

# **Mass for Christians Suffering Persecution**

## **“Red Wednesday”**

John Paul II Pastoral Centre

20 November 2019

Dear colleagues:

### ***Introduction***

As you have heard, today in Canada we are marking “Red Wednesday,” a day sponsored by the papal charity, “Aid to the Church in Need.” Its purpose is to highlight the persecution suffered by Christians, while at the same time promoting respect between followers of different religions. It is also a day to encourage people to take a stand on defending religious freedom.

The mainstream media give little coverage to the persecution of Christians, unless something spectacular occurs. Being knowledgeable about the condition of our persecuted sisters and brothers can help us to alleviate their situation. We can – and should – become a voice for those who are suffering. We can make their cry heard, a cry that is also a call to solidarity with them.

Despite what we may be tempted to think, concern for the persecution of Christians is more relevant than ever. The word “persecution” may conjure up in our minds images of Christians being thrown to the lions, and it is true that there have been persecutions from the very beginning of Christianity.

St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, as we heard, that they were

blessed not only to believe in Christ but to suffer for him as well (cf. Phil 1:29). And in the selection from John's Gospel that was read, Jesus minces no words at the Last Supper about his own fate and that of his disciples: "Remember the word that I said to you, 'No servant is greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 15:20). And so they have and so they do – only the "they" changes through the ages and the reasons for it. "The persecution of Christians is always the same: people who do not want Christianity feel threatened and thus they condemn Christians."<sup>1</sup>

The pace of persecution has so accelerated down through the years that the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw more persecuted Christians and martyrs than the 19 preceding centuries combined.

Currently, 327 million Christians live in countries where there is religious persecution. Another 178 million live in countries where there is discrimination. This makes a total 505 million Christians who are at risk. Although it is difficult to keep a precise count, "Aid to the Church in Need" believes that 75% of all religiously motivated violence is perpetrated against Christians.

It is impossible to discuss persecution without considering those who carry it out. In this regard, we can consider three groups: governments (communist or authoritarian); other religious groups (e.g.,

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, General Audience (19 September 2019).

radical Islam); and ultranationalist movements which demand that their country be of only one religion.

Recently, for example, in the Middle East, since 2003, the number of Christians in Iraq has dropped dramatically. From 1.3 million, they are now less than 200,000. In Syria, there were 1.7 million Christians before 2011; today, only about 450,000 are left. The atrocities committed against Christians in Syria and Iraq are so horrific that words cannot adequately respond, and their plight must not be forgotten. In Lebanon, the number of Christians is decreasing from year to year, representing about 20% of the population, compared to nearly 40% about forty years.

There is also increasing persecution of Christians in India and China, as well as in many countries in Africa.

Sometimes what provokes persecution is the fact that Christians are living out the prophetic mission they received in Baptism. In these instances it is the expressions and actions of Christians that are themselves provocative, destabilizing, and disturbing. In our world today, to defend the right to life, to oppose euthanasia, to foster social justice and the rights of conscience can lead to discrimination, persecution and even martyrdom.

Our situation in Canada is certainly different from that of our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters around the world. Here, many

of us feel uncomfortable being Christian in a world where religion is accorded a shrinking role in the public square. Our discomfort comes from the fact that our values are different from those of contemporary society.

We must raise awareness of discrimination, if not outright persecution, against Christians even in regions where public opinion would normally not expect this to exist. Even in Canada, to act and speak out publicly as a committed Christian in one's professional life has never been more threatened. Christians, as well as others, should therefore be allowed to express publicly their religious identity, free from any pressure to hide or disguise it.

Such discomfort with or, indeed, opposition to any public role of religion lies behind what Pope Francis has referred to as the "polite persecution of Christians." Under the guise of "political correctness," Christian faith and morals are now considered to be hostile and offensive, and therefore, something to be removed from public discourse. This fear of Christianity playing its legitimate role in the public square betrays a view of the freedom of religion or belief which would confine it merely to the freedom of worship. Against such a trend, the Holy Father has affirmed that: "Religious freedom certainly means the right to worship God, individually and in community, as our consciences dictate. But religious liberty, by its nature, transcends places

of worship and the private sphere of individuals and families. Because religion itself, the religious dimension, is not a subculture; it is part of the culture of every people and every nation.”<sup>2</sup>

We should rejoice in this challenge because it is precisely in this way that we are prophetic-missionary disciples. When faced with the treatment we receive, let us do so with courage, respect for truth and dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

Let us now turn and pray for all those who are suffering persecution for their belief in Christ and the Gospel, asking for an outpouring of the Spirit to bear witness to the truth on their behalf.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Address on Religious Liberty, Philadelphia (26 September 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. CCCB, Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace, “In His Name: Statement on the Persecution of Christians” (2019).