

**“International Religious Freedom:
An Imperative for Peace and the Common Good”**

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Feast of the Holy Name of Mary

Introduction

We come to this event with a sense of urgency. Yesterday’s events in Libya and Egypt point to what is at stake. We need to be respectful of other religious traditions at the same time that we unequivocally proclaim that violence in the name of religion is wrong. Back in March of this year I penned a column for *Catholic New York* entitled “Violence Against Christians on the Rise.”¹ I wish I could say the situation has gotten better since then. It hasn’t. According to the *International Society for Human Rights*, 150,000 Christians are killed for their faith every year, meaning we have seventeen new martyrs every hour of every day.

This gathering of bishops, religious leaders, policy analysts, academics, public officials, media professionals, and people of goodwill highlights the need to defend vigorously religious freedom throughout the world. Americans are shocked when they read headlines of attacks on innocent people of faith in far off places, but too often the images of pain fade and with it the need for concerted action. As Secretary of State Clinton observed only ten weeks ago, “More than a billion people live under governments that systematically suppress religious freedoms ... members of faith communities long under pressure report that it is rising. Even some countries that are making progress on expanding *political* freedom are frozen when it comes to *religious* freedom.” (State Department, *Report on Religious Freedom*, July 30, 2012)

I am grateful to everyone who make today’s Conference possible: The Catholic University of America, for hosting the conference, and Catholic Relief Services for cosponsoring the event. Thank you, President John Garvey and Dr. Carolyn Woo. Thank you, Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, the Chairman of our bishops’ *Committee on International Justice and*

¹ Cardinal Timothy Dolan, *Catholic New York*, Lord, To Whom Shall We Go? , “Violence Against Christians on the Rise,” March 22, 2012, <http://www.cny.org/stories/Violence-Against-Christians-on-the-Rise,7163>, accessed September 1, 2012.

Peace, for continuing and intensifying the Committee’s longstanding work to defend people of all religious faiths wherever their freedom, rights and lives are threatened. My gratitude also extends to my brother bishops who are participating. Your presence in such large numbers is a sign of the critical importance of this issue to our Conference.

Can any of us, brother bishops, forget the lumps in our throats and moisture in our eyes last June 13 at our meeting in Atlanta, when Bishop Shleman Warduni of Iraq implored us not to forget our Christians in his homeland? “We beg you to help. We want only peace, security, freedom ... please no more death, no more explosions, no more injustice.”

We are blessed this afternoon with a promising program, featuring many expert presenters: Archbishop Francis A. Chullikatt, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations; Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva; and Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, who came a great distance to share the painful persecution of the Church in Nigeria.

Today our focus is on threats to *international* religious freedom, but, as you are well aware, there are serious challenges to religious freedom *within* our own nation, serious problems the Church faces in her life and mission in the United States — threats that could marginalize the Church and her educational, charitable and health care institutions. As grave as these challenges remain, they are of a different order than those faced by Christians and other people of faith in many countries. In the words of Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See, “Of course, nobody would confuse or equate this marginalization of religion with the actual persecution and killing of Christians in other areas of the world.”² Not only is it *morally* imperative, consonant with the urgent gospel demands of justice and charity, for us as Catholics to be prophetic leaders in defending our co-religionists around the world who are today being “thrown to the lions,” but it is *strategically* necessary, as our own laudable efforts to defend our “first and most cherished freedom” here at home, are hollow and hypocritical if not coupled with a ringing solicitude for those under more overtly violent attack throughout the world.

² Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Roundtable on Discrimination Against Christians, September 12, 2011.

In all of our deliberations here we must remember that the absence of religious freedom in countries around the world leads to terrible human suffering. We hold in our hearts images of bloodied bodies lying lifeless amidst the rubble of bombed houses of worship, and the anguished faces of family members mourning their loss. We remember the anxious looks of refugees leaving behind homes and livelihoods as they flee religious discrimination or outright persecution. My hope is that we will together find ways to build societies respectful of the religious freedom of all persons and communities, a freedom at the foundation of all others, a freedom we Americans of all creeds, or none at all, rise to defend, at home and beyond.

