



Hundreds of people join Pope Leo XIV and representatives of Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches and communities to commemorate "new martyrs and witnesses of the faith," killed in the past 25 years, during an ecumenical prayer service at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls Sept. 14, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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In situations where "hatred seemed to have permeated every aspect of life," modern Christian martyrs showed that love is stronger than death, Pope Leo XIV said at an ecumenical prayer service.

The prayer service Sept. 14, the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, commemorated 1,624 Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants who died for their faith between 2000 and 2025. During the Holy Year 2000, St. John Paul II had led a similar commemoration of Christians killed in the 20th century, mainly by communist and fascist regimes.

Leo was joined by 28 representatives of other Christian churches and communities for the prayer service at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls.

Anglican Bishop Anthony Ball, the archbishop of Canterbury's representative to the Holy See, and Orthodox Archbishop Elia of Helsinki and All Finland, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, stood on either side of the pope. Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, chair of the Moscow Patriarchate's external relations department, also attended.

The Vatican did not release the names of the 1,624 new martyrs whose stories were submitted over the past two years by Catholic bishops' conferences, religious orders and nunciatures from all over the world.

But Leo mentioned some of them in his homily, including Sr. Dorothy Stang, a U.S. member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, who was shot and killed in the Brazilian Amazon in 2005 for defending the land rights of the Indigenous and poor farmers.

"When those who were about to kill her asked her for a weapon, she showed them her Bible and replied, 'This is my only weapon,'" Pope Leo said.

He also spoke about Chaldean Fr. Ragheed Ganni from Mosul, Iraq, "who refused to fight in order to bear witness to how a true Christian behaves." He and three subdeacons were shot and killed in front of their church in 2007.

The pope also mentioned "Brother Francis Tofi, an Anglican and member of the Melanesian Brotherhood, who gave his life for peace in the Solomon Islands." Tofi and six other members of the religious order were killed by militia members on Guadalcanal in 2003.

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"Unfortunately, despite the end of the great dictatorships of the 20th century, to this day the persecution of Christians has not ended," the pope said. "On the contrary, in some parts of the world it has increased."

"We cannot and do not want to forget," the pope said. And "we want to keep this memory alive alongside our brothers and sisters of other churches and Christian communities. I therefore wish to reaffirm the commitment of the Catholic Church to safeguard the memory of the witnesses of the faith from all Christian traditions."

The new martyrs and witnesses of the faith were not killed because of the denomination they belonged to but because they were Christian, he said, and lived the Gospel of loving service to their brothers and sisters.

"As we recognized during the recent synod, the ecumenism of blood unites 'Christians of different backgrounds who together give their lives for faith in Jesus Christ. The witness of their martyrdom is more eloquent than any word: unity comes from the Cross of the Lord,'" he said, quoting the synod's final document.

"Their martyrdom continues to spread the Gospel in a world marked by hatred, violence and war," Leo said. "It is a hope filled with immortality because, even though they have been killed in body, no one can silence their voice or erase the love they have shown."

"Their witness lives on as a prophecy of the victory of good over evil," the pope said. "Yes, theirs is an unarmed hope. They bore witness to their faith without ever using the weapons of force and violence, but rather by embracing the hidden and meek power of the Gospel."

Leo prayed, "May the blood of so many witnesses hasten the arrival of the blessed day when we will drink from the same cup of salvation!"

The Gospel reading at the service was St. Matthew's version of the Eight Beatitudes, which then provided the framework for specific prayers for Christians who were persecuted or kidnapped or jailed and ultimately killed for living their faith, defending the poor, caring for creation or defending religious freedom.

During the service, the people prayed that Christian communities today would "learn from these peaceful witnesses, persecuted for the Gospel, to imitate the Lord Jesus, the Master, meek and humble of heart."

The new martyrs and witnesses of the faith named in the prayers included: Blessed Leonella Sgorbati, a Consolata Missionary sister who was killed in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 2006; six Evangelicals killed at Silgadji Mission in Burkina Faso in 2019; and the 21 Coptic Orthodox martyrs beheaded by Islamic State members in Libya in 2015.