

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace

IN HIS NAME

STATEMENT ON THE
PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS



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INTRODUCTION

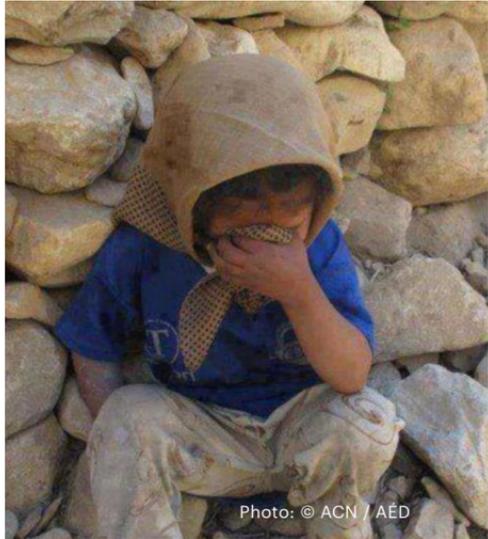
Persecution is defined as “a program or campaign to exterminate, drive away, or subjugate people based on their membership in a religious, ethnic, social, or racial group.”¹ It would be tempting to imagine that such actions no longer occur today. However, sometimes a particular idea can push persons or groups to fanaticism, leading to campaigns to “exterminate, drive away, or subjugate” those who do not share these ideals. This fanaticism can take on religious, political, or ethnic expressions. In the news today there is no shortage of such events. Faced with this exclusivist way of thinking, religious freedom is suppressed.

This statement is addressed to the Catholic faithful in Canada who, owing to the relative lack of religious persecution in our country, may not be concerned with this phenomenon. In the short space of this statement, we will outline several different types of persecution that affect not only our Christian brothers and sisters in other countries, but also our own religious reality here in Canada.

WHAT IS PERSECUTION?

Despite what we may be tempted to think, the subject of the persecution of Christians is more relevant than ever. The idea may conjure up in our minds images of Christians being thrown to the lions, and it is true that there have been persecutions from the very beginning of Christianity. Yet the pace of persecution has accelerated such that the 20th century saw more persecuted Christians and martyrs than the 19 preceding centuries combined. Today, no fewer than 327 million Christians live in countries marked by religious persecution.²

**75% OF RELIGIOUS
VIOLENCE IS AGAINST
CHRISTIANS, MAKING
THEM THE MOST
PERSECUTED GROUP.**



Weeping and desperate girl in Syria.

The least severe form of persecution can be described as *intolerance*. This can be manifested in negative portrayals in media or in social circles.³ Next we have *discrimination*, where Christians are treated differently from everyone else, particularly with respect to accessing employment or obtaining a permit to build a church or other religious building (while other religious groups have no such problems). Finally, there is *persecution* itself. We see this when Christians are singled out for arrest or detention, sent to work camps, tortured, and even killed.⁴ In its most extreme form – where it is directed toward completely eradicating Christians from a region – we can even speak of *genocide*. According to Aid to the Church in Need, what took place in Iraq in 2014 was a genocide against Christians as well as Yazidis.



Photo: © ACN / AÉD

Syria: Destruction in the city of Sadad: Women grieving the victims after atrocities in October 2013.

It is impossible to discuss persecution without considering those who carry it out. In this regard, we can consider three groups: *governments* (communist or authoritarian); *other religious groups* (e.g., radical Islam); and *ultranationalist movements* which demand that their country be of only one religion.

Even today, millions of people suffer simply because of their faith in Christ. Yet where there is persecution, there is often a strong and vigorous faith.

We are reminded of the inherent and inviolable rights to freedom when these are threatened by different forms of persecution.

As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* teaches:

*Freedom is the highest sign in man of his being made in the divine image and, consequently, is a sign of the sublime dignity of every human person. "Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person". The meaning of freedom must not be restricted, considering it from a purely individualistic perspective and reducing it to the arbitrary and uncontrolled exercise of one's own personal autonomy: "Far from being achieved in total self-sufficiency and the absence of relationships, freedom only truly exists where reciprocal bonds, governed by truth and justice, link people to one another". The understanding of freedom becomes deeper and broader when it is defended, even at the social level, in all of its various dimensions.*⁵

PERSECUTION: SURPRISE OR EXPECTATION?

