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Pope Francis greets Albanian Cardinal Ernest Simoni at the end of his weekly general audience

Pope Francis greets Albanian Cardinal Ernest Simoni at the end of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Feb. 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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At the age of 97, Cardinal Ernest Simoni, returned to the former prison camp in Albania where he used to offer Mass in secret during his 18 years of sentenced forced labor, offering a public Mass July 31 in the memory of those who suffered and died at the labor camp.

The camp at Spaç, built in 1968 around a copper and pyrite mine in central Albania, was one of the harshest forced-labor prisons run by the country's communist government. Simoni spent much of his 18 years of imprisonment there as a young priest.

Pope Leo XIV sent a letter, read aloud at the close of the Mass, honoring both the cardinal and the many prisoners whose stories were never told.

"No chain is strong enough to imprison a conscience illuminated by the Gospel, no night is so long that it can prevent the dawn the Lord prepares for his children, and no prison is deep enough to separate a person from the love of God," the pope wrote.

The pope called Spaç "one of the most painful chapters" in Albania's national memory, a place "where many carried the heavy cross of injustice."

"The blood of those who suffered and died among those mountains has watered that land, making it a silent witness to fidelity, courage and hope," he said.

"How many prayers must have risen to Heaven from that place! How many supplications were whispered in the heart! How many people, marked by suffering and deprivation, entrusted their last hope to God!"

The pope described the cardinal's decision to return to celebrate Mass at the site as a witness to "the Sacrifice of Christ, which transformed the Cross from a sign of death into a promise of life."

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On Christmas Eve 1963, Simoni was arrested by the communist regime of Enver Hoxha after offering a Mass for the soul of assassinated U.S. President John F. Kennedy.

He would spend 18 years in prison before his release in 1981. Even then he remained officially branded an "enemy of the people" and was compelled to continue forced labor working in sewers until the regime's fall in 1990.

Throughout his imprisonment, Simoni continued to minister secretly to fellow prisoners, saying Mass from memory in Latin. "I risked my life each time," he said, according to Vatican News. He also heard confessions and distributed Communion in secret, baking bread over makeshift stoves and using juice pressed from grapes in place of wine for the Eucharist.

"If they had found me, they would have hanged me immediately," he said.

At the Mass on July 31, the cardinal showed those present the miner's helmet he wore as a young priest condemned to work underground in the mines.

Pope Francis made Simoni a cardinal in November 2016, two years after visiting Albania and meeting the priest who had become a living witness to the faith's endurance under persecution.

In his letter, Leo asked that the memory of Spaç not fade with the generation that survived it.

"I join in prayer for those who suffered and died in Spaç, so that their memory may remain alive and serve for the younger generations as a constant call to respect the inviolable dignity of every human person, the value of freedom, and the commitment to peace," he wrote.