The Reality of Persecution

My column in March was prompted by a CNS headline that was depressing and all too familiar: “Car bomb explodes outside Nigerian church; 10 die in blast, violence.” This assault, which occurred at Saint Finbar’s Catholic Church, followed a similar attack two weeks before at the Church of Christ compound, which killed three people and wounded 38 others, and Christmas Day attacks that saw more than 32 martyred for their faith at Catholic churches as they gathered to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.

I was especially saddened by this report because the Archbishop of Jos, Nigeria, where this violence happened, Ignatius Kaigama, the President of the Nigerian Bishops’ Conference, is a cherished friend of mine. He is one of the gentlest, wisest, most conciliatory men I know, and has been a bold leader in calling for calm, non-violence, and religious freedom for all. In our calls and communications, I can sense his deep anxiety as he daily watches his Catholic flock under attack, and as his own life is in peril.

Of course, it’s not just happening in Nigeria. Christians are being persecuted and killed at an alarming rate in many Muslim-majority nations. The *2012 Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*³ notes that in Egypt there is “a climate of impunity in the face of repeated attacks against Coptic Christians and their Churches.” In Eritrea there are “an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 religious prisoners and reports of torture and other inhumane treatment” of these prisoners. In Iran the theocratic government has targeted “Baha’is, as well as Christians, Zoroastrians, and Sufi Muslims.” Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, a Christian convert, has been sentenced to death for holding on to his faith (although I am heartened by Nina

³ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2012, <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>, page 1, accessed September 1, 2012.

Shea's recent report that he has been freed). I can only begin to imagine the agony this is causing his wife, two young sons, and flock, and the fear it is spreading among other Christians and religious minorities in Iran.

This violence and persecution is leading to a massive exodus of Christians from the Middle East. Thousands upon thousands are leaving—usually forced out of—countries where Christianity has not only flourished, but in many cases where it first took root 2000 years ago. These Christian families want to stay in the ancient lands of their birth, but too often make the difficult decision to leave as a result of harassment or violent threats by extremists. As many Muslims and Jews will tell you, this is not good for the region. Christians are indigenous to the Middle East, there longer than the Islamic community. They contribute to the common good of their societies, and their presence enriches diversity and tolerance, and beyond tolerance, respect. Their presence is good for all of the people of the Middle East. This is sure to be a major theme of the Holy Father's brave visit to Lebanon this very weekend, a visit we keep high in our prayers.

The epicenter of violence against Christians may be the Middle East, but tragically it is not confined there. The *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom* reports that in Vietnam last year “there were marked increases in arrests, detentions, and harassment of groups and individuals viewed as hostile to the Communist Party, including violence aimed at peaceful ethnic minority gatherings and Catholics protesting land confiscations and harassment. ... Father Nguyes Van Ly [a Catholic priest engaged in human rights work] was returned to prison after being given a one-year medical parole.”⁴ Although there has been no large-scale violence since 2008, in India “intimidation, harassment, and occasional small-scale violence against members of religious minority groups continue[s], particularly against Christians in states with anti-conversion laws,”⁵ prejudice I saw personally in my CRS sponsored visit to Orissa, India. In China, “[r]eligious freedom conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims remain particularly acute, as the government broaden[s] its efforts to discredit and imprison religious leaders, control the selection of clergy, ban certain religious gatherings, and control the

⁴ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2012, page 260, <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>, accessed September 1, 2012.

⁵ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2012, page 304, <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>, accessed September 1, 2012.

distribution of religious literature.... The [Chinese] government [has] also detained hundreds of unregistered Protestants in the past year and stepped up efforts to shutter illegal meeting points and public worship activities. Dozens of unregistered Catholic clergy remain in detention or have disappeared....”⁶ We are all soberly aware of China’s decade’s old harassment of Catholics in China, a topic I would hope Secretary Clinton raised in her visit there last week.

