NEW EVIDENCE VALIDATES STEPINAC

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Robin Harris, *Stepinac: His Life and Times* (Gracewing Publishing, 2016)

Those who study churchmen of the WWII era know that Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb during WWII, is controversial. Following the war, communist authorities charged and convicted him of collaboration with the Nazi-like Ustashe party. Those false charges have followed Stepinac, even after many of the authorities who took part in framing him came forth and admitted their misdeeds. *Stepinac: His Life and Times*, by British historian Robin Harris, is the first all-encompassing biography of Stepinac, and it should put to rest all of the questions about him that have been debated ever since the close of the Second World War.

Harris draws on the latest and best archival evidence, including previously unexplored Secret Police files stored in the Croatian State Archives, to give the reader a close look at Stepinac's entire life. In so doing, he presents the clearest and best look available in the English language at this man who remains an icon across Croatia.

Stepinac rose to positions of authority in the Church at a young age. In 1934, Pope Pius XI nominated him to be coadjutor archbishop of Zagreb. At 36, he was the youngest bishop in the world. In 1937, though still below the prescribed canonical age of 40, Stepinac succeeded Anton Bauer as the archbishop of Zagreb, becoming one of the youngest archbishops in the Church's history.

Archbishop Stepinac was extraordinarily active. He founded more than a dozen new parishes, established a committee for

sacred art, helped found the first cloistered Carmelite monastery in Croatia, participated in numerous national and international Eucharistic Congresses, visited the Holy Land, began work on a complete translation of the Bible, and helped to establish a Catholic daily newspaper. He also opened a diocesan museum and directed the preparations for a celebration of the 1,300th anniversary of the first ties between Croatia and the Holy See. It was a time of dynamic growth for the Catholic Church in Croatia (which was then part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, also sometimes called the first Yugoslavia). Unfortunately, it all came to an end with the outbreak of war.

Two years after Stepinac was consecrated archbishop of Zagreb, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Within two more years, a Nazi-puppet regime took over in Croatia. Ante Pavelic and his Ustashi government unleashed a wave of brutality against Serbian Orthodox and others. They were very vicious, worse even than the Nazis in their persecution of those who got in their way. Pavelic called himself a Catholic, and the Ustashe forcibly converted many people to Catholicism, even over the objection of Archbishop Stepinac.

Stepinac initially cooperated with the Ustashe government, but he soon saw through the fog. The very same month that the Ustashi came into power (April 1941), they enacted Nuremberg-like racial laws. Stepinac not only condemned the laws from his cathedral, he wrote a letter of protest to the new government. Moreover, the letter makes clear that he had *previously* contacted the authorities with reference to the Jews and Serbs – immediately after the first measures against them had been taken.

In one typical homily from 1943, Stepinac condemned notions of racial superiority. “The Catholic Church knows nothing of races born to rule and born to slavery,” he said. “The Catholic Church knows races and nations only as creatures of God.” His sermons were so strong that the Ustashe prohibited

them from being published, but his words were secretly printed, circulated, and occasionally broadcast over the radio. The files of the German police attaché in Zagreb show that Stepinac was often identified as a traitor by the Nazis and the Ustashi.

In 1941, Stepinac severely condemned the Ustashe's destruction of Zagreb's main synagogue: "A House of God, of whatever religion, is a holy place," he said. "An attack on a House of God of any religion constitutes an attack on all religious communities." There is even a story about a Nazi officer who came to Zagreb and heard Stepinac speak. The archbishop condemned the Ustashe's actions so strongly that the general said "If a churchman in Germany spoke like that, he would not step down from the pulpit alive."

In 1944-45, Communist partisans under Marshal Josip Broz—better known as Tito—conquered the Balkans and occupied Zagreb. Soon, a communist regime, the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia, had control of the nation. More than 150,000 Croatians were killed—most of them war prisoners who died during a long march from the Slovenian border to Macedonia that became known as "the way of the Cross." The new government also undertook persecution of the Catholic Church, confiscating property, closing seminaries and schools, banning Masses, and persecuting clergy.

Before coming to power, the Communists used Cardinal Stepinac's speeches in their propaganda, siding with him, as he always spoke against the violation of human rights by the Ustache. In fact, pictures were published in the Yugoslav press of three Orthodox bishops, Archbishop Stepinac, his auxiliary bishop Josip Lach, the Soviet Military Attaches, and the Croatian Communist leaders. They were even scheduled to be honored at a Zagreb parade to celebrate the establishment of a "Peoples Government." Soon, however, any hope for a working relationship fell apart.

