

Christians' "salvation" requires peace in the Middle East

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AsiaNews has always dedicated time and space to the difficult situation so many Christians face in the Middle East, a situation that in some cases has turned to martyrdom. Their fate has touched so much the hearts and minds of so many people of good will that a rally will be held in Italy to remember the persecuted Christians in the Islamic world.

We do not want to snuff out any light, but if we think that we can defend Christians as an ethnic minority, as something separate from the rest of society, our steps in that direction can only be counterproductive and accentuate their difficulties. The fate of Christians in the Middle East is in fact closely related to the lack of peace and security in the region.

Palestinian Christians are escaping overseas; first of all because of Israel's unbearable military occupation, but also because of widespread anarchy in their cities and the lack of future for their children. To that extent they share the same fate with many Palestinian Muslims—only incidentally are they affected as Christians.

The same is true for Iraq's Christians. Far from viewing Saddam Hussein's regime as a mythical era of peace for Christians—under the late dictator's rule Christian schools were banned and Christians were not allowed to give Christian names to their children—the problem now is of a different order as Mgr Louis Sako, archbishop of Kirkuk has repeatedly pointed out, and not simply one of tensions between Christians and Muslims.

The main difference is the growth of fundamentalism, a trend reinforced by the failure of foreign and Iraqi troops to ensure security and controls, and by the deafness of a powerless government towards the demands of the population (Christians, Sunnis or Shi'as) for order and democracy. Such fundamentalism affects everyone, but inevitably Christians more so.

Those who want to "save" Christians as a separate entity run the risk of generating ideas like those expressed in the United States and Sweden that Assyrian (Christians) can be saved if they have their own enclave or "safe haven," an idea rejected by Iraqi Christians and bishops because it leads to a racist-type isolation.

The fate of Iraqi Christians depends instead on a fair and just peace in the region as Benedict XVI's own teachings suggest. In addressing the representatives of the many persecuted Churches during the annual meeting of the Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches (Riunione Opere Aiuto Chiese Orientali or ROACO), the Pontiff expressed his concerns for both Christian and Muslim communities, not for Christians alone.

Talking about "the delicate situation affecting vast areas of the Middle East," he stressed that "peace, so long implored and awaited, unfortunately is still largely being offended.

It is offended in the hearts of individuals and this compromises interpersonal and communal relationships. Peace becomes even more fragile because of injustices, old and new.

Thus it is extinguished altogether and gives way to violence which often degenerates into more or less open war until it ends up, as in our own time, as an urgent international problem."

Benedict XVI appealed to "those who have specific responsibilities, that they may accept the vital duty of guaranteeing peace for everyone, without distinction, freeing [peace] from the mortal illness of religious, cultural, historical or geographical discrimination."

This is why Christians do not seek special guarantees. All they need is a state that is sufficiently secular to guarantee everyone a chance to live and prosper "without religious discrimination."

The place of Christians cannot be realistically separated from the general situation of the country in which they live nor can religious freedom be guaranteed independently of the wider context of human rights.

In addressing those who "those who have specific responsibilities," the Pope was actually urging the United Nations and the governments of the East and the West to take direct action in favour of peace.

What we need is for someone in Italy and in Europe to take steps in favour of human rights and religious freedom, monitor their status and push for their broader applicability, which is something that might have political and economic consequences.

It is especially important that a new peace conference be convened with all the nations of the region involved in order to reach a settlement guaranteed by peace treaties.

Ultimately, if our goal is to save Christians from persecution in the Middle East, it is first imperative that we find ways to implement a just and fair peace for the region.