

Persecution of Christians Remains Elusive for US Catholics

For the second year in a row, U.S. Catholics say they are more focused on human trafficking, poverty, and the global refugee crisis than they are on the persecution of Christians around the world.

Nonetheless, 46 percent of U.S. Catholics believe the global persecution of Christians is “very severe,” and 58 percent say they are “very concerned” about the issue. Both figures represent a significant increase from a year ago.

These are among the major findings of the second annual survey of the views of U.S. Catholics regarding the persecution of Christians around the world. The poll was commissioned by Aid to the Church in Need-USA, a Catholic charity I chair, and conducted by McLaughlin & Associates.

The survey aimed to measure:

The extent to which American Catholics are aware of the persecution of Christians around the world;

The countries and regions where they consider Christians to be most severely persecuted;

Specific measures and policies they want the U.S. and other Western governments to pursue to help and protect persecuted Christians;

The extent to which they feel that the Pope, their bishops, and their parishes are making the issue of the persecution of Christians a priority;

Actions they believe they can and should take themselves.

A mixed picture emerges that shows the urgent need for more and better coverage of the persecution of Christians by mainstream media. It is also clear that bishops and pastors must do more to inform and galvanize the faithful on this issue.

Only 19 percent of U.S. Catholics say their parish is “very involved” with the topic of the persecution of Christians, while 62 percent say it is “very important” their parish do more; less than one-quarter of U.S. Catholics say their local bishop is speaking out on the persecution of Christians — a drop of 8 percent from a year ago. In addition, it is alarming that 14 percent of U.S. Catholics believe their bishop is “not engaged at all.”

American Catholics list Iran, Iraq, Syria, China, North Korea, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia as the countries where Christians are most severely persecuted. They call for diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions to punish these offending nations; they emphasize the power of prayer and donating to agencies that work to support persecuted Christians.

However, something is amiss when human trafficking, poverty, and the global refugee crisis — grave as these issues are — **outrank U.S. Catholics’ concern about the often brutal and deadly persecution of their fellow faithful.** In the Middle East the rise of ISIS and other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria ripped apart the fabric of ancient Christian communities. Yet, the survey shows that even after eight years of merciless war and terror in the region, U.S. Catholics are still not fully aware of the magnitude of the suffering of Christians targeted with brutal repression and even genocide.

In Syria, since the beginning of that country’s civil war in 2011, as Aid to the Church in Need has documented, almost 1,900 Christians died because of their faith; an estimated 664 faithful have been kidnapped and

remain missing; 9,800 Christian homes were destroyed along with almost 1,250 churches and Church properties.

This tragedy has severely affected ancient communities such as the Melkites, Armenian Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Maronites, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldeans, and Greek Orthodox, which together make up the rich tapestry of Christianity in Syria.

If the West does not act soon and decisively, this magnificent spiritual and cultural presence will disappear. U.S. Catholics and Christians throughout the West must be made aware of the seriousness of the situation. They must acknowledge the magnitude of the suffering and destruction and embrace and support long-term solutions and major projects.

The Archdiocese of Erbil, in Kurdish Iraq, presents a hopeful and inspiring example. With the help of faith-based agencies, including Aid to the Church in Need, the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Near East Welfare Association, the Italian bishops' conference and others, Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda was able to create a safe haven for more than 120,000 Christians fleeing ISIS as it swept through northern Iraq in 2014.

With ISIS ousted from the Nineveh Plains, **some 40,000 Iraqi Christians have returned home**; but at least as many have chosen to settle in Erbil, under the care of Archbishop Warda. With the need for emergency humanitarian aid now lessened, the new priority for the Archbishop is to build what he calls "anchor projects" that will enable Christians to stay in Iraq. Two such major projects are the Catholic University of Erbil and the first-ever Catholic hospital in the region.

These two major institutions will be serving people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds, thus contributing to reconciliation among different population groups, as well as providing significant employment opportunities.

The Archbishop's response to the crisis is holistic, as it cares for the embattled Christians in body, mind, and soul. This holistic approach could be the template for Syria. But, obviously, in that war-torn nation the political struggle for power and influence involving the U.S., Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the Syrian regime present tremendous obstacles.

It's heartening that the poll reveals that 60 percent of U.S. Catholics insist the Church play a leading role in assisting suffering and persecuted Christians. Hence, it is imperative that the U.S. Church must make greater efforts to inform and engage its flock about the plight.

It is also encouraging that 52 percent of U.S. Catholics say that Pope Francis is "very engaged" with the issue of the persecution of Christians. Just before Christmas last year, he spoke to the Roman Curia of a "new age of martyrs," adding that the "cruel and vicious persecution of the Roman Empire has not yet ended." He said: "how many Christians even now bear the burden of persecution, marginalization, discrimination and injustice throughout our world? Yet they continue courageously to embrace death rather than deny Christ."

We must follow the Pope's lead. Every bishop, pastor and every Catholic man and woman has an obligation to put the spotlight on the seriousness and pervasiveness of Christian communities being persecuted around the world.

George J. Marlin, a former executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, is the author of "The American Catholic Voter: Two Hundred Years of Political Impact," and "Christian Persecutions in the Middle East: A 21st Century Tragedy." He is chairman of Aid to the Church in Need-USA