



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Christians in the Middle East **August 2010**

I pray that the work of the Special Assembly will help to focus the attention of the international community on the plight of those Christians in the Middle East who suffer for their beliefs, so that just and lasting solutions may be found to the conflicts that cause so much hardship. On this grave matter, I reiterate my personal appeal for an urgent and concerted international effort to resolve the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, especially in the Holy Land, before such conflicts lead to greater bloodshed.

--Pope Benedict XVI, June 6, 2010

BACKGROUND

Christians have existed in the Middle East since Pentecost and are now spread across the entire region. Today, Christianity in the Middle East forms a grand mosaic comprised of Catholic Churches, Oriental Orthodox Churches, Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and Protestant communities. While not a majority in any Middle Eastern country, these ancient Christian communities have long contributed vibrantly to their societies in the fields of science, philosophy and medicine. For Christians in the Middle East, their faith is intrinsically entwined with their Apostolic Ministries. They are actively involved in providing health care and education to entire communities. For example, the majority of those treated in Christian hospitals in the Middle East are Muslim.

The seven Catholic Churches in the Middle East are the Latin, Maronite, Melkite, Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, and Syrian Churches. The size, composition and location of members of these seven Churches vary considerably. They range in size from the Latin Church (about 2.7 million) and the Maronite Church (about 1.7 million) to the Armenian Church (about 60,000). Some, like the Maronite Church in Lebanon, are strongly concentrated in one country, while others, like the Syrian Church, are spread across several countries. Some, like the Melkite and Armenian Churches, have a very large diaspora, while others, like the Coptic Church, are found mainly in the Middle East. The Latin Church has a very large immigrant population, as well as indigenous communities.

In the last decade, social pressures on Christians in the Middle East have dramatically increased due to a lack of economic opportunity, political instability, and rising extremism. The ongoing tension between Israel and the Palestinians has fueled regional conflict. The humanitarian situation for Arab Christians and Muslims is extremely difficult in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and dire in Gaza due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The security wall, expanding Israeli settlements, and numerous checkpoints restrict the movement of Palestinians, damage their economy, and contribute to political unrest. The ongoing conflict and occupation compromise the legitimate aspirations of Israel for security and recognition, and of Palestinians for a viable and independent state.

In Iraq, attacks and killings continue, and political parties vie for power. Christians and other vulnerable minorities have been targeted by extremists, powerfully symbolized by the kidnapping and death of Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul in March 2008. According to UN reports, although Christians accounted for three to four percent of the Iraqi population before the 2003 invasion, approximately 40 percent of Iraqi refugees are Christian. Many Christians fear the new Iraqi government may not fully respect religious liberty since the new constitution has contradictory clauses regarding human rights and religious liberty. The United States' support for Israel as well as repeated western military engagement in Iraq exacerbated these tensions throughout the Middle East.

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Christians are indigenous to the Middle East and the majority of Muslims live together with Christians in peace. In some countries, Christians are at times discriminated against in access to education and employment, the ability to own and operate businesses, and to practice their faith freely and openly. Extremists tend to view Christians as affiliated with the West and hence suspect. In some instances, they have been physically harassed, attacked, kidnapped, and even killed, because they are a vulnerable minority. In countries where Islam is the state religion, some perceive being Christian as unpatriotic. All these factors have led many Christians to emigrate in search of safety, better lives, and more freedom.

While emigration affects every population group in the Middle East, especially where there is conflict, emigration affects Christian groups disproportionately. Christians' high level of education and the scarcity of job opportunities in the region commensurate with their education act as "push" factors, driving some young Christians to move in search of economic prospects, prompting a "brain drain." Often countries and regions like the United States, Western Europe, Latin America and Australia exert a "pull" on potential Christian emigrants due to their economic opportunities and Christian-majority populations. Some Christians are more likely to emigrate as they increasingly have more family members and friends abroad and fewer in their native country. Some Christians remaining in the Middle East may also experience the desire to withdraw from society as a result of discrimination or marginalization, leading to a ghetto mentality and further separation. Many observers fear that the Christian indigenous presence will dwindle to a point where their unique cultures, dating from near the birth of Christianity, will be lost.

VATICAN RESPONSE

The Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops: To address these challenges facing Christians in the Middle East, Pope Benedict XVI called for a Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops on October 10-24, 2010. The two goals of the Synod are "a) to confirm and strengthen the members of the Catholic Church in their Christian identity, through the Word of God and the sacraments; and b) to foster ecclesial communion among the Churches *sui iuris*, so that they can bear witness to the Christian life in an authentic, joyous and winsome manner." Although the focus of the Synod is pastoral, the challenges facing Christians as a result of regional conflicts are addressed in the Synod's *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document), including concerns that "[t]he Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories is creating difficulties in everyday life, inhibiting freedom of movement, the economy and religious life," and in Iraq, although the war has "unleashed evil forces" that have "made all Iraqis victims," the "Christians represent the smallest and weakest part of Iraqi society" and "are the principal victims of violence, a fact which is not given sufficient attention in world politics."

SOME USCCB RESPONSES

Holy Land: USCCB urges the U.S. government to exercise strong leadership for a two-state solution; a just peace demands recognition, security and an end to violence for the state of Israel, an end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the establishment of an internationally-recognized and viable Palestinian state. Religious freedom and access to the holy sites must be respected.

Iraq: USCCB has supported the United States making a responsible transition in Iraq that minimizes further loss of human life, addresses the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the refugee crisis in the region, promotes political reconciliation in Iraq, and engages international support for stabilizing Iraq, including engagement with Syria and Iran. Of special concern to USCCB is the dire situation of Christians and other minorities in Iraq and the region, especially the need to protect religious freedom.

ACTION REQUESTED:

- **Support strong U.S. leadership** to promote peace and stability in the Middle East. Visit USCCB websites on the Middle East www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml.

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