



THE ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC ORDINARIES OF THE HOLY LAND
Latins, Melkites, Maronites, Syrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Custody of the Holy Land

Are Christians being persecuted in the Middle East?

Persecution! In many parts of the Western world, this word is people's lips. It is said that Christians are being persecuted in the Middle East today! However, what is really happening? How should we speak in truth and integrity as Christians and as Church about the suffering and violence that are going on in the region?

There is no doubt that the recent upheavals in the Middle East, initially called the Arab Spring, have opened the way for extremist groups and forces that, in the name of a political interpretation of Islam, are wreaking havoc in many countries, particularly in Iraq, Egypt and Syria. There is no doubt that many of these extremists consider Christians as infidels, as enemies, as agents of hostile foreign powers or simply as an easy target for extortion.

However, in the name of truth, we must point out that Christians are not the only victims of this violence and savagery. Secular Muslims, all those defined as "heretic", "schismatic" or simply "non-conformist" are being attacked and murdered in the prevailing chaos. In areas where Sunni extremists dominate, Shiites are being slaughtered. In areas where Shiite extremists dominate, Sunnis are being killed. Yes, the Christians are at times targeted precisely because they are Christians, having a different set of beliefs and unprotected. However they fall victim alongside many others who are suffering and dying in these times of death and destruction. They are driven from their homes alongside many others and together they become refugees, in total destitution.

These uprisings began because the peoples of the Middle East dreamed of a new age of dignity, democracy, freedom and social justice. Dictatorial regimes, which had guaranteed "law and order", but at the terrible price of military and police repression, fell. With them, the order they had imposed crumbled. Christians had lived in relative security under these dictatorial regimes. They feared that, if this strong authority disappeared, chaos and extremist groups would take over, seizing power and bringing about violence and persecution. Therefore some Christians tended to defend these regimes. Instead, loyalty to their faith and concern for the good of their country, should perhaps have led them to speak out much earlier, telling the truth and calling for necessary reforms, in view of more justice and respect of human rights, standing alongside both many courageous Christians and Muslims who did speak out.

We fully understand the fears and sufferings of our brothers and sisters in Christ, when by violence they lose members of their families and are driven out of their homes. They have the right to count on our solidarity and prayers. In certain circumstances their only consolation and hope is to be found

in Jesus' words: "Happy are those who are persecuted in the cause of right: theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10). However, the repetition of the word "persecution" in some circles (usually referring only to what Christians suffer at the hands of criminals claiming to be Muslims) plays into the hands of extremists, at home and abroad, whose aim is to sow prejudice and hatred, setting peoples and religions against one another.

Christians and Muslims need to stand together against the new forces of extremism and destruction. All Christians and many Muslims are threatened by these forces that seek to create a society devoid of Christians and where only very few Muslims will be at home. All those who seek dignity, democracy, freedom and prosperity are under attack. We must stand together and speak out in truth and freedom.

All of us, Christians and Muslims, must also be aware that the outside world will not make any real move to protect us. International and local political powers seek their own interests. We, alone, can build a common future together. We have to adapt ourselves to our realities, even realities of death, and must learn together how to emerge from persecution and destruction into a new dignified life in our own countries.

Together, we must seek out all those who dream as we do of a society in which Muslims and Christians and Jews are equal citizens, living side by side, building together a society in which new generations can live and prosper.

Finally, we pray for all, for those who join their efforts to ours, and for those who are harming us now or even killing us. We pray that God may allow them to see the goodness He has put in the heart of each one. May God transform every human being from the depth of his or her heart, enabling them to love every human being as God does, He who is the Creator and Lover of all. Our only protection is in our Lord and like Him we offer our lives for those who persecute us as well as for those who, with us, stand in defense of love, truth and dignity.

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