



AN ARCHDIOCESAN RESPONSE TO THE PRESENT CRISIS IN IRAQ

14 August 2014

BACKGROUND

The Christian communities of Iraq are regarded as one of the oldest surviving continuous Christian communities in the world. The majority are Assyrians with a smaller community being Armenian.

Christians totalled 1.5 million in Iraq in 2003, around 5 percent of the population. A decade later, this number was less than 450,000 with Chaldean Catholics forming the biggest group of Christians.

Some 30,000 Christians are thought to have fled Mosul to Hamdaniya to the east since the city was seized by the Islamic State (IS) militant group, who we are told have been ordering Christians to convert to Islam, pay a tax or face death. The UN are saying that a mere 20 families from the ancient Christian minority possibly remain in Mosul, which IS has taken as the capital of its Islamic state.

We read that an estimated 200,000 people have been forced to flee their homes after jihadist militants took over more towns in northern Iraq.

A humanitarian tragedy is unfolding each day with grave concerns expressed for the physical safety of these civilians, many of whom are now reported as dead.

OUR CHALLENGE

In the face of the displacement of the ancient Christian communities of Iraq, we in the West have a moral obligation to provide sanctuary to those fleeing from their homeland. We applaud the decision made by France's foreign and interior ministers this week "to help facilitate asylum on [their] territory" and the decision made by the Federal Government to open its humanitarian refugee program to as many as 4,000 Iraqi Christians and Yazidis in response to this crisis.

Further we need to reflect carefully on the words spoken by the director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), David Irvine, when he says that "we are not fighting Islam, in Australia or anywhere else. We are fighting the terrorism that kills innocent people, both Muslim and non-Muslim."

The appalling scenes we have seen in the Media are also condemned by the Australian National Imams Council. Grand Mufti Ibrahim Abu Mohamed has said that it is "utterly deplorable for extremists to use Islam as a cover for their crimes and atrocities" and that "their misguided actions do not represent the overwhelming majority of Muslims".

OUR PART

The Gospel (Matthew 8:5-13) shows us how Jesus, when asked by the centurion to heal his servant who "is suffering greatly" a distance away, recognises the great faith displayed and grants what the centurion believed the Lord could do. As his servant was healed at that moment we too, through the deliberate expression of faith, can dare to believe that God will preserve the lives of our Christian family and of others a great distance away.

I invite Catholics, and any fellow Christian brothers and sisters, and all those who believe in God, to call upon Him in prayer to bring about a satisfactory intervention to this crisis.

The evil and subsequent suffering unfolding in Iraq is not of God's making but is the result of humanity's terrible abuse of God's precious gift of free will. Above all then we must pray for a change of heart in those who persecute others and that those who are unduly suffering would be given the necessary strength and perseverance to meet their needs in each unique situation.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, has requested that the Church in Australia respond actively *“that the whole Church and all the faithful raise up with one voice a ceaseless prayer, imploring the Holy Spirit to send the gift of peace”*.

The Pope also appeals to the consciences of all people, and to each and every believer he repeats: *“May the God of peace create in all an authentic desire for dialogue and reconciliation. Violence is not conquered with violence. Violence is conquered with peace? Let us pray in silence, asking for peace, everyone, in silence...”* (Angelus, July 20, 2014)

A SUGGESTED ENGAGEMENT

Prayer and fasting are ancient Christian ways of expressing the sincerity of our concerns to God. As regards fasting, for a Christian it means to humble oneself before God and is a part of our Christian discipline. It takes on many forms and is not solely about minimising the intake of food. It is much more about changing and purifying the nature of our hearts than about trying to force God's Hand. A few suggested forms of fasting are as follows:

FASTING

- for healthy adults, simple bread and water for a day, or as a replacement for a meal
- refrain from eating certain pleasure foods (tea, coffee, or missing desserts or sugary snacks)
- turning off the television for a time to spend time in quiet reflection and prayer
- choosing to serve another person beyond what is expected of us, e.g. going out of our way to assist someone less able than ourselves.

Each individual, family and local church community must decide for themselves how to fast and also how and what to pray, not in any burdensome manner but out of a concerned heart and as a way of becoming closer to God. Prayer can take on numerous forms, some of which are:

PRAYER

- Spending time in and with God's Word, reflecting in silence
- Praying the Rosary
- Praying the Divine Mercy Chaplet
- Engaging in a Novena/nine days of prayer (*see below*)
- Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament
- Public or private Litany to the Saints (*see below*)

We might also consider praying the following adapted prayer written by the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Iraq, His Beatitude Louis Rafael Sako:

Lord,

The plight of Iraq is deep and the suffering of Christians is severe and frightening.

Peace is the foundation of life.

Grant the people of Iraq peace and stability that will enable them to live with one another with dignity and joy.

Spare their lives and grant them patience and courage to continue their witness of Christian values with trust and hope.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

THE PERSECUTED CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It is estimated that persecution of Christians is presently taking place in 139 nations around the world with four out of five acts of religious discrimination worldwide being directed against Christians. Some in previously moderate or secular countries like Turkey or Egypt have stepped up their hostility.

