

# WORLD & NATION

## Pope beatifies controversial Croatian cardinal

By Lynn Weil  
Catholic News Service

SPLIT, Croatia — Pope John Paul II beatified a cardinal he said summed up the tragedies of Croatia and Europe this century and applauded the country for its democratic development.

"My stay among you has enabled me to experience at first hand the recovery achieved in the past few years," the pope noted in his Oct. 4 farewell address at the airport of Split, Croatia. "I have seen a society which desires to build its present and future on solid democratic foundations, in complete fidelity to its own history, which is permeated by Christianity, in order to take its rightful place in the assembly of the other European nations."

During his Oct. 2-4 visit, Pope John Paul repeatedly took note of the violent and sometimes ambiguous episodes in Croatia's past, from collaboration with Nazi Germany in World War II to the war for independence from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. More often, he referred to the country's Christian roots and urged its people to rely on religious values to strengthen their society.

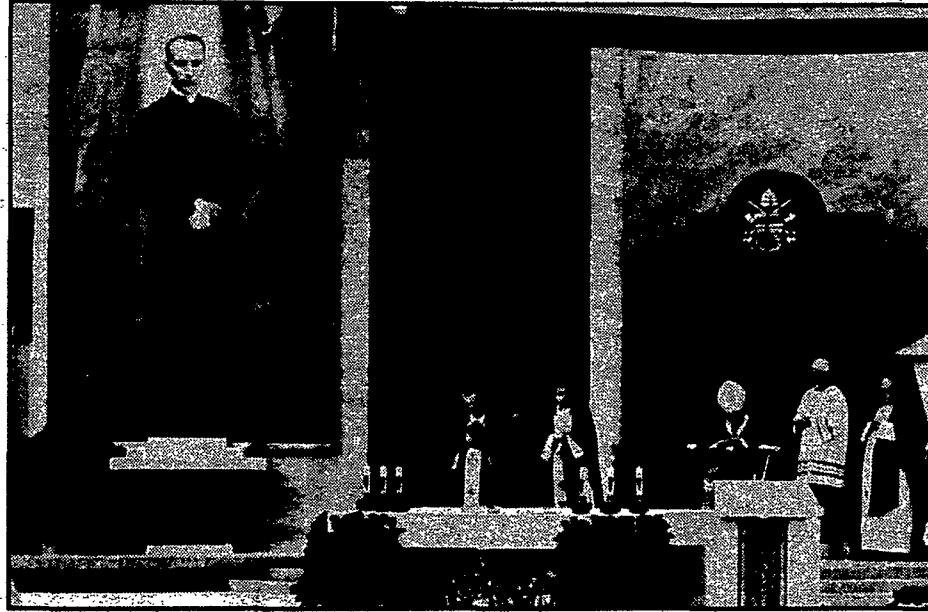
The two main focal points of the pope's visit were the beatification of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac and the celebration of Split's 1,700th anniversary.

Pope John Paul referred to the national significance of the beatification after the Oct. 3 Mass at the national shrine outside Zagreb.

"The cardinal archbishop of Zagreb, one of the outstanding figures of the Catholic Church, having endured in his own body and his own spirit the atrocities of the communist system, is now entrusted to the memory of his fellow countrymen with the radiant badge of martyrdom," the pontiff said.

Blessed Stepinac, he added, "sums up, so to speak, the whole tragedy which befell the Croatian people and Europe in the course of this century marked by the three great evils of fascism, national socialism and communism."

Of Croatia's 4.8 million people, 3.7 million are Catholic. The majority of the remainder are Orthodox. The recent war reinforced historical animosity between



Pope John Paul II sits next to a huge painting of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac during a beatification Mass Oct. 3. The pope said the cardinal symbolizes "the whole tragedy which befell the Croatian people" during and after World War II.



A woman holds a sign welcoming Pope John Paul II to the Marian Sanctuary of the Madonna of the Island at Solin Oct. 4, the last day of a three-day papal visit to Croatia.

them.

The pope told Croatians at his Oct. 2 arrival in the capital, Zagreb, that he had come "to confirm my brothers and sisters in the faith ... to encourage their hope and to strengthen their love."

In the months leading up to the papal visit, debate intensified over the nature of Blessed Stepinac's World War II allegiances, for years a galvanizing issue among the country's Catholic, Serbian Orthodox and Jewish populations.

U.S. journalist Robert Kaplan wrote in his 1993 book, *Balkan Ghosts*, that "nowhere in Europe is the legacy of Nazi war crimes so unresolved as in Croatia" and that Cardinal Stepinac's ghost "serves as the elemental symbol of the Serb-Croat dispute."

While still the archbishop of Zagreb, Blessed Stepinac welcomed the April 1941 arrival of the pro-Nazi puppet regime, the Ustasha, established by Germany, which had declared Croatia an independent state within Yugoslavia.

"Who can reproach us if we also, as spiritual pastors, add our contribution to the pride and rejoicing of the people," the then-archbishop wrote. "It is easy to see God's hand at work here."

Only as the regime's racist and eventually genocidal policies against Serbs, Gypsies and Jews became evident did Blessed Stepinac speak out. A year after seeing "God's hand at work" in the Ustasha's arrival, he met their leader, Ante Pavelic, on the steps of the Zagreb cathedral with the words, "Thou shalt not kill." Pavelic refused to enter the cathedral and stormed off.

In later public writings and messages to priests in his archdiocese, Blessed Stepinac said deprivation of human rights was against the wishes of God. He is also credited with saving 400-500 of the 39,000 Jews in wartime Croatia by placing them under church care.

Slavko Goldstein, a leader of the council overseeing the affairs of Croatia's current Jewish population of 2,000, said Oct. 2 that Blessed Stepinac could not be faulted for his actions.

"It took him a lot of time to realize what was happening," Goldstein said. "Maybe it took him more time than it took others. Of course he could have done more if he had protested earlier. But maybe he had other things on his mind."

Goldstein added that Blessed Stepinac "was really a brave man and a symbol of resistance against communism."

In a show trial staged by the communists who came to power after the war and whose request for a national Catholic Church independent of the pope he had resisted, Blessed Stepinac was convicted of collaborating with the Nazis. After serving several years in prison he was placed under house arrest in his hometown.

He continued to write and preach about religious freedom while under house arrest, until he died in 1960.

### Thoughts to Consider



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