

Iraqi bishops on why Christians flee country

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | Oct. 19, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- Christians in postwar Iraq, already a tiny minority in the mostly Muslim country, continue to leave because of fear for their safety, and to a lesser extent, because of economic difficulties, Iraqi bishops said.

Concrete solutions and help from the international community are needed immediately if the flight of Christians is to be stopped, many warned at the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which ends with a Mass Oct. 24.

Kidnappings for ransom, bombings of churches and other Christian buildings and a general lack of security have made life so precarious for the vulnerable Christian community that about half have left their homeland for safer destinations in the past seven years, the bishops said.

At least one bishop raised the question of systematic attacks as part of a "plan" to drive all Christians from the Middle East.

In comments both in and out of the synod hall, Iraqi bishops and priests painted a picture of extreme hardship for the small Christian community sticking it out in the country torn by violence since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

"Since the year 2003, Christians are the victims of a killing situation, which has provoked a great emigration from Iraq," Syrian Archbishop Athanase Matoka of Baghdad told synod participants Oct. 16.

He blamed the invasion for bringing to Iraq in general and Christians in particular "destruction and ruin on all levels."

Matoka said that while violence targeting Christians appeared to have dropped off in the last two years, the general insecurity and instability of the situation in the country is such that Christians continue to emigrate.

"Where is the world conscience?" he asked. "We ask the great powers: Is it true that there is a plan to empty the Middle East of Christians and that Iraq is one of the victims?"

In a briefing with journalists Oct. 18, Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of Baghdad said that in the past he also suspected that there was a plot to rid the Middle East of Christians. "If you ask me by whom, or how, I don't know," he said. However, there has never been such mass emigration in the history of the country, he said.

At least 20 churches have been bombed, two bishops have been kidnapped and one of them killed, and some 20 priests abducted and tortured, Warduni said.

Whether or not there is targeted persecution of Christians, he said, what is driving them away now is the fact that "there is no peace, there is no security, there are no jobs."

He made an appeal to world leaders to "take our wealth, but leave us in peace."

Fr. Raymond Moussalli, Chaldean Patriarchal Vicar of Amman, said at the briefing that there were about 400,000 Iraqis in Jordan, a small country not well-equipped to handle a large refugee population. Of those, about 5 percent are Christian, he said.

Before the invasion to oust dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, there were about 800,000 Christians in Iraq, but now there are 400,000 to 500,000, he said. Many have left large cities for the relative security of the Kurdistan region, where there are now more than 200,000 Christians as opposed to the 150,000 left in Baghdad, Father Moussalli said.

Anan J. Lewis, a consecrated virgin and English professor at the University of Baghdad attending the synod as an observer, said that the Christian population had declined nearly two-thirds since the early 1980s when some 1.5 million lived in Iraq.

She said that there are 16-18 Chaldean and Syrian churches left open in Baghdad out of 28 before 2003. Some of those open only once a month for Mass and have no stable congregations left, she said.

She said that she lived peacefully with her Iraqi Muslim neighbors, and that those carrying out the violence against Christians "are not my neighbors, are not my colleagues or my classmates." She said that she believed it possible that attacks were planned from outside Iraq.

Fr. Sameer Shaba Maroki, professor of Eastern theology at Babel College in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, said that even when the international embargo in place under Saddam Hussein put great economic strain on people, there was no great exodus of people for economic reasons.

The situation in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam, he said, has not improved. "The reason is fear, not economics." Father Maroki said that Christians were the victims of violence and kidnapping because they were the most vulnerable group.

In addition, Christians get stuck in the middle of disputes between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Maroki said.

Cardinal Emmanuel Delly, Chaldean patriarch of Baghdad, gave a more positive spin to the situation when he spoke to synod members Oct. 16. He said that Christians live "peacefully and freely" with the Muslim population and that there is mutual respect between both religions.

Asked about the apparent discrepancy in views at an Oct. 18 Vatican news conference, Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, said, "The beautiful thing about this meeting is that we don't all think the same." But he said that there had been definite improvement in the north of the country and that positive developments should be taken into account.

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