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Editorial: Holy Land's Christians need our action and advocacy

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 1, 2011

French intellectual Régis Debray, a committed progressive who once fought alongside Che Guevara, has observed that the embattled Christian minority in the Middle East represents a "blind spot" in the West's view of the world -- too Christian to concern the left, too foreign to engage the right.

That's often depressingly accurate, and especially in that light, a recent ecumenical summit on the fate of Christians in the Holy Land, cohosted by the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and the Catholic archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, is commendable.

The outlook for the tiny Christian community in Israel and the Palestinian Territories is bleak, having plummeted from 30 percent of the population in 1948 to a nearly invisible 1.25 percent today. French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and formerly Pope John Paul II's top diplomat, describes where things seem headed: the Christian centers of the Holy Land as "archeological and historical sites, to be visited like the Coliseum in Rome ? museums with entrance tickets, and guides who explain the beautiful legends."

That prospect should engage the imagination and effort of Christians everywhere, not merely because the disappearance of Christianity from the land of its birth would sever a vital link with the wellspring of Christian identity, but also because it would undercut the vision of the Middle East as a pluralistic society at the heart of the recent Arab Spring.

The ecumenical summit identified a number of concrete ideas about how to bolster the Christian communities of the Holy Land.

For instance, Christian entrepreneurs in the West could reach out to Christian-owned enterprises in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, crafting partnerships and helping their products reach Western markets. Parishes in the West could adopt communities in the Holy Land. Catholic universities in the United States and Europe could encourage young Christians from the Holy Land to spend a semester abroad, using their presence as an opportunity to educate audiences in the West about the realities on the ground.

Christians in the West can also promote pilgrimage and tourism to the Holy Land, employing local Christian agencies, guides, hotels and restaurants, and making sure that pilgrims encounter living faith communities and not merely historical sites.

Those initiatives, of course, must be bundled with political advocacy for a just peace.

In the meantime, the political resources of Western churches should be deployed in favor of small-step improvements, such as easier freedom of movement between the West Bank and East Jerusalem. No matter where one stands on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the fact that a Christian from Bethlehem, where Christ was born, finds it nearly impossible to worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Christ was buried and where he rose from the dead, is an outrage.

Seen through Western eyes, the recent summit at Lambeth Palace in London is intriguing for another reason. It demonstrates that when faced with a truly urgent global challenge, Catholics and Anglicans remain capable of joining forces despite recent turbulence in their relationship -- and not merely as a sort of pragmatic sanction, but in a spirit of real friendship. Almost without trying, the event thus offered a badly need infusion of ecumenical hope.

In other words, coming together in support of Christians in the Holy Land isn't just good for them. It's good for the rest of us, too.

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