Stepinac refused to be silent, and he became a threat. Several times, he was assaulted while he was trying to carry out his pastoral tasks. Finally, on May 17, 1945, Tito had him arrested. Pope Pius XII filed a protest, but the archbishop was held for 17 days. On the day after his release, Tito summoned Stepinac for a face-to-face meeting. The Communist leader wanted the Croatian Church to sever its ties with Rome. Stepinac, of course, refused. Tito then put the Catholic Church in his crosshairs.

Persecution got so bad that a synod of bishops met to discuss it on September 17-22, 1945. They issued a pastoral letter that was read in churches across the country. It said the bishops were willing to work with the state for the good of the people, but at the same time they condemned "all ideologies and social systems not based on the eternal principles of Christian Revelation, but on shallow material foundations, that is to say philosophic atheism." They protested the killing of over 200 Catholic priests and believers, "whose lives were taken away in unlawful trials based upon false accusations by haters of the Catholic Church." They also protested the suppression of youth education, the requisitioning of Church property, the destruction of graves, and the confiscation of the Catholic press and print shops. Stepinac was the President of the Bishops Conference and the first signatory of the letter.

In October 1945, Tito wrote a newspaper editorial accusing Stepinac of declaring war on the fledgling government. Within days, the government launched an intense propaganda campaign. Priests and bishops, including Stepinac, were attacked physically and accused of having collaborated with Hitler. Serbian radio condemned Stepinac as a war criminal and paved the way for his arrest. Stepinac was charged and put on trial for allegedly collaborating with the Ustashe. The trial drew much critical coverage from Western media and protests from those who recognized it as a fraudulent show trial.

Stepinac was denied even minimal due process. Prosecution witnesses were told what to say, and the defense was not allowed cross-examination. Many defense witnesses were not permitted to testify, and much of Stepinac's evidence was excluded. Stepinac was permitted to meet with his attorney for only an hour prior to the trial, and he was not permitted to consult with the representative sent by the pope.

On the fourth day of the trial, Stepinac gave a 38-minute speech. *Time* magazine reported that the archbishop "temporarily lost his equanimity." He "shook an angry finger at the court, cried: 'Not only does the church in Yugoslavia have no freedom, but in a short while the church will be annihilated.'" He accused his Communist prosecutors of behaving like the Gestapo. He said his conscience was clear. Publication of the statement (or arguments made by his attorneys) was prohibited during the entire rule of the Communists in the former Yugoslavia. Fortunately, there is no such problem today. Harris provides his readers with the full text of the speech.

The trial verdict, of course, was set in advance. Stepinac was found guilty of all six counts. He was sentenced to 16 years of hard labor, but due to the indignation throughout the democratic world, he was not made to do the hard labor. He was, however, put in Lepoglava prison, which was used to hold political dissidents in harsh conditions.

In the late 1940s, pressure mounted, particularly in the United States, for Tito to release Stepinac. In 1951, Tito expressed a willingness to do so if he would leave Yugoslavia. Stepinac's answer was that: "They will never make me leave unless they put me on a plane by force and take me over the frontier. It is my duty in these difficult times to stay with the people." Tito finally consented to hold the archbishop under house arrest in his native village of Krašić.

Pope Pius XII named Stepinac a cardinal, but he did not travel

to Rome for a ceremony due to concern about being permitted to return. He died in 1960 of a blood disorder, which was said to have been caused by the conditions he endured in prison. Tests of his remains conducted by Vatican investigators suggest that he may have been poisoned. Harris includes a separate appendix dealing with that issue.

After the fall of communism, one of the first acts of the new parliament was to apologize for the archbishop's show trial. The prosecutor acknowledged that the trial was motivated by Stepinac's bad relationship with the communists, not because of his relationship with the Nazis. Others involved in the fabrication of documents also came forward and confirmed that Stepinac's trial was a fraud.

Pope St. John Paul II beatified Stepinac as a martyr in October 1998. He said the cardinal stood against "the dictatorship of communism, where he again fought for the faith, for the presence of God in the world, the true humanity that is dependent on the presence of God." In June 2011, Pope Benedict XVI praised Stepinac as a courageous defender of those oppressed by the Ustashe, including Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies.

Recently, Pope Francis arranged a special commission of Catholic and Orthodox leaders to explore Stepinac's wartime record. The commission would do well to begin with Harris's book. It contains 409 pages, 12 chapters, and four interesting addendums: Stepinac's speech in the court; the list of a number of officials in the administration of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia during 1930s; a text concerning the issue of whether Stepinac was poisoned; and Stepinac's spiritual testament.

Stepinac: His Life and Times is an important treatment of a giant figure in Catholic history. Robin Harris has done a great service to truth by unearthing the facts and telling the story of this truly heroic man.

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