

EDITORIAL

Way of Cross, and Easter hope, for suffering Middle East Christians

Last year, a woman religious and an archbishop from war-torn Iraq visited Washington, and both framed the suffering and the hope of their people in language that is especially timely now as our Lenten journey progresses through Holy Week to Easter.

Dominican Sister Diana Momeka, a college teacher, fled with 50,000 residents of Qaraqosh, Iraq, a mostly Christian town, after ISIS forces overran the area in August 2014. They were faced with untenable choices: converting to Islam, paying a heavy tax, running for their lives, or being killed. She escaped with only her Dominican religious habit and her purse, and was living with 100,000 Iraqi refugees in the Kurdistan region of her country.

Last May in Washington, she testified in English to a congressional committee about the persecution of Christians in Iraq, and in an interview with the *Catholic Standard*, she said that the faith of Iraqi Christians grows stronger even amid their suffering.

"We chose to follow Christ and to be faithful to him. We feel God is holding us and making us stronger," she said. "We have hope. We won't let evil overcome us."

Sister Diana, a Syriac Catholic whose native language is Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, added that Iraq's Christians – who are descended from some of the world's first Christian communities – drew inspiration from Jesus, who himself was persecuted. "Suffering always ends with the resurrection. That's our hope," she said, noting that year's Lenten and Easter seasons were especially meaningful to Iraq's Christian refugees. "We lived the passion of Christ, yet we were able to rise with him. That's how we keep our hope, because we chose to follow Jesus."

In August, Archbishop Bashar Warda, the archbishop of the Chaldean Diocese of Erbil, Iraq, also visited Washington, and spoke about how his diocese, with the help of Catholic relief agencies, has provided shelter, food, medical care and educational services to an influx of tens of thousands of Christian refugees fleeing rampaging ISIS forces. Thousands of Christian families had to walk eight to 10 hours through the desert to find safe haven. The arriving refugees slept in churches, classrooms, halls, garages and tents. Some found homes with other Christians or in rental or prefabricated housing. Yet Archbishop Warda said they were still conscious of God's presence in their lives.

"To choose Christ, to choose to be Christian, is a sign of hope and courage. Yes, it comes with a cross," he said in an interview. But he said amidst their suffering, Iraq's Christian refugees felt blessed to be alive and to experience God's love and grace through all those helping them. "The caring hands of God are present there. Amidst the difficulties, God is working," he said.

The Iraqi archbishop also spoke of his people's experience in terms of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. "We are living in a very long Good Friday, but it is not the end of the story. We can sense Easter coming," Archbishop Warda said.

A ray of hope amidst the ongoing Way of the Cross experienced by the suffering Christians in Iraq, Syria and

killed, and that for many is a choice between one kind of death and another."

The State Department's declaration that ISIS is committing genocide against Christians and other minorities was called a "correct and historic decision" in a statement by Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, whose group, along with the organization In Defense of Christians, presented a nearly 300-page report to Secretary of State Kerry detailing acts of genocide by ISIS against Christians in the Middle East.

The report by the Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians noted that ISIS' wave of terror had included well documented cases of "killings, rapes, torture, kidnappings, bombings and the destruction of religious property and monuments..."

The Knights' leader, after praising the genocide designation against ISIS by the State Department, said, "Following this declaration, America must continue to focus on those being killed in this genocide, and our country, and the international community, must make sure the slaughter ends and that these innocent people are protected."

Cardinal Wuerl, who has joined Pope Francis and other religious leaders in highlighting the plight of Middle Eastern Christians and the world's silence about their persecution, said in a statement that, "For the U.S. government to call this savagery by its proper name – genocide – is a welcome step in what must now be a more committed effort at bringing peace and security to that beleaguered land. These words must now be translated into action."

During his visit to Washington, Archbishop Warda said passionately that what was unfolding in Iraq and Syria "is genocide," and he said acknowledging that would mean "those people are not forgotten... We'd be giving them just status, to help the world not repeat (this). We're living in the 21st century, and repeating the same mistakes, the same sins of the past... Everyone is watching. We have to do something."

The suffering Christians in the Middle East, by their Way of the Cross and their hope in the Resurrection, should inspire their fellow Christians around the world to pray and stand with them in solidarity, and encourage government leaders not only to name the evil inflicted on those persecuted people, but also act to end it.

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other parts of the Middle East came last week. First, by a bipartisan 393-0 vote, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a nonbinding resolution that condemns as genocide the atrocities being carried out by Islamic State militants against Christians and other ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria. The European Parliament passed a similar resolution.

More importantly, late last week, the Obama Administration and Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged that ISIS – also known by the Arabic acronym Daesh – "is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians and Shia Muslims." Secretary Kerry added: "One element of genocide is the intent to destroy an ethnic or religious group, in whole or in part. We know that Daesh has given some of its victims a choice between abandoning their faith or being

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