With horrendous news constantly breaking about the religious persecution happening in Iraq, and with ongoing exposure about threats to religious liberty around the world, we are being encouraged to pray for religious freedom. One way is to consider offering the following novena for this intention. This can be done privately, in a family or community setting, or as part of a Holy Hour offered each day for nine days within a parish setting.

“The saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church’s history.” said St. John Paul II. With this in mind, it is imperative that we pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ.

We must not be tempted into believing that we too are powerless as such horrors unfold before us. Even a mustard seed of faith expressed through prayer can move a mountain (cf. Matthew 17:20).

Let us again entrust world peace into the hands of Christ, the Prince of Peace, and to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Communion of Saints.

Yours most sincerely,



The Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB, Archbishop of Perth

It is suggested that specific ***Prayers of the Faithful*** be used in Parish Masses over the coming weeks. Examples of these can be found below. It will be important to include prayers for the people persecuted by IS at this time.

SUGGESTED PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

Lord, bring peace to Iraq, to the Middle East and to the many troubled lands that they may find salvation and hope through you.

We pray for world leaders, thinking particularly at this time of those who are deciding the present and future of the Middle East, that they will make right and just decisions for the greater good of their countries.

Lord, heal the anger in our world, especially within the hearts of those who see their neighbour as a threat or enemy, so that men and women of all religions can live together in peace and harmony.

We pray, Lord, that through your unifying presence at work within creation, the nations of the world might grow stronger together and be of service to one another.

Lord, bring justice to the oppressed, freedom to the enslaved and show mercy to the captors so we can live in a world of true freedom.

Also below is a suggested novena written to be a prayer to Mary, our Mother, to all Saints and particularly to Martyrs who are known to have endured great sufferings as followers of Christ.

NOVENA FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH & RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

*O great cloud of witnesses!
 O Saints worshipping God for all eternity!
 O holy ones in heaven above,
 You who were once part of the Church on earth,
 You who were faithful servants of the Church,
 You who suffered for the love of God,
 In all ages, the Church has in part been persecuted and hated.
 We pray, Lord, in communion with your holy saints, that we may be blessed
 With the freedom to worship and adore you at all times.
 We pray that you may bless your Church throughout the world,
 And me personally, with your grace to persevere with love in the face of
 persecution just as You did on the Cross.*

(mention the intentions of those being persecuted and also your personal intentions here)

*We look to you, the Prince of Peace,
 Who brings that peace which the world cannot give,
 To intervene in any heart or action that is violent
 And therefore in opposition to your will.
 Hear our prayer, Lord Jesus, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit
 Are one God living and true, forever and ever. Amen.*

A time of quiet private prayer, or a private or public litany of Martyrs could be inserted here
 (see below)

A CONCLUDING PRAYER

*God our Father,
 Hear the prayers we raise to you in communion with the saints
 As we grieve over the sufferings of so many of your children
 Scattered throughout the world.
 Remove the hearts of stone from those
 Who bring violence and suffering to others
 And give them hearts of flesh instead.
 Strengthen our resolve to be people of peace
 And help us to do whatever we can
 To alleviate the sufferings of others.
 We ask this through Christ our Lord.
 Amen.*

A LITANY OF MARTYRS

+ Day 1:

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Joan of Arc
 St. Valentine
 St. Sebastian
 St. Peter
 St. Stephen
 St. Polycarp

+ Day 2

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Maria Goretti
 St. Ignatius of Antioch
 St. Lawrence
 St. Agnes
 St. Anastasia
 St. Oliver Plunkett

+ Day 3

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Edith Stein
 St. Maximilian Kolbe
 St. Thomas More
 St. Margaret Clitherow
 St. Julia
 St. Peter of Verona
 St. Thomas Becket
 St. John Fisher

+ Day 4

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. John the Baptist
 The Jesuit Martyrs of China
 St. Cecilia
 St. Jude
 The Vietnamese Martyrs
 St. Boniface

+ Day 5

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Luke
 St. Andrew
 St. Charles Lwanga
 St. Kizito & the Ugandan Martyrs
 St. Paul Chong Hasang and the Korean Martyrs
 St. Genesis
 St. Cyprian
 St. Catherine of Alexandria
 Holy Innocents

+ Day 6

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 Blessed Miguel Pro
 St. Perpetua
 St. Felicity
 St. Dymphna
 Blessed Teresa of Augustine and the Martyrs of
 Compiègne
 St. Thecla
 St. Elias and St. Jeremy

+ Day 7

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Anthony
 St. Paul
 St. Agatha
 St. Simeon
 St. Isaac Jogues and the North American
 Martyrs
 St. Faustinus and St. Jovita
 St. Meinrad
 St. Tarcisius

+ Day 8

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Lucy
 St. Alban
 St. Paul Miki
 St. Gabriel Lalemant and Canadian Martyrs
 St. Andrew Kim and Japanese Martyrs
 St. Toribio
 St. Jean de Brébeuf
 St. Barbara
 St. Tanco
 St. Winefride

+ Day 9

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Queen of Martyrs
 – *Pray for us!*
 St. Edmund Campion
 St. Ursula
 St. Dominic Henares
 St. Erasmus
 St. Andrew Bobola
 St. Miguel de la Mora
 St. Tatiana
 Pope Saint Sixtus II

(Please feel free to add or take away from the above list)