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Syrian patriarch urges Iraqi government to ensure safety of citizens

by Doreen Abi Raad by Catholic News Service

BEIRUT -- Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignatius Joseph III Younan called on the Iraqi government to ensure the safety of all Iraqi citizens, especially Christians, "who are defenseless, honest and peaceful people."

In his homily at a Dec. 10 memorial Mass in Baghdad that venerated the "46 new martyrs" of the Syrian Catholic Church, the patriarch said the presence of government officials at the liturgy "helped to inspire some trust and feelings of some protection" for the faithful, despite a prevailing mood of being anxious for the future "since the cover-up of the terror targeting Iraqi Christians is still going on after such a period of time."

The patriarch, who flew from Beirut for the Mass, reminded those present of the pleas of all Christians in Iraq and abroad, "that it is the responsibility of the Iraqi government to carry out proper and thorough investigations to uncover the terrorist groups who did plan and finance the carnage, of whatever religious or political allegiance they may be, and to bring them publically to justice."

"We need deeds and not just ... promises, that our Christian faithful feel really safe in their churches, houses and places of work. They also need that the government ensure equality in the work places, since the Christians fear vengeance and harassment from many fundamentalist and self-proclaimed leaders in parts of the city as well in the civil and administrative areas," he said.

Fifty-eight people died in the attack on the Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad Oct. 31 after military officials tried to end a terrorist siege of the church.

In an e-mail to Catholic News Service, the patriarch said the December memorial Mass was "a time of

grace, sorrow and hope."

He said he experienced "profound consolation to witness the faith of thousands of Iraqi Christians who challenged threats and overcame fear in order to prove their commitment and love for the ultimate sacrifice of their brothers and sisters, including their two young priests ... who gave themselves courageously as first martyrs to be savagely slaughtered during Sunday Mass."

The Mass, the patriarch told CNS, was attended by many prominent Shiite Muslim leaders and government representatives, four ambassadors to Iraq, as well as church officials, including Archbishop Giorgio Lingua, apostolic nuncio to Iraq and Jordan.

Patriarch Younan said he reminded U.S. Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey of what Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, as outgoing president of the U.S. bishops' conference, recently wrote to President Barack Obama.

In a Nov. 9 letter, the cardinal urged the U.S. government to "redouble its efforts to assist Iraqis" in providing safety for its citizens, especially religious minorities.

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