations, and “full freedom for the human person and his inviolable rights, full respect for Christian marriage and the restitution of all confiscated properties and institutions”. The state-run media launched an attack on the Church in general, and the archbishop by name.

Stepinac was tried in September 1946 for defending the unity of the Catholic Church in Croatia, and its unity with Rome. The Pope objected to this show trial, and members of the Jewish community in the United States protested, “...this great man has been accused of being a collaborator of the Nazis. We Jews deny this.... Alojzije Stepinac was one of the few men in Europe who raised his voice against the Nazi tyranny, precisely at the time when it was most dangerous to do so.” On 11 October 1946, he was sentenced to 16 years of hard labour and the loss of his civil rights, such as they were.

On 5 December 1951, ill health forced the authorities to move Stepinac from prison to house arrest in Krasic. There he performed priestly functions, received visitors, and wrote more than 5,000 letters, none of which show the slightest resentment for those who persecuted him.

Created cardinal on 12 January 1953 by Pope Pius XII who called him “an example of apostolic zeal and Christian strength. [This is] to reward his extraordinary merits...and especially to honour and comfort our sons and daughters who resolutely confess their Catholic faith despite these difficult times.” This apparently was too much for the Yugoslav regime who, promptly broke diplomatic relations with Rome. Stepinac, however, retained his position and maintained his stance against the bullying government until his death, which may have been a murder to eliminate an annoyance to that government.

He died on February 10, 1960 at Krasic, Croatia. Suffered from polycythemia rubra vera, thrombosis of the leg and bronchial catarrh, but may have been poisoned as arsenic was found in his bones during the beatification examination.