

# Blessed Eugene Bossilkov

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## THE GRACE OF MARTYRDOM



Eugene Bossilkov was born on November 16, 1900, in Belene, on the banks of the Danube River. As a child, he almost drowned there while playing. His mother, Beatrice, implored heaven for his life, and promised to offer him to the Lord if he survived-- and the little boy was saved by a miracle. At 13, he was accompanied by his mother to the Passionist seminary. A lively boy, fond of joking, he studied in Bulgaria, Belgium and Holland and Italy. On April 29, 1920, he made his religious profession and was ordained a priest in 1926. Eugene felt at ease among people. He made could be understood by the simple, yet he was a man of vast culture and made a good impression on the learned. In disputes with atheists he was subtle and profound. In dialogue with the Orthodox he anticipated today's ecumenical spirit. He was consecrated bishop in 1947 in Russe. He was the right man: educated, prudent, courageous, who offered an opposing voice to the pounding Marxist propaganda. He suffered martyrdom on November 11, 1952.



Blessed Eugene Bossilkov, C.P.

THE GRACE OF THE MARTYRDOM

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On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his death, we recall some traits of his life as a religious and pastor, which are raising him to the honors of the altar. "*A priest as clear as crystal,*" he was respected and loved by all, because he first loved and respected everyone. "*He was an extraordinary person of culture and faith. I held him in high esteem,*" said a state official. His home was always open to everyone. "Don't be afraid to disturb me", he said; "*I am here for you.*" During the German occupation, he saved the lives of countless Jews. He became famous throughout Bulgaria and was loved even by the Orthodox.

He was a university graduate, spoke thirteen languages, and contributed to the Catholic newspaper "*Istina*" (The Truth). He was one of the best orators in Bulgaria. His speeches were famous, some even at the national level such as the one in 1938 commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Catholic insurrection against the Turks. Even the Orthodox went to listen to him, fascinated by his oratory skills. "*When Eugene preaches,*" they said, "*even the flies stop to listen to him*". But he was also a man of prayer. He wrote, "*I get up every morning at four-thirty; I pray until seven-thirty. Then I start work, and a great amount of it.*" He had a great devotion to Our Lady. His parish became a significant center of Marian devotion for the whole diocese. "*With Our Lady you can do anything,*" he said as bishop to those who were most fearful.

In 1946 Monsignor Damian Theelen, who had been administering the diocese since 1915, died suddenly. Eugene himself was called to succeed him, first as administrator and then as bishop. To curb the pounding Marxist propaganda, he immediately organized a popular mission in which he himself took part, putting himself at personal risk.

On September 17, 1948, he was received in a long and affectionate audience by Pius XII who told him, "*In Bulgaria the crown of martyrdom awaits you.*" Despite pressure to remain in Italy, he returned to his homeland where the persecution against the Catholic Church was now systematic. Already on Calvary, however, he wrote to the Superior General, "*My confreres and I are happy to find ourselves in the favorite place of a son of St. Paul of the Cross.*" The regime worked to separate



the Catholic Church from Rome and create a national church in its place. It asked the bishops to take an oath of allegiance to the government, and they even offered Eugene the position of head of the national church with every privilege. He vigorously refused and declared his renewed loyalty to the Pope. He wrote, "*The government is making great efforts to separate us from the Pope. I expressed to the Holy Father my filial affection and firm attachment. I have the courage to live; I hope to have the courage even to suffer the worst while remaining faithful to Christ, the Pope, and the Church. I am ready to give my life for the faith.*" As soon as he was elected bishop, he wrote to the faithful, "*I will not be silent.*" True to his commitment, he was not silent and would not be silent-- not even at the cost of his life. Eugene did not yield to pressure from the regime and prepared to celebrate his glorious martyrdom. He was arrested on July 16, 1952, on charges of being a Vatican spy and leading a conspiracy against the state. During the trial he maintained a disconcerting serenity. He forgave his accusers and defended his priests and the faithful to the last. In a quick meeting with family members he assures them that he remained faithful to the Pope and implored them to "*Pray for me, that I may be worthy of martyrdom.*" He was concerned for the faithful, fearing that they would be deceived. Therefore he repeated, "*Tell them that I have remained faithful to the Pope, that I have not betrayed the Church.*" Eugene was shot to death on the night of November 11, 1952. The authorities waited more than twenty years before giving official notice of his death. For an oppressive government, the voice of a martyred bishop was more destabilizing than a brave living bishop. Pope Pius XII would one day say to the Passionists, "*If you succeed only in preserving this mission in Bulgaria, it will be the most precious gem in the crown of your Congregation.*" Eugene, with his martyrdom and beatification on March 15, 1998, added further splendor to this crown. What he prophetically wrote shortly before his death is coming true-- "*The traces of my blood are a guarantee of a splendid future for the Church in Bulgaria.*"