



Persecution

Each Christmas we recall the coming of the Prince of Peace—and the persecution inflicted on the Holy Innocents Herod put to death in his place. From that day to this the blood of Christian martyrs has not ceased to flow.

This point was made forcefully at November's meeting of the American bishops in Baltimore. Of necessity, the continuing threats to religious liberty in the United States drew considerable attention. But as Cardinal Timothy Dolan reminded us, our struggle pales in comparison when we realize that Christians elsewhere are suffering "lethal persecution on a scale that defies belief." Already in the first decade of the 21st century, over a million people throughout the world have been killed because of their belief in Jesus Christ.

Priests who leave their home land to serve here give us in the Diocese of Baker a personal connection to the mounting anti-Christian violence beyond our borders. Nigeria, for example, has seen increasingly frequent attacks on Christians, most notoriously the bombing of churches on our holiest days. In India hundreds of Christians were slain in the Orissa massacre of 2008, and 400 churches were destroyed.

The "Arab spring" has brought no joy to the Coptic Christians of Egypt, who now face the harshest persecution in centuries. Catholics there fare little better. After storming a school run by Franciscan nuns, Muslim assailants paraded three of the sisters before the crowd as prisoners of war.

But consider the situation in Syria, the land from which the Christian faith spread to the rest of the world. In April the Greek Orthodox Archbishop and the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop were kidnapped—a high-profile signal to Christians that none of them can count on protection. Heavily armed invaders of one small village gave the Christian families four choices:

- renounce their "idolatry" and convert to Islam;
- refuse conversion and stay put—and pay the jizya tax for protection;
- depart and leave their property behind;
- be slain for their faith.

Not being allied with the Assad regime, Syrian Christians have no armed protector, inside or outside the country. With no militias of their own, they are defenseless against a ruthless campaign of religious purification.

Christians are not the only ones who suffer religious persecution, but, in Cardinal Dolan's words, "there is no escaping the fact that Christians are singled out in far more places and far more often."

In September Pope Francis made an appeal from the heart to us all. "When I hear that so many

Christians in the world are suffering,” he asked, “am I indifferent, or is it as if a member of my own family is suffering?” Does the report of such persecution “touch my heart or does it not reach me? . . .It’s important to look beyond one’s own fence, to feel oneself part of the Church, of one family of God!”

Both in daily private prayer and at Sunday Mass we who enjoy the great blessing of religious liberty need to develop a culture of intercession for our brothers and sisters who suffer daily and deeply for our faith. In the words of Cardinal Dolan, “Protecting religious freedom will be a central social and political concern of our time.” And it will be crucial for the proclamation of the Gospel of the Prince of Peace.