May 30

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Martyrs of the Ustashi regime (1941-1945)

In May 1941 the Croat nationalist army built the prison camp of Jasenovac, where hundreds of thousands of prisoners, mostly Serbs and Jews, were put to death between 1941 and 1945.
In those same years, dictator Ante Pavelich's Ustashi regime, supported by Hitler and Mussolini and looked upon favorably by part of the Catholic hierarchy, massacred fifty thousand Jews, seven hundred thousand Orthodox Serbs, and even a small number of Slovenian Catholics, destroying 299 Orthodox churches and almost all of Croatia's synagogues in the process. The Serbian Orthodox patriarchate suffered extremely heavy losses at the hands of the Ustashi: six bishops, more than three hundred priests, and 222 religious lost their lives in that brief span of time. In the Orthodox eparchy of Plaski alone, only five priests out of 137 survived. Religious leaders, rabbis on one side and metropolitans on the other, were subjected publicly to indescribable atrocities, and after their execution, their bodies were desecrated.
Among those who collaborated with Pavelich's inhuman regime were several Catholic religious. Very few bishops spoke out in defense of the Jews, and almost no one attempted to defend the Serbs.
The martyrdom of the Serbian church and of the Jews of Croatia was motivated above all by nationalistic hatred that had grown over time in those neighboring countries. Still, these events are a reminder that religious faiths can always be exploited, and that whenever this has happened in history the results have been devastating. Every Christian is called to ask him- or herself whether the faith of Christ is compatible with any ideology that does not recognize the dignity and inviolability of every human life.

A READING

When you find yourself in the ravines of Prebilovci, among the skulls of Serbs pitilessly piled in heaps by the Ustashi, Job's eternal question resurfaces in an obsessive way, because we are unable to answer such a question. To which god of death were those martyrs sacrificed, and to which god of love, justice, and mercy, if our God is an almighty God?
If Christ did not exist, if his coming and his martyrdom had not happened, then this question would be destined to remain unanswered, with all the absurdity it contains. After the 1942 Kraljevo pogrom led by Hitler's troops, when the families of those who had been shot came to bury them, one of the victims asked the priest who was there, "Father, where was God while my son was being shot?" The priest led that father into the church, and pointing to the crucifix replied, "He was there."

Christ forgave while he was on the Cross. As for us, how can we forgive? The only way is to search in the depths of our hearts for the sparks of love that never stop burning in every Christian, and that Christ came to fan into flame with his teaching and his life.

Pavle, Patriarch of Serbia

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

ANGLICANS:
Josephine Butler (d. 1906), social reformer
Joan of Arc (d. 1431), visionary
Apolo Kivebulaya (d. 1933), priest, evangelist in Central Africa

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (22 basans/genbot):
Andronicus (1st cent.), one of the 70 disciples (Coptic Church)

LUTHERANS:
Gottfried Arnold (d. 1714), theologian in Saxony

MARONITES:
Isaac of Constantinople (d. ca. 406), monk and confessor
Felix I (d. ca. 274), pope

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:
Isaac of Constantinople, monk and confessor