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Message from Iraq: 'Take our wealth, but leave us in peace'

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NCR Today

ROME -- Four Chaldean Catholics from Iraq met the press this afternoon on the margins of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, and their *cri de couer* to the outside world was perhaps best expressed by Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of Baghdad.

'Take our wealth,' Warduni said, 'but leave us in peace.'

Though Christians are disappearing in many parts of the Middle East, nowhere has the decimation been as dramatic as Iraq. Conventionally it's said that Iraq has lost half its Christian population since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. In fact, however, the Iraqis this afternoon said the situation is even worse.

Anan Lewis, a lay woman who works with Chaldean church in Iraq, said that before the first Gulf War in 1991, there were at least 1.5 million Christians in the country. Today the total is somewhere between 400,000 and a half million, meaning that Iraq has lost more than two-thirds of its Christian population in the span of just two decades.

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In truth, things are even worse than those figures make it seem, since large pockets of Christians from the major urban areas such as Baghdad and Mosul are now living as refugees in the Kurdish-controlled northern sectors of the country.

On Friday, the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church in Iraq, Cardinal Emmanuel III Delly, took the floor in the Synod of Bishops to say that in Iraq today, "there is religious freedom, respect for the hierarchies, and esteem for the [church's] institutions and the ecclesiastic works." Some observers read that to mean that anti-Christian backlash has diminished, but the speakers this afternoon warned that the situation remains dire.

Meeting the press in a session organized by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, the Iraqis offered the example of the Dora neighborhood of Baghdad, which used to be known as the city's "little Vatican" because of the proliferation of Christian churches and families. It once counted seven churches, two seminaries, and the Pontifical Babel College, all of which are now either closed or relocated.

Dominican Fr. Sameer Shaba Maroki said the primary cause of the exodus has been fear. Many observers, he said, blame the economic chaos, but in fact conditions were actually worse during the U.S.-imposed sanctions during the 1990s, and many Christians nevertheless hung on.

Today, he said, Christians have become an "easy target" for reprisals and attacks. He insisted that there is a deliberate campaign in some quarters to attack Iraq's Christian population.

Maroki pointed to the phenomenon of kidnappings, which he said has struck a large percentage of Christian families in Iraq. Kidnappers sometimes demand ransoms of \$200,000 or more, and even after negotiating those sums down to perhaps \$50,000, loved ones often aren't returned after the ransoms are paid.

The kidnappings have even struck the clergy. Two Iraqi bishops have been kidnapped, Maroki said, with one returned who has never confirmed whether a ransom was paid and another killed. He said more than ten priests were also kidnapped, many of whom were "tortured and still bear the marks on their hands and their bodies."

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Since most Christians know at least one family that has gone through the experience, Maroki said, many have decided to leave the country before it can happen to them.

Despite claims in some quarters that calm is returning, Maroki said he doesn't see any improvement.

Warduni warned against over-generalization, saying that for the most part, the conditions prompting Christians to leave are "the same for all, Christians and Muslims." Maroki also said that things tend to be the most acute for Christians in conflict zones between Sunnis and Shi'ites, which often leaves the Christians caught in the cross-fire.

At the same time, Warduni conceded that he sometimes asks himself if there is an organized plot to drive Christians out of the Middle East, given that the Christian population is dropping not just in Iraq but across the region.

Warduni told a harrowing story of an attack on his own church last summer, as the faithful were gathered in the courtyard outside the church, the Chaldean Church of St Mary, after Mass when a car bomb exploded. Two young members of the congregation were killed.

Warduni also said that some Iraqis have tended to conflate the local Christians with the "Christian West,"

especially the United States, assuming that Christians support the U.S. presence in Iraq. Another challenge, he said, is the proliferation of new 'sects,' meaning Protestant Evangelicals who often enjoy backing from Christians in the United States.

One especially annoying aspect of these new Evangelical movements, he said, is that many insist on re-baptizing Iraqi Christians.

'We've been Christians for 2,000 years,' Warduni said. 'How can somebody come in and try to re-baptize us?'

Lewis stressed that for the most part, attacks against Christians in Iraq are not coming from the local Muslim population, but from 'outside forces' – a euphemism for Islamic extremists wanting to strike a blow against the West, and especially the United States.

'These forces are not the Muslims who have lived alongside us for years,' she said. 'They are not my neighbors, my colleagues at college or at work.'

Proof that the assaults are organized, she said, comes in the fact that they tend to strike at the same institutions on the same days.

'One day it's the hotels, then it's the colleges, then it's the Christian churches, then it's the schools,' she said.

Warduni asked the media to carry a message back to opinion-makers in the rest of the world.

'Our people need peace and security,' he said, referring to all Iraqis.

'Tell the leaders to act in the interests of the Iraqi people, and not their own personal interests,' he said. 'Leave us in peace. We beg you to say that, we ask you as brothers.'

'Take our wealth,' he said, 'but leave us in peace.'

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