We can learn something about persecution from Jesus, who was himself persecuted. He tells us that we are not of the world because he has chosen us and set us apart.⁶ Living the values of the Gospel often places Christians in a delicate situation. Under certain totalitarian political regimes, helping the poor and denouncing injustice are viewed as political opposition, bringing with it dramatic consequences for Christians involved in these activities.

To be not of the world means going against the flow; it means taking the risk of offending people by our desire for justice and love. This is the prophetic role of every believer. Through the expression of our faith and our actions, we proclaim Good News that can be provocative, destabilizing, and disturbing. In our world today, “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (Isaiah 58:6) can lead to persecution and even martyrdom.

“IF THE WORLD HATES YOU, BE AWARE THAT IT HATED ME BEFORE IT HATED YOU. IF YOU BELONGED TO THE WORLD, THE WORLD WOULD LOVE YOU AS ITS OWN. BECAUSE YOU DO NOT BELONG TO THE WORLD, BUT I HAVE CHOSEN YOU OUT OF THE WORLD—THEREFORE THE WORLD HATES YOU.”

JOHN 15:18-19

Yet the suffering of Christians serves to strengthen their faith and confirm their commitment to the value of the Good News.⁷ When Christians live Gospel values, they preach through their actions, even when they are unaware of doing so. This preaching speaks directly to the hearts of those who see them. The witness of Christians who love and forgive sometimes even leads to unexpected conversions. Further, persecuted Christians often take on the important role of bringing peace to those around them by building bridges and stimulating dialogue between different groups. Authentic love demands dialogue with the other. The Second Vatican Council teaches us of the great hope which animates each believer and which is the source of meaning and courage: “May all those who are weighed down with poverty, infirmity and sickness, as well as those who must bear various hardships or who suffer persecution for justice’s sake – may they all know they are united with the suffering Christ in a special way for the salvation of the world.”⁸

In spite of all this, we should not seek out persecution or martyrdom but rather do what we can to avoid it, while accepting the will of God as Jesus did (cf. Matthew 26:39).⁹

A WAY FORWARD

Persecuted Christians are ordinary people who have been given extraordinary grace in a time of trial. They experience fear, but they put their trust in God through the grace he gives them. They know that they must respond with openness and forgiveness; judging people or labelling them is of no use. For Christians, speaking and acting must always involve love and charity, even for our enemies. Jesus himself reminds us, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45a).

HENCE THE CHURCH EARNESTLY BEGS OF ITS CHILDREN THAT, “FIRST OF ALL, SUPPLICATIONS, PRAYERS, PETITIONS, ACTS OF THANKSGIVING BE MADE FOR ALL MEN.... FOR THIS IS GOOD AND AGREEABLE IN THE SIGHT OF GOD OUR SAVIOUR, WHO WILLS THAT ALL MEN BE SAVED AND COME TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH.”

DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ, § 14,
QUOTING 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4



Lambert WILSON Michael LONSDALE
OF GODS AND MEN
Inspired by a True Story



© Xavier Beauvois.
Used with permission.

Of Gods and Men is a film chronicling the decision of Trappist monks in Algeria to remain with the people they were serving, knowing that by doing this, they would be killed for their faith.

In this regard, we can follow the example of Pope Francis during his meeting with the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow in 2016. Given that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have been separated for nearly a thousand years, this meeting was historic. The common declaration they issued dealt largely with the question of the persecution of Christians, which has touched both churches. Although they were once enemies, these churches are now on a path of dialogue.

Out of great suffering, hope can arise. Even Saul, who had uttered “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles who would have to suffer for the sake of the Lord’s name (cf. Acts 9:16). The proclamation of the Good News brings hope to the world, yet it also brings difficulties – something Christ’s disciples experience even today. If Saul, a terrible persecutor of Christians, could become Paul, the great disciple, then we can be sure that anything is possible in the hope that does not disappoint us (cf. Romans 5:5).

