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Defending Christians at risk is a transcendent post-election cause

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 9, 2012 All Things Catholic

Now that the 2012 campaign is finally, mercifully over, perhaps there's a window of opportunity for Catholic attention in the States to focus on something other than who's going to occupy the White House. If you're looking around, you won't do any better than to ponder a Nov. 4-6 conference at Notre Dame, "Seed of the Church: Telling the Story of Today's Christian Martyrs."

Sponsored by Notre Dame's Institute for Church Life, the event's aim was to raise consciousness about the widespread persecution of Christians around the world. Statistical overviews and policy analyses were interspersed with first-hand testimony from some of the danger zones, including Nigeria, China, India and the Middle East.

Taken as a whole, the event drove home an insight from Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande, who was assassinated in El Salvador in 1977 for his advocacy on behalf of the poor: "It's a dangerous thing to be a Christian in this world."

I was one keynoter, the other being Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the pope's ambassador to the United States. There was a strong display of episcopal support, as both Bishop Kevin Rhoades, the current leader of the Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., diocese, and Bishop John D'Arcy, his predecessor, stuck around for almost all the working sessions, as did Viganò himself.

Although it's dangerous to reduce a rich gathering to a few sound bites, here are three quick takeaways:

1. It's difficult to get exact counts of new Christian martyrs, partly because much depends on how you define "martyrdom." By any standard, however, the scale of anti-Christian violence is stunningly vast. In fact, this may be one of the reasons it's difficult to raise an alarm: the numbers are so big it's hard to believe they're real.
2. The threats Christians face are incredibly complex, and often a superficial reading generates more heat than light. Bishop Matthew Kukah of Nigeria, for instance, insisted that interpreting his nation's Boko Haram movement primarily through the prism of Muslim/Christian conflict gets things wrong.
3. There are no easy answers about how best to defend Christians at risk, and just about every time you think you've got one, somebody smarter than you points out a potential pitfall.

A vast scale

Todd Johnson, a Protestant expert on religious demography from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, offered a statistical overview of Christian martyrdom in the 20th and early 21st centuries. (Johnson works on both the World Christian Encyclopedia and the World Christian Database.)

To understand what his numbers are based on, here's how Johnson defines a martyr: "Believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in a situation of witness, as a result of human hostility."

That's a more expansive standard than the traditional Catholic test for martyrdom of being killed *in odium fidei*,

"in hatred of the faith." It's in keeping, however, with John Paul II's decision to stretch the concept of martyrdom to include those killed in hatred of the church, and many theologians' willingness to include also those killed out of hatred for the virtues inspired by the faith.

By that definition, Johnson's conclusion, based on exhaustive empirical research, is that there have been 70 million Christian martyrs since the time of Christ. He said that fully half of that total, 45 million people, perished in the 20th century alone, most falling victim to the great totalitarianisms of the century: the Nazis and the Soviets.

In terms of the present, Johnson estimates there have been 1 million new Christian martyrs between 2000 and 2010, an average of 100,000 per year. Those numbers include scores of Christians killed in both Sudan and Congo, two of the bloodiest locales on the planet during the first decade of this millennium.

Although staggering enough, that estimate is actually lower than some others. Aid to the Church in Need [1], for instance, has estimated that 150,000 Christians are killed every year in the early 21st century.

In any event, the overall picture is bleak. Taking Johnson's total, the numbers work out to 11 Christians killed every hour of every day for the whole of the past decade.

A vigorous discussion ensued, with Allen Hertzke of the University of Oklahoma calling for a more careful way of sorting through situations such as the Congo wars in order to establish how many of its fatalities truly count as martyrs. He suggested using methods employed by the Pew Forum, including "decision rules in advance" and "strong inter-coder reliability" to make the numerical estimates more iron-clad.

The idea was that it doesn't help the cause to float inflated statistical claims, which can then be knocked down or dismissed.

In his wrap-up, Johnson laid out several factors he believes could impact Christian martyrdom today, in the sense of making it more or less common:

- The world is less religious in 2010 than in 1910, generating mounting tensions between nonreligious and religious folk. Yet the world is more religious in 2010 than in 1970, following the collapse of communism and the global expansion of both Christianity and Islam, creating new conflict zones between the faiths.
- There are 214 million migrants today, 80 percent of whom are Christians and Muslims.
- In 1800, Christians and Muslims together represented one-third of the global population; by 2011, it will be two-thirds. How the relationship between these two faiths unfolds, he said, will be enormously consequential.
- Surveys report that 86 percent of all Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus in the world report they do not personally know a Christian, pointing to a "relationship gap" among the major religions.

