

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 26, 2013 at 9:08am

What Francis can do on anti-Christian persecution

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Rome — Pope Francis addressed anti-Christian persecution today, on the day after attacks on two Christian churches in Baghdad left at least 38 dead. He called for a moment of silence in honor of victims of such violence and said it must be "denounced and eliminated."

His remarks came in an Angelus address on the feast of St. Stephen, the day after Christmas, and they marked the latest reference to anti-Christian persecution in what has become an emerging theme for Francis.

In the abstract, it's tempting to ask what any pope can do to affect anti-Christian persecution beyond issuing a *cri de coeur*. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI raised the issue, and their rhetoric didn't seem to put a dent in a scourge that claims somewhere between 9,000 and 100,000 lives every year, depending on which set of estimates one chooses to trust, working out to somewhere between 1 and 11 new martyrs every hour.

On the other hand, it was also once fashionable to ask what any pope could do about Communist persecution of Christians, until John Paul II played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet system across Eastern Europe.

Maybe Francis can be to the early 21st century what John Paul was to the late 20th, meaning a pope who genuinely changes history.

Here's what Francis said in his Angelus address, after reflecting on the story of St. Stephen, regarded in Christian tradition as the church's first martyr.

"Today, we pray in a particular way for Christians who suffer discrimination because of the witness they

offer to Christ and to the Gospel," he said.

"We are close to these brothers and sisters who, like St. Stephen, are unjustly accused and made the object of violence of various kinds. Unfortunately, I'm sure they're more numerous today than in the time of the early church. They're so many!"

"This happens especially wherever religious freedom isn't guaranteed or fully realized," Francis said. "However, it also happens in countries and environments where freedom and human rights are protected on paper, but where in fact believers, especially Christians, find limitations and discrimination. I'd like to ask you to pray for these brothers and sisters in a moment of silence. We entrust them to the Madonna."

"For Christians this isn't a surprise, because Jesus already announced [persecution] as a moment for offering witness," the pope said. "Nonetheless, on the civil plane, injustice ought to be denounced and eliminated."

Herewith, four things Francis could do to translate those words into action. Needless to say, given the moral credibility and popular appeal that Francis enjoys, he arguably has a unique capacity to move the ball.

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Prayer

One should never underestimate the importance of prayer in shaping culture in the church. Catholicism has the saying *lex orandi, lex credendi*, meaning "the law of prayer is the law of belief." The idea is that what Christians pray for, especially in their public prayer, shapes what they believe and how they see the world.

As an example of the point, consider the Catholic Church's custom prior to the Second Vatican Council of including a prayer for the "conversion of Russia" at the conclusion of each Mass. It was part of a cluster known as the "Leonine Prayers" because they date from 1884 during the papacy of Leo XII. The prayer for Russia was added in 1930 at the direction of Pope Pius XI, following the Bolshevik Revolution. It was not actually for the conversion of Russia, but rather that "tranquility and freedom to profess the faith be restored to the afflicted people of Russia." It was popularly known as a prayer for conversion, however, because of its association with a reputed appearance of the Virgin Mary at Fatima in Portugal, where the visionaries reported that Mary had directed Catholics to pray for the conversion of Russia.

Naturally, this was before the ecumenical momentum unleashed by Vatican II, and in truth the idea of praying for the "conversion" of Russia would today be seen as ecumenically insensitive. Russia is a profoundly Christian nation, and remained so despite seven decades of Soviet oppression.

However non-politically correct, the prayer served the purpose of reminding Catholics that there were people suffering for the faith in Russia, and that the church cared. It created a popular consciousness about the "Church of Silence," the catacombs church behind the Iron Curtain, which was important in keeping Christian attention riveted on the fate of believers in the Soviet sphere.

In today's context, similar prayers on behalf of the victims in the global war on Christians could have a similar impact in raising consciousness and steeling resolve. Francis might lead the way to develop such a prayer to be worked out among the various Christian churches and then authorized for common use.

Such a gesture would not only say something important about how committed the churches are, but it would promote and enhance the spiritual fruits of martyrdom.

Raising consciousness

On September 16, 2012, I found myself in the middle of a vast crowd gathered at the City Center Waterfront in Beirut, made up of people who had come from all across the Middle East to attend Pope Benedict XVI's open-air Mass. I made my way towards a group of people in the crowd waving a Syrian flag.

They turned out to be a group of Christians from Syria who had fled the bloody civil war, packing their bags and boarding a beaten down mini-van. They described losing family and friends, hearing anti-Christian slogans shouted by the Free Syrian Army, watching Christian churches and shops being bombed, and being afraid to take their children to services on Sunday.

At the end of our conversation, I asked the typical Western question: What can we do? I was expecting them to suggest sending money, helping them to get visas, or tell the American government to do more to stop the violence. All those points did come up, but by far the most common response was simpler: "Don't forget about us." Over and over, they said that the core reason they chose to leave Syria was because of a sense that they have been forgotten by the rest of the world and left to fend for themselves that no one cares about their fate, or is even paying attention.

As the most popular religious figure on the planet, who now wields a mammoth media megaphone, Francis is in a unique capacity to raise consciousness. Beyond his own comments on the issue, such as those he delivered Dec. 26, the pope could also explicitly ask Catholics around the world to join the effort.

