



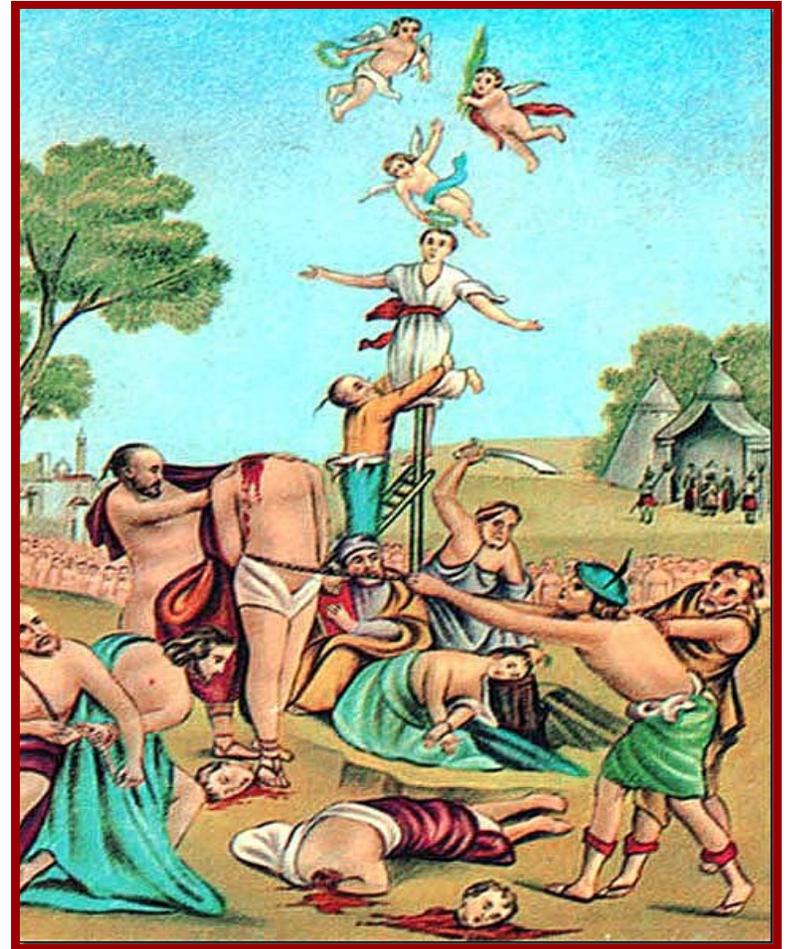
**CANONIZING OF THE 800 MARTYRS
BY
POPE FRANCIS ON MAY 12, 2013**

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THE EIGHT HUNDRED MARTYRS OF OTRANTO

Antonio Primaldo and His Companions

Feast Day: August 14



Antonio Primaldo and His Companions The Eight Hundred Martyrs of Otranto

*On Sunday, May 12, 2013, during the solemn high Mass celebrated in St. Peter's Square, the 800 Italian martyrs decapitated in 1480 by the Ottomans for refusing to abjure their faith were proclaimed saints. Before the thousands of faithful present, Pope Francis spoke of the example given by the martyrs of Otranto: "Let us look at the new saints in the light of the word of God proclaimed. It is a word that has invited us to be faithful to Christ, even to martyrdom; it has reminded us of the urgency and beauty of bringing Christ and his Gospel to everyone; and it has spoken to us of the testimony of charity, without which even martyrdom and the mission lose their Christian savor." After surviving the siege and capture of the city of Otranto by the Turks, they were beheaded on the outskirts of the city for refusing to deny their faith, and died confessing Christ. "Where did they find the strength to stay faithful?" asked the Sovereign Pontiff. "In the faith," he continued, "which enables us to see beyond the limits of our human sight", "even in the midst of obstacles and misunderstanding." And he added, "Let us ask God to sustain all the Christians who still suffer violence today in these very times and in so many parts of the world and to give them the courage to stay faithful and to respond to evil with goodness."

On July 29, 1480, there swooped down on the open sea of Otranto a fleet composed of 90 galleys, 15 mahones and 48 galliots, carrying 18,000 soldiers. The army was led by the pasha **Agometh**, himself under the orders of the sultan **Mehmet II** (1432-1481), who had conquered Constantinople in 1453. In June 1480, the sultan considered it to be the perfect timing to take over Rome, and to transform St. Peter's basilica into a stable for his horses. He raised the siege of Rhodes – which Christian soldiers were bravely defending – and directed his fleet towards the Adriatic Sea. He intended to capture Brindisi, a large and convenient port, and go from there to Italy, all the way to the Papal See. However, a strong adverse wind forced the ships to land further south. At the arrival of the Ottomans, Otranto had only a garrison of 400 armed men, and the leaders hastened to send a letter to the king of Naples, Ferrante of Aragon, asking for his help.

A terrible siege followed, lasting fifteen days. On August 12, at dawn, the Ottomans opened a gap in the city walls, and invaded the streets, massacring everything along their way. They came to the cathedral where many of the inhabitants had taken refuge. After breaking down the doors, the Turks found the archbishop Stefano clothed in his pontifical vestments, crucifix in hand. When the invaders ordered him never again to pronounce the name of Christ – for henceforth it was to be Mohammed who ruled – the archbishop answered by exhorting them to convert. He was immediately beheaded with one blow of a scimitar. On August 13, Agometh had a list made of all the captives, except the women and children under 15 years old.

Nearly 800 men were brought before the pasha. When asked to deny the faith, Antonio Primaldo, a pious tailor and fervent Christian, exhorted them: "Believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, all of you, and be ready to die a thousand deaths for Him." Agometh immediately condemned all 800 prisoners to death. The following morning, they were led, their hands bound behind their backs and ropes around their necks, to the hill of Minerva, on the outskirts of the city. They renewed their profession of faith, crying out that they preferred to die rather than to deny the Lord Jesus Christ. The tyrant then ordered them to be beheaded, beginning with old Primaldo, who encouraged his companions to remain strong in the faith. During the beatification process for the 800, in 1539, four eyewitnesses reported the miracle of Antonio Primaldo, who remained standing after being beheaded, and the conversion of the executioner. One of them, Francesco Cerra, 72 years old in 1539, recounted: "Antonio Primaldo was the first to be put to death. Beheaded, he remained firmly on his feet, and for all their efforts his enemies could not make him fall, until all the others had been killed. The executioner, overcome by the miracle, declared that the Catholic Faith was the true faith. He insisted on becoming a Christian and was therefore condemned to death at the stake, on the pasha's orders." (Saverio de Marco, *Compendiosa istoria degli ottocento martiri otrantini*, published in 1905)

The city's two weeks of resistance had left the king of Naples' army the time to get organized and thus to stop the 18,000 Ottomans from invading the region of Puglia and falling upon Rome. Otranto was then reconquered, Agometh returned to Turkey and Mehmet II died in 1481.

*(Excerpted from: www.dici.org)