Complex situations

Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto, located in Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria, told a story that drives home the problem with simplistic takes on anti-Christian persecution.

His younger sister, he said, lives in the city of Kaduna in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood. There's a Muslim family across the road who are lifelong friends, and her daughter would often hang out in their home after school. When anti-Christian violence broke out in the city, the Muslim father of the family risked his own neck to come to the shop owned by Kukah's sister and put all of her belongings in his house to keep them safe while the sister and her family spent a week in an army barracks to escape the mayhem. Later, Kukah said, armed bands of Christians started attacking Muslims as payback, and this family was among their first targets.

They burned down their house, and his sister lost all her possessions in the attack.

As Kukah put it, his sister thus fell victim "to a bunch of Christians who had come to save her."

Kukah went on to argue that styling the rise of the Boko Haram movement as nothing more than another chapter in a clash of civilizations between Christianity and Islam doesn't do justice to the reality on the ground.

"We have been trying to cure a disease we've diagnosed wrongly," he said.

Kukah noted the militants themselves never use the name Boko Haram, which in the northern Hausa language basically means "Western education is bad." That's a label imposed on them, he said, by the national security forces, part of an effort to dismiss them as a bunch of illiterate hicks.

In fact, Kukah said, many of these guys have an education (in some cases in Christian schools) and are frustrated that there are no jobs in Nigeria. "They're all dressed up with nowhere to go," Kukah said. "They showed up at door of opportunity to find it's closed."

Further, Kukah said, many of Boko Haram's victims have been other Muslims, and in addition to Christian churches, they've also blown up hotels and halls where people watch soccer matches, asking rhetorically: "Does that mean they don't like hotels or football?"

To be fair, not everyone was quite as ready to dismiss the specifically anti-Christian dimension of Boko Haram. A Nigerian-born priest now serving in the States pointedly asked Kukah, "If that's true, why aren't they blowing up mosques too?"

Kukah, however, argued that the better way to read Boko Haram is as a symptom of the failure of the Nigerian state to solve the country's problems, including chronic insecurity and the corrupt misuse of oil wealth. What's needed, he said, is state-building -- democracy, accountability and the rule of law -- and a more robust concept of citizenship that cuts across ethnic and religious divides.

Beyond direct violence, Kukah went on to tick off 10 other forms of persecution faced by Christians in northern Nigeria:

- Denial of access to land to build churches
- Denial of freedom to Muslims who want to embrace Christianity
- Denial of inheritance rights to Christian women who marry Muslims
- Denial of access to the state media
- Denial of access to state employment (Kukah told the story of three young Christian men in his area named Philip, Thomas and James who applied to become police officers. He said they were told they're ineligible because nobody with such names could be indigenous to the area.)
- Denial of access to state contracts
- Non-payment of compensation for destroyed churches
- Bias in the allocation of federal projects, with state-funded hospitals, schools and so on, routinely built in Muslim rather than Christian areas
- Kidnapping and forced marriages of Christian girls
- Lack of access in government schools to Christian religious education

Turning to China, Fr. Gianni Criveller, a professor at Holy Spirit Seminary in Hong Kong and a veteran Sinologist, described persecution of the church in the world's new superpower in these terms: "The country has changed, but religious policy hasn't."

Criveller told the story of Auxiliary Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai, who was ordained this past July with the consent of both the government and the Vatican. Chinese authorities had insisted that an illicitly ordained bishop take part in the ceremony, part of what Criveller described as a master strategy that "everyone must have some stain" -- no one should be seen as completely clean, so they can be more easily manipulated.

At the end of the ceremony, Ma announced he wanted to be the bishop of all, even those Chinese Catholics fiercely loyal to Rome who refused to attend the ordination because of the illicit bishop's presence. As a result, Ma said, he would not join the Patriotic Association, the agency of the Chinese government that regulates church affairs.

