

Heritage or hate?

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue



The skulls of several hundred martyrs surround the altar of the cathedral in Otranto, Italy. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Laurent Massoptier](#).

Popes often acknowledge saints and martyrs, but rarely are the heroes of the faith present as they were at a 2013 ceremony in Otranto, Italy, one of the more controversial and unsettling canonizations of modern times. Not only were relics of the martyrs present, but the skulls of several hundred of them were on plain view, kept behind glass at the rear of the altar. That feature was startling enough. The story associated with the canonization raises its own set of troubling questions.

In the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire expanded mightily across southern and eastern Europe. Constantinople fell in 1453, and most of the Balkans were soon in Turkish hands. The main question facing Christian Europe was how far the crescent flags of Islam might spread and when (rather than if) Italy would be attacked. That nightmare came true in 1480, when Ottoman forces invaded the port of Otranto.

The occupation of Otranto was short-lived but brutal. Twelve thousand died in the campaign, and in a single horrific incident, the invaders killed some 800 local residents, including their bishop. The exact circumstances of the slaughter are unclear, but early accounts reported that the citizens were executed after refusing to renounce their Christian faith. Such exemplary loyalty to the faith inspired popular devotion to the victims as saints and martyrs, and these faithful were officially canonized in the 2013 ceremony.

When Christianity was chiefly based in a Europe that generally accepted that faith, stories of Christian martyrdom ran little risk of offending the descendants of the perpetrators. Roman paganism, for instance, has been extinct for many centuries. But the situation is quite different when the persecutors who inflicted that martyrdom were Muslims, who held the same faith as millions of modern Europeans—and as many as 1.5 million residents of Italy itself. More problematically, Europeans are currently struggling with the problem of integrating Muslim immigrants and seeking to resist stereotypes of Islamic fanaticism and violence.

The Otranto ceremonies could have been both divisive and provocative, and could even have provided a focus for far-right political activism. As we might expect from Pope Francis, though, the Vatican took every step to avoid any such implications. Instead of stigmatizing Islam, still less pursuing any kind of historical vendetta, Catholic leaders stressed that they were only acknowledging the heroism of faithful believers. The canonization was carried out without any grievous conflicts or recriminations.

The affair, however, highlights a problem that European Christians are certain to face as Muslim numbers swell. How do Christians commemorate a history that so often involves bygone struggles against Islamic forces, from the Arabs who occupied Spain and Sicily, to the Turks who still ruled much of the Balkans a little over a century ago? The Otranto martyrs are by no means the only sanctified participants in such battles. How many visitors to the Californian mission of San Juan Capistrano realize that the name commemorates a singularly fanatical Franciscan friar who personally led his crusading forces against the Turks at Belgrade in 1456?

Modern Christian leaders are sensitive to Muslim concerns and have no wish to give ammunition to xenophobic nationalists. But they can hardly deny the events that shaped European church history. So how do you commemorate Christian achievements and sufferings without reawakening ancient hatreds against another faith?

Nowhere is that dilemma more acute than in Spain, a land that owes its historic identity to half a millennium of wars in which Christian forces defeated and ousted Muslim occupiers. Those forces explicitly identified their cause in religious terms, sometimes as a crusade. Through the Middle Ages, Spanish warriors invoked the name of the apostle St. James—Santiago—who had supposedly offered supernatural leadership to his knightly followers. As the Moor Slayer, *Matamoros*, Santiago

became the critical symbol of Spanish unity and national identity, which was especially associated with his magnificent pilgrimage shrine at Compostela.

Nor is it possible to confine those events to the technical debates of medieval historians. Throughout Spain, churches preserve images of Santiago depicted as a Christian knight, riding triumphantly over the contorted bodies of dead and dying Moors. With the best will in the world, it is very difficult to preserve and venerate such images in a way that does not offend the nation's million Muslims. Even so, devout Catholics fiercely protest any suggestion of removing the images.

How long will conservatives be able to stress that these images do not arise from bigotry, but rather are symbols of national pride and glorification of proud military achievements? As they claim, the images represent heritage, not hate. But as we have seen in the modern-day South of the United States, such distinctions can be difficult to maintain indefinitely.