INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY

THE LAST CHRISTIANS IN THE CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY?

Today, the Cradle of Christianity, where Christ lived and the earliest Christian communities emerged, is sadly a place where extreme religious persecution threatens and disrupts the lives of all who live there. Reports of the self-proclaimed Islamic State's brutality against Christians and other religious minorities have dominated international news coverage for much of the last year. The group has captured large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, forcing anyone who refused to support their ruthless rule to flee their homes, often leaving behind everything they owned.

ISIL has killed many, sometimes using shocking methods such as beheadings. Reports of kidnappings of those from religious minority groups as well as Sunnis who oppose the group have been all too common, with many women and girls being forced into sexual slavery. Those Christians who did not flee were compelled to convert or pay a tax that would ultimately fuel the violence of ISIL. The threat extends throughout the region. Its reach now extends to extremists in North Africa and Afghanistan who have pledged their allegiance to the "Islamic State."

The expanding threat of ISIL builds upon already tumultuous situations that threaten religious freedom. In Syria, the civil war has turned into a sectarian conflict. The Assad regime has primarily targeted members of the Sunni Muslim community, with Christians often caught in the cross-fire between the military and anti-government forces. Christians and minorities in Syria have been kidnapped, held for ransom, tortured and often brutally killed. At the end of 2014, it was estimated that 200,000 people (mostly civilians and many Muslims) had been killed and nearly 11.5 million were displaced within Syria or as refugees in other countries. In Iraq, in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion that led to political instability, Christians have been among those targeted by extremists. There have been terrorist attacks on churches and systematic kidnappings of priests and bishops for ransom. In Egypt, Coptic Christians and religious minorities have been victims of attacks,

especially as Christians were blamed for former President Morsi's removal from power and the government's subsequent violence against his supporters. Christians have been victims of violent attacks on people and property while the State has failed to protect them or hold perpetrators accountable consistently.

While Christians suffer the very real consequences of these attacks on their dignity, their livelihoods and their lives, they are also confronted with the harsh reality that their culture, dating back some 2000 years, is being systematically destroyed. The region has historically been religiously and ethnically diverse, but Church leaders throughout the region fear the indigenous Christian presence in the region will be lost since Christians are emigrating in disproportionately large numbers. In December 2014, Pope Francis captured the vibrant contributions made by Christians, saying, "Your very presence is precious for the Middle East…Even more than the many contributions which the Church makes in the areas of education, healthcare and social services, which are esteemed by all, the greatest source of enrichment in the region is the presence of Christians themselves…." It is clear that the loss of the Christian presence in the Cradle of Christianity would be harmful for all.

In March of this year the U.S. Bishops said: "Upon learning of the death of 21 Coptic Christians at the hands of ISIL terrorists, Pope Francis called their murder a "testimony which cries out to be heard." On behalf of America's Catholic Bishops, we pause to listen and invite people of all faiths to join us in prayer for those facing the stark reality of religious persecution in the Middle East and elsewhere… In union with the local Churches and the Holy See, we call upon our nation to: work with the international community to intervene and protect the rights of religious minorities and civilians within the framework of international and humanitarian law; address political and economic exclusion that are exploited by extremists; and increase humanitarian and development assistance…"