Ma was swiftly placed under house arrest in the Shanghai seminary, which has been closed down by the government and now functions as a kind of prison. The few local Catholics who've been able to visit him, Criveller said, say Ma has lost weight and is very pale, and they're "very concerned" about his fate.

Although Ma's situation is dramatic, Criveller said Chinese bureaucrats have learned over the years that whenever possible, it's smart to avoid creating new martyrs. Before they harass or arrest members of the clergy, he said, they first try to buy them off.

"They offer entertainment, travel, even access to a political career," Criveller said. "Those who go along are rewarded with substantial payoffs."

Sometimes, he said, the carrot that's dangled for cooperation with the state, and thus defiance of Rome, is badly needed financial support for the construction of church buildings. In that situation, he said, "it's easy to give in for the 'good of church.' "

Criveller said the perception that many Catholic leaders in China are morally compromised is having a palpably negative effect on church life: "Candidates to the priesthood are decreasing dramatically," he said, while "some priests are leaving the priesthood ... and there's low Mass attendance in the cities."

At least in the case of China, Criveller suggested, sometimes subtle corruption is actually the greater threat than outright persecution -- and standing up to the former is often more about the moral spine of Christians than the policies of the state.

Adding another layer of complexity, Fr**.** Cedric Prakash of India argued that sometimes anti-Christian persecution is aided and abetted, even if unwittingly, by Western interests.

India has seen some of the most violent anti-Christian outbreaks in the world in recent years, including an anti-Christian pogrom in the northeastern state of Orissa in 2008 that left 100 dead and some 50,000 Christians taking refuge in a nearby forest while their churches, schools, businesses and homes burned. A mob had been whipped up by radical Hindus who see Christians as a threat to India's Hindu identity.

One might think Western leaders would be cautious about aligning themselves with figures tied to the radicals, but Prakash reported that tea party-affiliated politicians and PACs in America actually have embraced Narendra Modi, the controversial governor of Gujarat state. Among other things, they've endorsed his request for a travel visa, despite the fact that Modi is allied with Hindu radicals and linked to various episodes of religiously motivated violence.

The reason, he said, is Modi's hardline stance on Islam. Yet Prakash observed that Modi is also responsible for a "draconian" 2003 anti-conversion law in Gujarat that, he said, was primarily "aimed at the Christians."

(As a footnote, one of Modi's most enthusiastic supporters in the States, Republican Rep. Joe Walsh of Illinois, lost his re-election bid Tuesday night despite attracting substantial support from a PAC called "Indian Americans for Freedom." Earlier this year, Prakash wrote to Walsh to argue that his support for Modi poses "very serious questions on the role that the U.S. plays in ensuring the freedom of religion in all countries of the world.")

Prakash's example would seem to illustrate that politics can complicate accurate diagnosis, not to mention that backing somebody just because they're tough on your perceived enemies begs the question of what happens when they turn on your friends.

No easy answers

In general, pretty much everybody could agree on a few basics to express solidarity with suffering Christians:

- Prayer, which is important not only in spiritual terms but for creating a culture in the church -- a bit like the old prayer for the "conversion of Russia" kept the cause of the persecuted church behind the Iron Curtain alive.
- Direct humanitarian assistance to people who are hurting. Right now, for instance, thousands of Christian refugees in Syria are in danger of not surviving the winter, and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association has launched an emergency appeal on their behalf. (Details can be found here [2].)
- Raising consciousness by telling the stories of the new martyrs of our time, breaking through the indifference of the secular media and the insularity of much Catholic conversation in the West.

Beyond that, things get complicated in a hurry.

For instance, Thomas Farr of Georgetown, a veteran diplomat who served as the first director of the U.S. State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom from 1999 to 2003, made a compelling case for treating the promotion of religious freedom around the world as a "vital national security interest."

Farr said to date, the U.S. "has adopted a largely rhetorical anti-persecution approach" as opposed to "a policy of advancing the institutions and habits of religious freedom." His clear suggestion was that America's advocacy of religious freedom needs some teeth.

R. Scott Appleby, who directs Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, pointed out a drawback: Many times, he said, when people in other parts of the world hear the United States talk about "religious freedom," they see it as a pretext for opening the door to proselytism by Western missionaries, especially Protestant Evangelicals.

