

Rome to beatify anti-Nazi priests, but not a Lutheran

by [Omar Sacirbey](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

Residents of the northern German city of Lübeck have long taken pride in four native sons—three Catholic priests and a Lutheran pastor—who were beheaded in quick succession on November 10, 1943, by the Nazi regime.

The commingled blood of Catholic priests Johannes Prassek, Hermann Lange and Eduard Müller and Lutheran pastor Karl Friedrich Stellbrink spawned an ecumenical cooperation between the city's majority Lutherans and minority Catholics that still lasts.

The

Vatican's decision to beatify the three priests on June 25—but not Stellbrink—is testing that ecumenical spirit, and some religious leaders worry that the event could drive a wedge between the two communities.

"People

worry that the priests who are beatified will be seen as higher than Stellbrink, and that the focus will be on the three, not the four," said Constanze Maase, pastor of Luther Church in Lübeck. "We recognize that beatification is an important part of the identity of the Catholic Church. But there is a sadness, because it makes the ecumenical work more complicated," he said.

Prassek was a 30-year-old chaplain at Lübeck's Sacred Heart Catholic Church when he met Stellbrink, a 47-year-old pastor at the nearby Luther Church, at a funeral in 1941. They had a shared disapproval of the Nazi regime, and Prassek soon introduced Stellbrink to his two Catholic colleagues, Lange and Müller.

The

four clergymen were active but discreet in their anti-Nazi activities, speaking out against the Nazis and distributing pamphlets to close friends and congregants.

That changed when the British Royal Air

Force bombed Lübeck on March 28, 1942. After Stellbrink spent the night tending to the wounded, he went to his church to celebrate Palm Sunday—and attributed the bombing to divine punishment.

Stellbrink

was arrested a few days later, followed soon after by the priests. All four were sentenced to death. Rather than fear their executions, the four were said to have died as happy martyrs, confident that they were going to be with God. "Who can oppress one who dies," Prassek wrote in a farewell letter to his family.

Many observers credit the four clergymen with spawning a German ecumenism that had been almost unheard of until then.

"They

didn't create a big movement, but they were very influential within their churches, and they planted the seeds of ecumenical cooperation in Germany," said Franz Mecklenfeld, a priest at Sacred Heart. The church held its first memorial mass for the martyrs on November 10, 1945, and included the Lutheran Stellbrink in its remembrances.

In postwar

Lübeck, Lutherans and Catholics jointly celebrated the men with memorial masses and formed ecumenical discussion groups. The Luther Church erected an exhibit to all four men in 1993. The Sacred Heart Church commemorates all four in its crypt and is planning a larger exhibit later this year.

But many Lutherans, including Stellbrink's last surviving daughter, worry that putting the three priests on the path to sainthood may relegate the Lutheran pastor to obscurity.

"Many

Christians, including me, are disappointed that the current pope seems to be doing little for the ecumenical solidarity of churches, especially regarding Lutherans," wrote retired Lutheran pastor Heinz Russmann in an editorial published by a Lübeck news website.

"All four should be beatified," said Russmann, a veteran of the city's ecumenical dialogue. "When that doesn't go, then none!"

Among

the best-known Catholic critics of the beatification is Hans-Lothar Fauth, a former Dominican monk who later opened a nightclub and became a city politician. After he couldn't get the city and church groups to pay for a memorial to all four martyrs at Lübeck's 12th-century city hall, he bankrolled one in 2004.

Mecklenfeld said concerns over the beatification are not "unfounded," but said it need not derail ecumenical relations. He noted that several Roman Catholic cardinals are scheduled to attend a special Lutheran service planned to honor Stellbrink the day before the June 25 beatification.

He added that

German-born Pope Benedict XVI contributed to the ecumenical spirit by speaking of all four men together, rather than just three, when he received Germany's new ambassador to the Holy See last September.

Lutheran

leaders agreed that ecumenical relations could be maintained, but said it would require extra effort. "We're celebrating this together," said Maase. —RNS