Today’s gathering draws on the experience of the Catholic Church in Cuba, Iraq and Nigeria, but the lessons we glean from these situations have broader application for people of various religious traditions in a host of other countries. Sadly, religious intolerance and persecution are largely “equal opportunity” crimes against the human family. Not every attack on people of faith is motivated solely or principally to target their religion. There are often other political and economic factors, but too often religious identity is a major reason. All religious traditions experience religious discrimination and violence, especially when they are in the minority of a population. Baha’is, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and others all experience marginalization and persecution, but our experience as Catholics and Christians is especially relevant and timely. Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, makes an observation clearly validated by objective studies:

At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith. Many Christians experience daily affronts and often live in fear because of their pursuit of truth, their faith in Jesus Christ and their heartfelt plea for respect for religious freedom. This situation is unacceptable, since it represents an insult to God and to human dignity; furthermore, it is a threat to security and peace, and an obstacle to the achievement of authentic and integral human development.⁷

This animosity against Christians is so rampant that it now has a name: *Christophobia*.

As Catholics, it is our faith in Jesus Christ and the truth of the human person that drives us to defend the religious rights of all peoples, communities and traditions. This is our belief in

⁶ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2012, page 136, <http://www.uscifr.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>, accessed September 1, 2012.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message, “Religious Freedom, The Path to Peace,” January 1, 2011.

the *imago Dei*, central to Judeo-Christian revelation, cherished by other creeds as well, that every human person is created in God's image and likeness, thus deserving dignity and respect.

Our faith in the creator in whose image we are made is both personal and social. It finds expression in both freedom of religion and conscience, and in the freedom of believers to act together in the public arena, establishing, not only temples, synagogues, mosques, and churches, but also faith-based institutions to serve the common good through educational, social and medical services, and participating actively in public conversations to form societies more respectful of human life and dignity. Perhaps in part because of this engagement with society, Christians are frequently targets of prejudice and threats of violence. As the President of the Conference of Bishops, it has too often been my sad duty to write letters of condolence and solidarity to Church leaders whose people have been attacked for their faith in Christ.

The Ecumenism of the Martyrs

Cardinal Kurt Koch, the President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, not long ago delivered a profound reflection on "Christian Unity and Love of the Poor" in which he said, "God ... takes sides. ... [I]n a world dominated by injustice, suffering and poverty, the love of God for justice takes the concrete form of a preference for the poor and the suffering." Cardinal Koch went on to speak of an "ecumenism of the martyrs," proposing that the shared Christian experience of martyrdom today, which crosses denominational boundaries, promotes Christian amity and unites Christians in "publicly denouncing the situations of martyrdom and committing ourselves in favor of respect for religious liberty and human dignity."⁸ Suffering unites

I believe the "ecumenism of the martyrs" does something else as well. It serves not only Christian unity, but the oneness of the whole human family. The suffering of Christians in many countries around the world is a warning sign that the religious freedom and fundamental human rights of all peoples are at risk. The blood of the martyrs is a cardinal-red signal warning that persecution and intolerance is now epidemic.

A Threat to Peace and the Common Good

Pope Benedict reminds us that the denial of religious freedom is a "threat to security and peace, and an obstacle to the achievement of authentic and integral human development." Religious freedom is a value in its own right because it frees up individuals and communities to

⁸ Cardinal Kurt Koch, "Christian Unity and Love of the Poor," September 11, 2011.

pursue ultimate truth. For Christians, this truth is found in the Person of Jesus Christ. At the same time, religious freedom is related to other essential human rights, including the freedoms of speech, association and assembly.

It is no accident that efforts to promote religious freedom have accompanied efforts to develop democratic institutions. The history of our own nation attests to this fact. As Pope Benedict XVI states, “When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the ethos and institutions of people are strengthened.”⁹ Religious freedom, as the foundational first freedom, contributes in a profound way to peace, justice, the rule of law, and the development of democracy.