Appleby referred to Christian missionaries in Saudi Arabia who once went around tossing Bibles over the walls of private homes, thus literally hitting people over the head with the Gospel. How, Appleby asked, can the U.S. promote religious freedom without being seen as promoting that sort of thing?

Farr conceded that there's no easy answer, while noting the irony that many of America's diplomats are actually secular types who would be "horrified" to think they're "making the world safe for Christian missionaries."

At the end of the day, Farr said, one has to be clear that there is no right not to be proselytized, that religious freedom includes "the right of individuals and communities to propose their faith."

Similarly, Criveller said there's "no easy answer" as to the best way to help the church in China. He described two broad schools of thought:

- The "party of resistance" as exemplified by Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former archbishop of Hong Kong, who has described dialogue with the state as a form of compromise;
- The "party of dialogue," which includes some Chinese bishops and Vatican officials who believe that gradual détente is possible.

To date, he said, the pope has not settled the debate. As a result, there's every reason to believe that the church's China policy will continue to lurch from one to the other.

Another example: In my keynote, I argued that though Catholics should be concerned about violations of religious freedom directed against any group, there's a compelling basis for a "preferential option" for Christians today because in statistical terms, they're the most persecuted religious body on the planet.

That produced blowback from real experts (who, let's face it, know the situation much better than I do), who warned that if the defense of religious freedom is perceived as a partisan exercise on behalf of Christians, it will lose credibility. Others, however, argued that if we don't mount a special effort on behalf of fellow Christians, why would the followers of other faiths believe we'll ever do anything meaningful for them?

Two final points

Two other points are worth making about the "Seed of the Church" conference.

First, the event brought home that martyrdom has a unique spiritual power in Christian life, and that the stories of the martyrs are among the most effective evangelizing tools in the Christian toolbox.

(Tongue in cheek, Johnson told a story about a colleague who once spoke to a group of wealthy Christian industrialists who asked him what the church's most effective evangelical strategy is. The colleague replied that empirical research shows it's martyrdom. After a long pause, one of the industrialists finally asked: "Can you tell us what the second most effective strategy might be?")

There's nothing like the stories of the martyrs to fire the Christian imagination. Fr. Angelo Romano of the Community of Sant'Egidio, for instance, described the community's efforts to build a memorial to the new martyrs at the Church of San Bartolomeo on Rome's Tiber Island.

Among the martyrs commemorated there is Italian Consolata Sr. Leonella Sgorbati, who was shot to death in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 2006. (Some believe the attack was in retribution for Pope Benedict XVI's controversial speech in Regensburg, Germany, six days before, which incited Muslim outrage by appearing to link Muhammad with violence.)

At the time, Romano said, Sgorbati was one of only two Westerners left in Mogadishu, refusing to leave her post running a hospital for the victims of that country's violence -- Muslim and Christian alike. She had a Muslim driver, a father of four children, who was devoted to her safety. When the militants came for her, Romano said, this Muslim man shielded her body with his own and took the first bullet, so they died together, their blood mingling on the floor. In that sense, he said, Sgorbati is not only a symbol of the new Christian martyrs, but of Christian/Muslim friendship at its very best -- the willingness to lay down one's life for another.

Sgorbati's last words reportedly were *perdono, perdono*, meaning "forgiveness."

"In the martyrs, we see a more human vision of the world, one that is completely unarmed and fragile," Romano

said. "The memory of the martyrs is important because it can build a better future."

Second, many people at the conference stressed the ecumenical dimension of martyrdom, arguing that their witness can bring Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Anglicans together, since it's something all branches of the Christian family share.

I suggested there's also an intra-Catholic version of this "ecumenism of the martyrs."

It's no secret that the Catholic church is often a house divided against itself, perhaps especially in the United States -- a point clearly confirmed by the divisive 2012 election. These tribal divisions are a source of pain for many Catholics, not to mention a constant impediment to bringing a unified Catholic witness to bear on anything.

If ever there were a transcendent cause that could bring the various Catholic tribes together, surely it's the defense of innocent Christians in places such as Congo, Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, India and so many points beyond, where Christians literally take their lives in the hands every time they go to church, open their business or just walk down the street.

In other words, if so-called "progressives" and "conservatives" in the American church can't set aside their differences to engage this issue, what hope is there that they could ever do so on anything else?

That, at least, seems food for post-election thought.

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