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Pope sounds alarm on anti-Christian persecution

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 25, 2013 The Francis Chronicles
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Three days after an attack on an Anglican church in Peshawar, Pakistan, left at least 85 people dead, Pope Francis on Wednesday urged Christians to an examination of conscience about their response to such acts of anti-Christian persecution.

"So many Christians in the world are suffering," the pope said during his general audience Wednesday morning in St. Peter's Square. "Am I indifferent to that, or does it affect me like it's a member of the family?"

"Does it touch my heart, or doesn't it really affect me, [to know that] so many brothers and sisters in the family are giving their lives for Jesus Christ?"

The Sunday atrocity in Pakistan is the latest instance of a mounting wave of anti-Christian violence in different parts of the world.

According to the International Society for Human Rights in Frankfurt, Germany, 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed against Christians.

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that in the last decade, an average of 100,000 Christians have died each year in what the center calls a "situation of witness," meaning for motives related to their faith.

Although some experts regard that estimate as inflated, it works out to an average of 11 Christians killed each hour throughout the past decade.

Parts of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and regions of sub-Saharan Africa tend to be the greatest danger zones, though there are recent examples of Christians experiencing violent persecution in many other parts of the world as well.

Francis appeared to have these realities in mind Wednesday during his audience.

Speaking directly to the crowd in the square, Francis said he wanted to ask a question, and he didn't want people to shout out an answer but rather to ponder it in their hearts.

"How many of you pray for Christians who are persecuted?" the pope asked. "Ask yourselves, do I pray for that brother or sister who's in difficulty for confessing their faith?"

Francis also touched this morning on the unity of the church, calling on Catholics to feel themselves as part of a global "house of communion" rather than "privatizing" the church for "oneself, one's group or one's nation."

As part of that reflection, Francis issued a warning against gossip, using homespun language to drive home his point.

"A Christian should bite their tongue before gossiping," he said. "That way the tongue will swell up and you can't gossip anymore!"

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