This reality is powerfully symbolized by two leaders who were assassinated within two months of each other in Pakistan last year. Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic, and Salmaan Taseer, a Muslim, were the Pakistani Federal Minister of Minority Affairs, and the Governor of Punjab Province, respectively. Both were assassinated for their opposition to harsh Pakistani blasphemy laws that have been used to abuse the rights of Christians and other minorities. Shahbaz Bhatti, whom my friend John Allen urges be immediately canonized by the Church as a martyr, had visited the staff of our Conference of Bishops on more than one occasion. I am told he was a man of uncommon courage and conviction, keenly aware of the threats to his life resulting from his human rights work.

The community of nations owes a debt of gratitude to all the “martyrs” for religious freedom. Their sufferings have sounded the alarm for the entire human family. As Saint Paul writes of the Church, “If [one] part [of the body] suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.”¹⁰ The suffering of today’s persecuted martyrs hurts the entire body of humanity.

Widespread persecution today calls us to action on behalf of the entire human family. Our Conference of Bishops, and many other religious bodies in our nation, are well placed and well equipped to take up this task.

As citizens of a powerful democracy, we have a special responsibility to promote the religious freedom of our brothers and sisters in all nations and of all religious traditions.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message, “Religious Freedom, The Path to Peace,” January 1, 2011.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 12:26.

Many Catholic bishops' conferences around the world have looked to our own Conference to bring before our government the distressing difficulties they are facing. In some places Catholics suffer outright persecution; in others they face discrimination in education, employment, and access to public services. Some countries prohibit public and even private worship; others restrict being able to live the faith by providing educational, health and social services to the broader population; still others curtail participation in the public square.

For decades, our *Committee on International Justice and Peace* has brought these concerns to Congress and various U.S. Administrations. We have insisted that our public officials urge other governments to uphold human rights and to protect the religious freedom of all citizens. Our Conference of Bishops was instrumental in the successful passage of the *International Religious Freedom Act* of 1998. This legislation sought to make religious freedom a central feature of U.S. foreign policy. Just last year our Conference vigorously and successfully advocated for the reauthorization of the *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, a key institution established by the Act. Four Catholic bishops have served on the Commission: Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop Charles Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., Bishop William Murphy, and Bishop Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B., three of whom are here today.

Public advocacy alone, they will tell us, is not enough. Our Conference directly assists victims of religious intolerance, both overseas and here at home. I am particularly proud of how Catholic Relief Services reaches out to people of all faiths who suffer. Their mission is to assist people "on the basis of need, not creed."¹¹ Here at home our Conference's Migration and Refugee Services and its diocesan network resettle people of all faiths who have fled for their lives. Through various national collections and other initiatives we also provide direct assistance to the suffering Church in far off places.

Our Conference of Bishops does not keep its distance when it comes to international religious freedom. Bishops of our Conference make regular fraternal visits overseas to give visible support to the Church in challenging situations. These visits put a face on the issue and give additional credibility to our witness with public officials and the American public.

A Call to Action

¹¹ See the Catholic Relief Services website at <http://crs.org/about/mission-statement/>, accessed September 1, 2012.

Our nation and world are not where we need to be in terms of protecting and promoting religious freedom in the many places where it is threatened. U.S. policy makers need to place greater priority on religious freedom in foreign policy discussions and decisions, an observation cogently made to us bishops at our summer meeting by Dr. Thomas Farr. Americans generally, and our Catholic people especially, need to become better informed of the systematic challenges to the fundamental right of religious freedom in far too many countries. The first freedom, which we too often take for granted in our own nation, even as we are vigilant in its defense, is under often violent attack in other nations with terrible human consequences.

The urgent task we consider this afternoon is a test of our shared humanity as children of God. It is also an imperative for peace and the common good of the whole human family. That's why, "It is good for us to be here." Thank you!