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Nazi war criminal's SSPX funeral stopped by protests

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The traditionalist Society of St. Pius X offered to celebrate a funeral for convicted war criminal Erich Priebke after the diocese of Rome said the service would be allowed only in a private home, but violent protests outside the chapel forced cancellation of the Mass.

Some 500 protesters had gathered Tuesday outside the SSPX district headquarters in Albano, south of Rome, when a hearse carrying Priebke's body arrived. People shouted "murderer" and beat on the hearse.

Violence broke out after the arrival of a small group of people described by witnesses as neo-Nazis. Riot police intervened and two people were taken into custody, but the protesters remained and, according to Priebke's lawyer, made it impossible for friends and relatives of the former Nazi SS officer to get to the chapel.

The lawyer, Paolo Giachini, told reporters outside the SSPX headquarters that the funeral Mass had not taken place, but that he had fulfilled his obligation to arrange a funeral. "Now it's up to the authorities to decide what to do with the body," since he was unable to find a city where Priebke could be buried.

Priebke died Oct. 11 at the age of 100. A former captain in the Nazi elite force known as the SS, he was convicted of carrying out a 1944 massacre of 335 Italian civilians in the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome. At the time of his death, he was serving his sentence under house arrest.

Priebke continued to claim he was only following orders when he took part in the Ardeatine Caves' massacre and, shortly before he died, he affirmed his belief that the Holocaust was an invention.

The diocese of Rome had refused Giachini's request to allow a funeral to take place in a church or chapel.

In a statement issued Monday, the diocese said, "Considering all the circumstances of the case, the ecclesial authorities believed that prayer for the deceased and entrusting him to the mercy of God -- the aims of a religious funeral -- should take place in the strictest privacy."

"Prayers for the dead were never denied," the diocese said, but the church had a right to insist the rites be "reserved and discreet."

Bishop Marcello Semeraro of Albano, secretary of Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals, told Rome's Corriere della Sera newspaper Wednesday that the church would never prohibit prayers for someone, but canon law does allow a bishop to deny a public funeral to a "manifest sinner" when it would scandalize the faithful.

In Priebke's case, he said, "the crime was public and notorious, the lack of conversion was public and notorious, and the scandal it would have raised in the Christian community was public and notorious."

After agreeing to host the funeral, the Italian district of the Society of St. Pius X issued a statement on its website saying, "A Christian who was baptized and received the sacraments of confession and the Eucharist, no

matter what his faults and sins were, to the extent that he dies reconciled with God and the church, has a right to the celebration of the holy Mass and a funeral."

The statement said the SSPX condemns "every form of anti-Semitism and racial hatred, but also hatred under all its forms. The Catholic religion is one of mercy and forgiveness."

The SSPX has a history of comments by its leaders expressing suspicion or hostility toward Jews. In 2009, after now-retired Pope Benedict XVI lifted the excommunications of the society's bishops, there was widespread outrage at revelations that one of the four, Bishop Richard Williamson, had denied the gassing of Jews in Nazi concentration camps. The SSPX later ousted Williamson.

The New York-based Anti-Defamation League, which combats anti-Semitism, issued a statement Tuesday saying it was "shocked" that a "fringe Catholic sect" would agree to host the funeral of a "notorious Nazi war criminal."

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