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## Religious Leaders in Dachau Join in Opposing War

**Prelates, Survivor Urge Taking Responsibility for Peace**

By Chiara Santomiero

DACHAU, Germany, SEPT. 15, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- From Romania, Poland, Hungary and Ukraine, from Italy and Russia, religious leaders convoked by the Catholic lay Community of Sant'Egidio arrived together to Bunker 28 in Dachau.

The group was part of the interreligious meeting held last Sunday through Tuesday in Munich, with the theme: "Bound to Live Together. Religions and Cultures in Dialogue."

Catholic priests and Protestant pastors were held at Dachau, men who expressed in their churches opposition to the Nazi regime or helped to hide Jews and other persecuted people. From 1933 to 1945, some 3,000 priests were kept there, from 134 dioceses and 24 countries.

Very many died. "Dachau was not an extermination camp; its objective was 're-education' through forced labor; however, as regards the 42,000 deaths among the 200,000 inmates during 12 years, there certainly can be no talk of natural deaths," explained the guide.

The religious leaders from all over the world -- Christians, Muslims, Jews and representatives of the religions of Asia -- met Tuesday in Dachau for a commemorative ceremony, which highlighted, once again, the desire of religions for peace and reconciliation.

The camp's 30 barracks were aligned along a wonderful avenue flanked by poplars planted by the inmates themselves: being a model camp, it had to be pleasant to look at.

"According to the camp's hierarchy, it was best if one were assigned to an even-numbered shed at the beginning of the avenue, where the conditions were better. As one moved further along, the sheds were crowded and conditions were worse. The camp built to house 5,000 prisoners, had 36,000 of all nationalities when it was liberated. To survive was a miracle," explained the guide.

Existing and enduring

Cardinal Jozef Glemp, retired archbishop emeritus of Warsaw, recounted a detail of its liberation.

"Before the camp's liberation, on April 21, 1945, a miraculous event occurred," he said. "The Polish prisoners were praying to St. Joseph for their release when, suddenly, an American tank arrived that had taken a wrong turn. So the SS, who were preparing to destroy the camp and all proofs of the crimes that had been committed, fled."

Evidence such as the crematorium ovens -- which the SS assigned to Catholic priests because they thought that their ministry obliged them to secrecy in any situation -- or the gas chamber. The procedure at the concentration camps was always the same: The prisoners were obliged to strip naked with the pretext of having a shower and to enter the place where Zyklon B gas was released. It took 30 minutes to die.

"Thirty minutes is not a short time to die; it was a long agony. It reminded me of Jesus: He had to die to redeem all the dead, including these," Auxiliary Bishop Pero Sudar of Sarajevo commented to ZENIT. "The planning of the 'death factory,'" was striking, he said, "but also a place like this attests that evil can exist and endure, but in the end it is always defeated."

Referring to the conflict in Sarajevo, the bishop reflected: "The tragedy of the human condition is the inability to learn the fundamental things of others' experiences: Good and evil must enter the spirit of every generation."

"It is difficult for anyone to nourish an absolute will for evil: It is necessary to mask it with a pretense of goodness, such as the aim of re-education at Dachau or the need to defend oneself preventively from the possible attack of others, as happened with the Serbs in Bosnia," he added. "That is why it was possible in Germany that a whole nation, conditioned by propaganda and lies, tolerated all this."

Bishop Sudar said religions have a duty to unmask evil, but so do intellectuals and the media -- "so that it can be recognized for what it is. The preventive war does not exist and neither does the defensive: What exists is to be against war or for it.

Dishonoring war

Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, retired president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said the group's presence at Dachau was "the sign of your commitment to dishonor war wherever it appears."

"To attain peace today requires more heroism than to win a war in the past," he reflected.

Metropolitan Aleksandr of the Moscow Patriarchate told ZENIT that he has often visited such sites.

"In my country, Kazakhstan, near the city of Karaganda, I often go to pray to similar places, concentration camps where hundreds of martyrs died for the faith," he said. "Their witness, as well as that of those who suffered in Dachau, has shown that no dictatorship of ideologies can win, but only a system of Christian values that are the common values of all men."

A Dachau survivor, Max Mannheimer, vice-president of the Association of Dachau Survivors, spoke with ZENIT about the strength of the human spirit.

"At 23, in 1943, I went to Auschwitz, then to the Warsaw ghetto and later to Dachau. I worked in the gravel pits and was surrounded by brutality and violence. When the camp was liberated I weighed 48 kilos (105 pounds)," he said.

"When I returned to Czechoslovakia, I met a German girl who was opposed to Nazism and whose family was persecuted because of it. She constantly repeated that Germany could have been a democratic country," said Mannheimer. "I fell in love, and I believed her. For this reason I agreed to return to Germany and I have spent the last 25 years going from university to university to encourage young Germans on the path of democracy and peaceful coexistence."

Mannheimer offered an intervention at the ceremony. "Show courage," he said, "when it is a question of defending the rights and dignity of another human being. You are not responsible for what happened. But it must never be repeated. Of this you certainly are responsible."

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