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On 6 June 2026, in the Sanctuary of St John Paul II in Krakow, the beatification ceremony of nine Polish Salesians, educators and martyrs, will take place. This beatification is a public recognition of their testimony of faith, which proved stronger than violence, fear and death.

The eclipse of hope

On 1 September 1939, the invasion of Poland by Nazi troops marked the beginning of a deep night for humanity. National Socialism and Soviet Communism united with the deliberate aim of destroying the Polish nation. That day did not merely mark the beginning of a territorial conflict; it was the dawn of a plan of annihilation. The persecution was the result of a coordinated scientific plan aimed at liquidating the intelligentsia and the clergy. For the Nazi regime, the clergy, and in particular those engaged on the educational front like the sons of Don Bosco, represented an intolerable threat to the “Germanisation” project. Striking the priest meant “decapitating” Polish culture, since the clergy was the natural custodian of national identity. In particular, the Salesians, with 32 houses and over 500 confreres, formed young people according to the Preventive System: Don Bosco’s “Da mihi animas cetera tolle” was the antithesis to Nazi indoctrination; for the regime, Christian education was ideological sabotage. Reinhard Heydrich’s orders were clear: “The nobility, the Catholic clergy and the Jews must be liquidated”. The violence aimed to paralyse and annihilate the Church, but the Salesians responded by transforming evangelisation into moral resistance, ready to pay with their blood for their pastoral and educational mandate.

The places of martyrdom: Auschwitz and Dachau

Many priests and religious were thrown into the abyss of the *Konzentrationslager* (KL), where human dignity was systematically trampled upon. Auschwitz (I, II-Birkenau and III-Monowitz) and Dachau were not only places of death, but memorials of testimony to human dignity and the holiness of God unto martyrdom.

Here, figures such as the SS officer Siebert in Montelupich or the sadistic kapo "Franz" in Auschwitz sought to annihilate not only the body, but the religious identity of a people. To the forced labour of breaking stones and dragging heavy wheelbarrows under the beatings of their tormentors, the Salesian priests united their physical and moral sufferings to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ; to the blasphemous challenge of the kapo shouting: "I am God because I can kill you", defying divine omnipotence, and to the deadly blows of the tormentors, they reacted with the incessant invocation of the name of Jesus, maintaining an inner serenity that amazed the tormentors themselves; to the deprivation of care and the gratuitous and inhuman torture they responded with the exercise of charity, transforming the barracks into "oratories of sorrow", where they confessed and comforted the dying in fidelity to the priestly ministry. To the annihilation of human dignity and of men of God with physical and moral humiliations, they responded with the clandestine administration of the sacraments and the holocaust of their lives. These "death camps" paradoxically became "camps of hope", where nine martyrs wrote the last page of their lives.

Portraits of fortitude

27 June 1941, represents the apex of Nazi ferocity against the Salesians of Krakow. On that day, a group of priests, including Fr. Jan Świerc, Fr. Ignacy Dobiasz, Fr. Franciszek Harazim, and Fr. Kazimierz Wojciechowski, was assigned to the *Strafkommando* (Penal Company) of Block 11. The kapo Franz, described as a "sadistic bandit", and the other tormentors sought not only the death of bodies, but the apostasy of souls. **Fr. Jan Świerc**, the eldest, massacred for an hour by the kapo Franz, died breathing the words: "O Jesus, O Jesus!", without ever cursing his executioner. **Fr. Ignacy Dobiasz**, a master of spiritual life, was beaten and thrown into a pit, welcoming martyrdom as a supreme and definitive gift. **Fr. Franciszek Harazim**, of fragile health, was tortured while the kapo, shouting, challenged him to show his God. "I am God, because I can kill you or leave you alive. If you believe in God, why doesn't he help you?" In this abyss of violence, when Fr. Harazim, dying in the pit with broken bones, asked to be able to confess, Franz ordered Fr. Wybraniec to hear the confession aloud and in German, to violate its secrecy. Fr. Wybraniec, defying immediate death, imparted absolution without demanding public confession, preserving the sacrament and suffering a violent beating for this. Fr. Harazim died suffocated by an iron bar on his throat together with **Fr. Kazimierz Wojciechowski**. In that same group shone the figure of **Fr. Ignacy**

Antonowicz. Although he had the opportunity to escape before his arrest, he chose to return to the seminary so as not to abandon his clerics. "Everything is ready, in case I do not return," he told a confrere. Aware of his fate, he said: "For them it is enough to be a priest to arrest us". He died weeks later, on 21 July 1941, exhausted by the bites of dogs set upon him.