IN OUR COUNTRY

Our situation in Canada is certainly different from that of our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters around the world. Here, many of us feel uncomfortable being Christian in a world where religion is accorded a shrinking role in the public square. But in reality, what do we have to lose? Our discomfort comes from the fact that our values are different from those of contemporary society. We should rejoice because it is precisely in this way that we are prophetic disciples. When faced with the treatment we receive, let us do so with boldness, freedom, and dialogue.



Photo: © Igor Palkin / ACN / AED

Meeting between Pope Francis and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, Cuba, February 12, 2016.

WE SHARE THE SAME SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM OF CHRISTIANITY. THE WITNESSES OF THE TRADITION ARE THE MOST HOLY MOTHER OF GOD, THE VIRGIN MARY, AND THE SAINTS WE VENERATE. AMONG THEM ARE INNUMERABLE MARTYRS WHO HAVE GIVEN WITNESS TO THEIR FAITHFULNESS TO CHRIST AND HAVE BECOME THE "SEED OF CHRISTIANS".

**JOINT DECLARATION OF POPE FRANCIS AND
PATRIARCH KIRILL OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA, § 4,
FEBRUARY 2016**

CONCLUSION

Our suffering Christian brothers and sisters require tangible actions from us and an ongoing commitment. They hope for our prayers, that they may have the strength to endure the trials that come, and that even within chaos they may encounter those who look on them with love.

They also wish us to pray for those who torment them. Let us pray without ceasing for persecutors, that their hearts of stone might become hearts of flesh. Here, Jesus' command to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) takes on its full meaning.

They need us to be informed about the persecution they are undergoing, and to share this with others. The media give little coverage to these situations, apart from when something spectacular occurs. Being knowledgeable about the condition of persecuted Christians can help us to change their reality; we can become a voice for those who suffer in silence. We can make their cry heard, a cry that is also a call to solidarity with all people.

Finally, our persecuted brothers and sisters count on our help in navigating their trials. In this regard, we can bring them pastoral and material assistance. Pastoral assistance is very important, since very often their faith is the source of their courage and is their only hope. Material assistance does not solve the problem of discrimination or persecution, but it allows persecuted Christians to survive.

**ALL WHO SEE ME MOCK
AT ME; THEY MAKE
MOUTHS AT ME, THEY
SHAKE THEIR HEADS.**

PSALM 22:7



Photo: © Jaco Klame / ACN / AED

Refugees from Khazer camp, Nineveh Plain, Mosul, Iraq.

TO LEARN MORE

[Aid to the Church in Need Canada](#)

[World Watch List 2019](#) (an annual list published by [Open Doors](#) ranking 50 countries in which Christians are persecuted for their faith)

[International Religious Freedom Report](#) by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

[Catholic Near East Welfare Association \(CNEWA\) Canada](#)

[United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

[Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2019. Accessible at dictionary.com
2. Based on information from the 2018 report *Religious Freedom in the World* by Aid to the Church in Need.
3. For example, cf. Pope Francis, Address to Members of the Consulta of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, 16 November 2018. "Before the entire world — which too often averts its gaze — lies the tragic situation of Christians who are persecuted and killed in ever increasing numbers. In addition to their martyrdom of blood, there is also their 'white martyrdom', such as that which occurs in democratic countries when freedom of religion is limited."
4. Cf. Common Statement of Pope Francis and Catholicos Patriarch Mar Gewargis III, 9 November 2018. "Without distinction of rite or confession, they suffer for professing the name of Christ. In them, we see the Body of Christ which, today too, is afflicted, beaten and reviled." (n. 3)
5. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* § 199. Internal citations are from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1738 and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1987 Instruction *Libertas Conscientiae* § 28.
6. Cf. John 17:14-19.
7. Common Statement of Pope Francis and Catholicos Patriarch Mar Gewargis III, 9 November 2018. "Just as the blood of Christ, shed out of love, brought reconciliation and unity, and caused the Church to flourish, so the blood of these martyrs of our time, members of various Churches but united by their shared suffering, is the seed of Christian unity." (n. 4)
8. *Lumen Gentium* § 41.
9. Matthew 26:39: "And going a little farther, he [Jesus] threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."



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