

Memo to bishops: Think globally on religious freedom

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 18, 2011 All Things Catholic

During their fall meeting this week in Baltimore, the U.S. bishops heard a report from their new Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty, led by Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn. It's a measure of how seriously the bishops take the subject that the committee includes heavyweights such as Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington as well as Archbishops Charles Chaput of Philadelphia and Wilton Gregory of Atlanta.

The committee was created primarily to fight American church/state battles, such as proposed mandates from the Department of Health and Human Services regarding coverage of contraception and sterilization in private insurance plans; a Supreme Court case that could erode the "ministerial exception" allowing religious groups to hire and fire in accord with their beliefs; and threats to the ability of Catholic individuals and organizations to decline to serve same-sex couples under gay marriage laws.

Lori told the bishops that such policies "treat religion not as a contributor to our nation's common morality, but rather as a divisive and disruptive force better kept out of public life."

I'm not sure how clearly this point came through in Baltimore, but I want there to be no mistaking it here: If this committee is to realize its potential, the focus must not be exclusively on these sorts of tussles in states. In thinking about religious freedom in the early 21st century, there's simply no substitute for a global view.

The logic is simple. In a growing number of places around the world, the threats Christians face aren't political and legal, but rather lethal. From Iraq and Egypt, to Indonesia and India, we're witnessing the rise of a whole new generation of Christian martyrs. If the church in the United States doesn't speak up on their behalf, we risk being complicit in constructing a 21st century edition of the "church of silence."

Americans, long accustomed to thinking of Christianity as a powerful majority, are often flabbergasted to learn that Christians are actually the most persecuted religious group on the planet. According to the Frankfurt-based International Society for Human Rights, a secular body, 80 percent of the acts of religious intolerance in the world today are directed against Christians. The threat doesn't come just from Islamic extremism, but a bewildering variety of forces: the rise of Hindu radicalism in India; the policies of officially atheistic regimes in China and North Korea; old tribal and ethnic rivalries in parts of Africa, given a new religious veneer; even secular prejudice against religious faith in parts of Europe and North America.

Lamentably, this reality is largely unknown. Two weeks ago, for instance, marked the one-year anniversary of an assault on Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad, a Chaldean Catholic church where 53 people were killed and hundreds injured in the wake of an assault during Mass by al Qaeda-linked gunmen. (It's the death toll, not the fact of the attack, that makes Our Lady of Salvation stand out. In the last eight years, 43 of the 60 Christian churches in Baghdad have been bombed at least once.)

In a just world, this anniversary would have been talked about from every pulpit in America. Instead, it passed largely in obscurity.

Of course, Catholics shouldn't be concerned exclusively with the rights of other Christians. A credible defense of religious freedom has to mean freedom for all. Yet it is Christians today who are paying the most substantial price when religious freedom is denied -- and if we won't come to the defense of fellow Christians in jeopardy, what hope is there for anyone else?

As the Vatican's Cardinal Kurt Koch recently pointed out, there's also a spiritual logic for a "preferential option" in defense of persecuted Christians. He quoted from Paul's letter to the Galatians: "So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith."

If the U.S. bishops want to get serious about addressing the global panorama of anti-Christian persecution, at least three steps suggest themselves.

First, the bishops could declare an immediate mobilization of U.S. Catholic resources in defense of the Christians of Iraq. Whatever one makes of the rights and wrongs of the war, the fact is that American policy helped create a situation in which Iraq has lost two-thirds of its Christian population in just the last two decades. That implies a special responsibility for Americans, including American Catholics. If nothing else, it shouldn't be possible to address well-informed American audiences and draw blank stares when talking about the anniversary of the attack on Our Lady of Salvation, yet that's been precisely my experience in the last two weeks.

Second, the bishops ought to take similar steps, right now, for Egypt. One Coptic commentator has written that an army assault on Christian demonstrators in Cairo on Oct. 9, known as the "Maspero Massacre" and left 27 people dead and more than 300 injured, has been perceived by many Christians as their *Kristallnacht*, heralding the beginning of the end. Estimates are that 93,000 Coptic Christians have fled the country since January alone. American Catholics can provide muscle on the policy level, and in the meantime, they can invest human and financial capital in Christian institutions and enterprises in Egypt.

Third, and longer term, the bishops could use their institutional resources to raise the profile of religious freedom issues in American Catholic consciousness. They could encourage research programs at Catholic universities, they could sponsor high-profile lecture series, and they could take advantage of their status as newsmakers to galvanize media interest.

Bishops inclined to get creative have plenty of options. For instance, most American dioceses these days are host to a growing number of international priests, many from places where religious freedom is a live concern, such as India and Nigeria. How about inviting those priests to make the rounds to all the parishes of the diocese, telling their stories and urging people to get involved?

Here's hoping that the bishops don't succumb to myopia in their approach to religious freedom, thereby ending up on the sidelines of the most dramatic Christian story of our generation.

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NCR senior correspondent is traveling with the pope in Benin. Below are a list of stories he has filed so far. Watch the NCR website for updates throughout the weekend.

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- [In voodoo capital, Benedict blasts 'occultism and evil spirits'](#) [3], Saturday, November 19, 2001
- [From a Eurocentric pope, a remarkably African message](#) [4], Saturday, November 19, 2001
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