

# Religious Freedom

Where God Weeps

“If anybody wants to follow me,  
he must take up his cross.”

## Calvary

“Calvary is not a name that belongs only to antiquity. It is a contemporaneous reality that describes, to differing degrees, the suffering of many ...

when Christians are bruised and battered by those who assail them, they are similar to Christ who also fell to the ground under the weight of the Cross.”

(Archbishop Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem)

## Some indicators of Religious Freedom

- 59 % of the world's population today lives with "high" or "very high" levels of restrictions on religious freedom 2011.

(Pew Forum Survey)

- 70% of all religious persecution is against Christians
- Christians face increased persecution in 22 countries with Iraq, China, and Pakistan being among the worst countries for believers to live in. (COMECE 2010)
- Terrorist attacks on Christians in Africa, the Middle East and Asia increased 309 % between 2003 and 2010.

(Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi C.S., permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations)

# Sources of Religious Persecution

1. Muslim Fundamentalism: Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia ...
  2. Fundamentalist Nationalism: India, Indonesia ...
  3. State Sponsored persecution: Communist and atheist countries such as North Korea, Eritrea, China and Cuba ...
- Extremists link local Christians to the West. Unable to attack Western countries, extremists turn on local Christians.
  - As Archbishop Twal stated: “Being a Christian in those lands is no accident of birth. It is part of their vocation...” But as journalists, what is our vocation?
  - Here some faces of those suffering religious persecution:

## Romania under Communism

- Before starting on contemporary persecution, we cannot forget those who have suffered in recent history.
- In 1948 the communist regime in Romania liquidated the Greek-Catholic Church – one of the eastern rites of the Catholic Church. All seven bishops, many priests and laymen, were arrested.
- Tertulian Langa, a young, 26 year-old lawyer and theologian, was arrested in 1948. He spent 17 years in prison. (Film)
- Tertulian Langa was released from prison in 1964 during political amnesty. He was consecrated and became a priest of the underground Greek-Catholic Church.
- For the shedding of their blood, even in the darkest years of the Communist regime, faith never vanished from Romania.

## Fundamentalist Islam: Iraq

- At the time of the last census in 1987, Iraq had 1.4 million Christians. Iraq's bishops estimate that over the past decade the number of Christians has declined to fewer than 200,000.
- Since 2002 more than 2,000 Christians, one bishop and six priests have been killed and more than 30 churches attacked.
- As documented by the US State Department, Christian persecution includes: "threats of violence if they do not abandon their homes and businesses, the bombing of their churches and murder of their religious leaders".

## Excerpt of a letter spread to Christian homes in Bagdad

*"The Secretary General of the members of the Islamic Brigade give the Christian crusader infidels of Baghdad and the other provinces a last warning, to leave Iraq immediately and permanently and join Benedict XVI and his followers, who have trampled on the greatest symbols of humanity and Islam ...*

*There'll be no room in Iraq for the Christian infidels from now on; those who remain will have their throats slit as "it is happening to the Christians of Mosul."*

(Islamic extremist group Ansar al-Islamas as published on an online Arabic news service Al-Ittihad)

(Film)

## Fundamentalist Nationalism: Orissa, India

- Increasing radicalization and antipathy to Christianity is especially visible among Hindu extremists.
- In August 2008, a Hindu political leader Swami Saraswati was assassinated. The VHP movement falsely accused Christians in Kandhamal of the killing.
- A campaign of anti-Christian violence resulted in burning 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions. Up to 500 people died and 54,000 were made homeless.
- Amid threats of renewed violence and forced conversions, many Christians are too afraid to return home.
- 2009 witnessed more than 152 attacks, and 2010 saw at least 149. The actual number of incidents is likely much higher, as not all cases are formally registered. (World Evangelical Alliance) (Film)



## State Sponsored: China

- Reports indicate party concern at statistics showing Christianity is the fastest growing religion in China.

(Wu Jiao , "Religious believers thrice the estimate", *China Daily*, 07.02.2007.)

- Christianity's growth stems from a new thirst for freedom and knowledge following generations of Marxist oppression.
- Christianity is viewed with suspicion. The Catholic Church, for its autonomy in Rome presents the greatest threat.
- The government has impeded the Church by creating a national Church – the state sponsored Official Church. Catholics loyal to Rome moved to the Underground Church.
- At least 12 Catholic bishops and a similar number of priests are either behind bars or in some way prevented from carrying out their ministry. (Film)

## Our responsibility

- *“And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross.” (Mathew 27:32)*
- If, as called upon by the local Church, it is the vocation of Christians to stay in the Middle East, then what is our vocation?
- As communication professionals, perhaps ours is to help the persecuted Christians tell their story - like Simon the Cyranean who helped Jesus carry His Cross.