

Canadian Catholic groups join forces to help Iraqi Christians On the 11 December 2009- By WCR

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SPECIAL TO THE WCR

In the fall of 2008, the Christian community of Mosul Iraq received an ultimatum to leave the country or face consequences. A few days later a surge of violence claimed the lives of 12 Christians.

In panic, an estimated 13,000 Christians fled to take refuge in neighbouring villages. For many this was too much to handle such as Wardeh Bahou who lost her husband. Heart-broken, she left for Jordan with her children.

Today, there are still 250,000 Iraqi Christian refugees who, like Wardeh, live in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon and depend on international aid to survive. Many have asked for asylum in the West and in Canada.



PHOTO | CARL HÉTU
An Iraqi Christian mother and son wait in Jordan, wondering if they can come to Canada.

DEPORTED WITHOUT CAUSE

On Oct. 28, Berlanty Azzam, a 21-year-old Palestinian Christian student at Bethlehem University was brutally deported to Gaza by the Israeli military because of a permit confusion. Even if the State of Israel has since admitted its mistake, she still isn't allowed to complete the two months left she needs to graduate.

Berlanty is a bright young woman, eager to finish school, find a job and build a family despite the ongoing conflicts. But now her future is uncertain. Like so many other Christians before her she might have to leave the Holy Land to pursue her dreams.

Wardeh and Berlanty's story captures the experience of many Christians across the Middle East. Armed conflicts, displacement, economic stress and hopelessness pose a real threat to the survival of this ancient community.

Scholars predict that within 15 years, Christians in the Middle East will number just six million . . . a nearly 50 per cent decline from the 11 million Christians in the region today.

Are we willing to stand by and passively witness the disappearance of a Christian presence in the land where our Lord walked? Are we willing to let the holy places turn into monuments of a faith that once was? Do we even know who they are and the role that they play?

Indeed, Middle East Christians are really unknown to us in the West and in Canada. Some of us are vaguely aware that their numbers are diminishing and that they are struggling. Most of us don't know who the Melkite, Maronite, Chaldean, Syrian and Armenian Catholics are.

Actually it is widely believed that Arabs are all Muslim. We are even less aware that these churches are in communion with the Holy See and that their origin comes from the first churches founded by the apostles.

To allow them to disappear will mean a deep spiritual loss for the Church, but also a great loss for the region because Christians continue to serve society in the Middle East through its schools, hospitals, uncountable humanitarian initiatives and interreligious collaboration.

For us in the West, their disappearance will mean a loss of partners who share our values and, at the same time, are part of the Arab culture. Through their unique experience they serve as a credible and necessary bridge to the Muslim world.

Pope Benedict recognized their special role when he visited the Holy Land last May. He encouraged them to continue their mission and urged Catholics in the West to pay special attention to their needs. It's the only way Christ's message of love and hope will survive.

On Oct. 19, Martin Mark, director for the Archdiocese of Toronto Refugee Office and myself spoke at the Canadian bishops' annual assembly on the situation of Middle East Christians, the focus being on the Iraqi Christian refugee crisis.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

We proposed three actions:

1. To better know who Middle East Christians are;
2. To mobilize emergency aid to Iraqi Christian refugees and support other Christian communities in need;
3. To facilitate the immigration of those Iraqis seeking asylum in Canada.

With the support of Canadian bishops, representatives from diocesan refugee and social justice offices, religious communities and Catholic groups will converge at a conference Jan. 13-15 in Toronto in order to find ways to mobilize Canadian Catholics.

As an agency of the Holy See, CNEWA Canada, who has worked for over 80 years with Middle East Christians, has launched a nationwide campaign to tackle these issues. Many resources are available on websites www.helpiraqichristians.ca and www.cnewa.ca.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, let's take a few moments to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ and reflect on how we can best support them in these challenging times.

(Carl Héту is national secretary of CNEWA Canada.)

Link: <http://www.wcr.ab.ca/news/2009/1214/groups121409.shtml>