

Basque bishops apologize for 1930s deaths of priests by Franco troops

VITORIA, Spain – Catholic bishops from Spain's Basque region have apologized for keeping quiet about the killing of priests by right-wing forces during the Spanish Civil War.

"The memory of these priests has never faded in the eyes of their families, parishioners and diocesan presbyteries, nor (in the eyes) of the religious orders to which they belonged," said Bishop Miguel Asurmendi Aramendia of Vitoria.

"What is not justifiable or acceptable any longer is the silence in which our church's official media has wrapped their deaths. We believe such a long silence was not only a wrongful omission, but also a lack of truth and an act against justice and charity, for which we humbly ask forgiveness from God and our brethren," the bishop said at a July 11 Mass for 14 priests killed by the late Gen. Francisco Franco's nationalist army.

At the Mass, concelebrated by more than 200 Catholic clergy, Bishop Asurmendi said the priests were denied public burial rites, and most of their deaths were not recorded in diocesan registers. He said the church wished to "recognize and repair" the damage and to "serve the truth by purifying memory."

"We do not know in detail the painful circumstances surrounding these deaths, which were certainly unjustifiable even in the dark conditions of the time," said Bishop Asurmendi, who delivered the homily on behalf of all Basque bishops. "We do not want to reopen wounds, but to cure and alleviate them, by helping dignify those forgotten and excluded, and by mitigating the pain of their relatives and friends."

More than 6,800 Catholic clergy and religious were killed during the 1936-39 war. Most were killed during the summer of 1936 after the left-wing Popular Front government launched an aggressive anti-church campaign.

The 14 priests were killed when Franco's troops advanced into the Basque region. They were among 70 clergy and religious killed during the war by both sides in

territory covered by the Vitoria Diocese.

The commemoration at the Mass marked the Spanish church's first public act of remorse for its wartime role; the bishops at the time declared support for Franco's dictatorship, which ruled the country for four decades.