What might that look like? It might mean volunteering to lead an adult faith formation group in one's local parish or congregation. It might mean volunteering to deliver a sermon on the subject during a Sunday service. It might mean asking a Bible study group or a Marian sodality to introduce a special prayer for persecuted Christians into their devotions.

It might mean writing a letter to the editor of a church newspaper, or to the leadership of one's denomination, calling for greater attention to the issue. It might simply mean making a point of talking about persecuted Christians within one's own spheres of influence, such as one's school, neighborhood and workplace.

As hollow as it may sound, sometimes simply reassuring the victims of violence that their pain has not occurred in a vacuum, that someone is paying attention, can be enormously reassuring.

Promoting institutional relief

Francis could use his bully pulpit to promote the work of organizations devoted to humanitarian relief on behalf of suffering believers, such as Aid to the Church in Need and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA).

A compelling recent example of their efforts was written was CNEWA's emergency appeal on behalf of

Christians in Syria. The situation facing Christians in the country is harrowing, especially in Aleppo and Homs where the carnage has been the most intense. Among other nightmares, one challenge facing many Christian congregations in Syria is to come up with enough money to ransom the mounting number of Christians kidnapped by militant groups, who see extortion as a way to finance their mayhem. The spike in kidnappings is also, naturally, another force driving Christians out of the country.

CNEWA is among the largest the providers of aid to Christians in Syria, if not the largest. Realizing the urgency of immediate relief, their first priority is to help Christian refugees get through the winter. The idea is to deliver ?Winter Survival Kits? to 2,000 families, at a cost of \$210 each.

Issam Bishara, a representative of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in Lebanon, said in October 2012 that because Syria?s Christians generally have not headed for massive refugee camps in Turkey or Jordan, they?re not getting help from international relief agencies. Fearing exposure to further hostility, they?ve headed to other parts of Syria and to Lebanon, taking refugees with families and friends, but in many cases those folks are running out of food, water, heating oil, and other supplies. Without the help provided by CNEWA and other groups, these Christian refugees faced the prospect of a long, cold, and deadly winter.

Aid to the Church in Need does similarly remarkable work, not only providing direct humanitarian relief but also producing some of the best-informed reporting and commentary on anti-Christian persecution anywhere in the world.

These groups generally do heroic work with little fanfare and with perennially limited resources. Donating \$210 to aid a Christian family in Syria may seem a drop in the bucket, but change begins with small steps ? and Francis could encourage those small steps on a remarkably large scale.

Political advocacy

Francis could draw not only on his own personal popularity, but also the diplomatic standing of the Holy See as a sovereign state, to press global leaders to take the suffering of Christians into serious consideration as a policy priority.

Francis meets heads of states all the time, including some of the real titans of the earth. He recently had a one-on-one with Russian President Vladimir Putin, for instance, and there are persistent rumors that U.S. President Barack Obama may come calling in 2014. Moreover, this is a pope who loves to work the phone, and there isn?t a political leader on earth these days who would refuse a call from the pope who?s also the new Mandela, meaning the planet?s most respected moral authority.

What might Francis push these politicians to do?

First, he can insist that the defense of religious freedom become a central element of foreign policy. The pope can also hold policymakers? feet to the fire when hard choices have to be made ? demanding, for example, that China not get a free pass for its oppression of religious minorities simply because of perceived economic and geopolitical interests. At the same time, he can demand that the rhetoric of religious freedom not be exploited to advance ideological interests ? that criticism of Iran for its treatment of Christians, for instance, not be swept up into broader debates about nuclear policy or anything else, and that any sanctions be commensurate with measures imposed on other states with a similar track record.

Second, Francis can ask that policy-makers take the perspectives of Christians on the ground into consideration when crafting foreign policy. For instance, they could find ways to bring the voices of Syria?s Christian minority more thoroughly into debates about the Assad regime and Syria?s ongoing

civil war. Many of those Syrian Christians are less enthused about the prospect of regime change than some in the Western foreign policy establishment. While listening to them doesn't necessarily mean endorsing their position, it ought to be part of the conversation if for no other reason than because they're the ones who will have to live with the consequences.

Third, the pope can ask political leaders to mobilize their resources in situations of special need. In Nigeria, for instance, many Christian leaders are asking Western governments to offer military and law enforcement resources to assist the Nigerian authorities in combatting the militant Boko Haram movement identifying its leadership, tracking its financial support, ascertaining who precisely is responsible for its various attacks, bringing the perpetrators to justice, and offering security to vulnerable Christian communities, especially in the country's north.

Fourth, Francis could request that policies on refugee admission and resettlement recognize persecuted Christians as a protected category. In recent years, Christians fleeing violence and oppression have encountered difficulties when applying for status as refugees, because in many nations Christians are not specifically identified as a persecuted group. In other cases, bureaucratic forces compound the difficulties. Many Iraqi Christian refugees were either turned away or faced lengthy delays in their applications to enter the United States after enhanced background checks due to terrorism concerns plugged the pipeline.

In all these ways, Francis is uniquely positioned to be a change agent for Christians in the firing line. The extent to which he realizes these possibilities should form part of the drama of his papacy in 2014.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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