Fr. Karol Golda was arrested on 31 December 1941 in Oświęcim. His "crime" was the administration of the sacrament of penance. Golda had welcomed two SS soldiers, an aspiring priest and an Orthodox comrade. For Nazi ideology, a soldier who crossed the threshold of a church "stained the SS uniform": for this reason, the soldier himself was sentenced to several years in prison. Fr. Golda was transferred to Auschwitz (Block 22) on charges of espionage. Maximilian Grabner, the infamous head of the camp's political department, subjected him to systematic torture to violate the sacramental seal and obtain information on the soldiers' confessions. Golda opposed an absolute silence. He was a martyr of confession because he did not betray the seal of confession. Shot on 14 May 1942, Golda left a final note to his confreres. He did not ask for justice, but only forgiveness for any sorrow caused, sealing the dignity of the ministry with his blood.

Fr. Włodzimierz Szembek: noble by birth and an agronomist, he joined the Salesians at the age of 40, bringing with him a moral mettle that would challenge the horror of the *Konzentrationslager*. On 9 July 1942, during a brutal Gestapo search in Skawa, Szembek spontaneously offered himself in place of the director, who was to act as a hostage in place of a young Salesian aspirant who had managed to hide. The officers, in an excess of repressive zeal, decided to arrest both. Before reaching Auschwitz, Szembek experienced the hell of the Zakopane prison, locked in a very narrow cell flooded with water, where the prisoners could only sit in turns. At Auschwitz, he was assigned to exhausting work, forced to drag a heavy stone cylinder to level the roll-call square. The testimonies of his fellow prisoners, including his nephew Jan Kanty Szembek, describe a battered body: hands and shoulder fractured by beatings; all his ribs broken under the blows of the guards; his torso completely blackened by the onset of gangrene; a swollen and fractured leg that made every movement an agony. And yet, Szembek exhorted his

companions to an almost impossible mission: “We must erase all hatred from our hearts, forget and forgive the crimes suffered”. He died on 7 September 1942.

In the Auschwitz infirmary, where hygienic conditions were defined as “inhuman” by the prisoner doctors themselves, **Fr. Ludwik Mroczek** became a spiritual point of reference. Struck by a phlegmon – a very serious suppurative infection that progressively spread throughout his body – he was subjected to repeated surgical operations without anaesthesia or adequate medicines. The contrast between his face disfigured by pain and the serenity of his soul deeply shook the witnesses. Józef Stemler, his fellow patient, recounted having “tested” him by insulting a tormentor who had just kicked the priest. Mroczek’s response – “May God forgive him” – instantly revealed his priestly stature. “He is a giant of suffering... If we did not have such priests, we would be a hundred times worse,” declared the doctor who operated on him. Mroczek died on the night of 5 January 1942, transforming his agony into an act of intercession for his own executioners.

Fr Franciszek Miska (30 May 1942): director of the Łąd seminary, transformed into a prison for 152 religious. He refused the freedom promised in exchange for collaboration with the Gestapo. He died in Dachau, forced to carry pots of boiling soup with a broken hand.

In the camps, the Salesian martyrs did not cease to be fathers and teachers. Their presence transformed the perception of the camp: where hatred reigned, they brought the “pedagogy of hope”. The confessions administered in the work lines or during the distribution of bread restored the dignity of children of God to those reduced to a number. The clandestine Eucharist, celebrated in the dark of the barracks with fragments of bread, brought “the strength of grace” to a place that denied its existence. The comfort of the dying transformed solitary agony into a passage towards eternity, offering human warmth in the freezing cold of the camp. The forgiveness of enemies was the most subversive act. By teaching not to hate, the martyrs broke the chain of violence, emerging victorious on a moral and spiritual level.

The legacy of memory

The link with history is sealed by the words of a young man from the Salesian parish of Debniki (Krakow) who, seeing the sacrifice of his pastors, felt his own vocation mature, the young Karol Wojtyła, future Pope John Paul II. "I am convinced that my priestly vocation [...] was also contributed to by the prayers and sacrifices of those pastors of that time who [...] for the Christian life of every parishioner and especially for young parishioners - I belonged to the youth here at the time - paid not only with a good word [...] but also with the sacrifice and blood of martyrdom." They had paid with their lives to protect the youth of the parish, that same youth of which the future St John Paul II was a part.

The nine Polish Salesian martyrs are masters of consistency who teach how, even when the light of reason goes out, the light of faith can shine brighter, making man free even behind barbed wire. Their legacy invites us to be, today, witnesses of the same timeless hope. Their story hands us a piercing paradox: the victory of those who succumb out of love over those who kill out of hatred. In an era that often slips towards resentment and division, these men pose a question that shakes consciences. How is it possible, under the blows of a stick or in the dark of a cell, to respond to torture with forgiveness and to darkness with care for the other? Their spiritual resistance suggests that human dignity, when anchored in faith in God, is the only force that no tormentor can break.