

Colleen Dulle - 97-year-old cardinal celebrates Mass at site of communist labour camp where he was imprisoned for 18 years



Pope Francis greets Albanian Cardinal Ernest Simoni at the end of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican, 14 February 2024.

A 97-year-old Albanian cardinal returned on July 31 to the site of the forced-labour camp where he had been imprisoned for 18 years under Albania's communist regime, this time to celebrate a Mass for those who had been imprisoned or died at the camp. Pope Leo XIV sent a special message to Cardinal Ernest Simoni that was read aloud at the end of the Mass, calling the camp "*one of the most*

painful chapters in the nation's history" and saying "*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.*"

Cardinal Ernest Simoni grew up Catholic in Albania and began his formation to become a Franciscan at age 10; however, within four years of Stalinist leader Enver Hoxha's rise to power, Simoni's Franciscan monastery was looted and "*turned into a place of torture for prisoners,*" according to Cardinal Simoni's biography on the Vatican website. The regime shot all of the friars and expelled the novices, among them the future cardinal.

Simoni continued his studies clandestinely and, after several years working as a teacher in a remote village and two required years of military service, was ordained a diocesan priest in Shkodrë, near his hometown. He was first arrested on Christmas Eve in 1963, after celebrating a Mass in memory of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. He was sentenced to death and placed in solitary confinement in Shkodrë, but the sentence was commuted to 25 years of forced labour, most of which Simoni spent working in the mines at the Spaç prison camp. At Friday's Mass, the cardinal displayed the helmet he had worn in the mines as a young priest.

The cardinal continued his ministry clandestinely in the camp, risking his life by celebrating Mass in Latin from memory for his fellow prisoners. He baked the Communion bread himself over makeshift stoves and used juice squeezed from grapes for the wine. "*If they had found me, they would have hanged me immediately,*" the cardinal said.

After an uprising at the camp in 1973, Simoni was again sentenced to death as an instigator of the unrest, but the sentence was not carried out. In 1981, he was freed from the camp but forced to labour in the sewers in Shkodrë, still being considered "*an enemy of the people*" until the fall of the regime in 1991.

The priest shared his story with Pope Francis during the latter's visit to Albania in 2014, and Francis was reportedly moved to tears. In 2016, Francis named him a cardinal, one of the few historically to be granted a special dispensation not to be ordained a bishop first.

Pope Leo, in his letter to the cardinal on Friday, said of the camp, "*Who knows how many prayers rose to Heaven from that place? How many supplications were whispered in silence? How many faces, marked by hardship and deprivation, entrusted their final hope to the Lord?*"

"*No prison,*" he wrote, "*is deep enough to separate a person from the love of God.*"

Colleen Dulle is the Vatican Correspondent at America and co-hosts the "Inside the Vatican" podcast. She is the author of Struck Down, Not Destroyed: Keeping the Faith as a Vatican Reporter