

## Holy Land Catholic leaders: Stop speaking of Christian persecution

Catholic News Service | Apr. 3, 2014  
Jerusalem

Repeated references to persecution of Christians, "usually referring only to what Christians suffer at the hands of criminals claiming to be Muslims, plays into the hands of extremists," said Catholic leaders in the Holy Land.

"In the name of truth, we must point out that Christians are not the only victims of this violence and savagery. Secular Muslims, all those defined as 'heretic,' 'schismatic' or simply 'nonconformist,' are being attacked and murdered in the prevailing chaos," said a statement Thursday from the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, posted on the website of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

"In areas where Sunni extremists dominate, Shiites are being slaughtered. In areas where Shiite extremists dominate, Sunnis are being killed," the bishops said. "Yes, the Christians are at times targeted precisely because they are Christians, having a different set of beliefs and unprotected. However, they fall victim alongside many others who are suffering and dying in these times of death and destruction. They are driven from their homes alongside many others and together they become refugees, in total destitution."

The bishops said the extremists, "at home and abroad," hope to "sow prejudice and hatred, setting peoples and religions against one another."

They acknowledged that Christians had lived in relative security under some of the dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, so Christian leaders defended these regimes that were overthrown as part of the Arab Spring.

"Instead, loyalty to their faith and concern for the good of their country should perhaps have led them to speak out much earlier, telling the truth and calling for necessary reforms, in view of more justice and respect of human rights, standing alongside both many courageous Christians and Muslims who did speak out," the bishops said.

They said they understood people's fear and suffering when family members are killed or are driven from their homes.

"In certain circumstances their only consolation and hope is to be found in Jesus' words: 'Happy are those who are persecuted in the cause of right: Theirs is the kingdom of heaven,' " they said.

However, they added, "All Christians and many Muslims are threatened by these forces that seek to create a society devoid of Christians and where only very few Muslims will be at home. All those who seek dignity, democracy, freedom and prosperity are under attack. We must stand together and speak out in truth and freedom."

The bishops also said that international powers could not help them; people of the Middle East had to stand together and help themselves.

"International and local political powers seek their own interests," the bishops said.

"We have to adapt ourselves to our realities, even realities of death, and must learn together how to emerge from persecution and destruction into a new dignified life in our own countries," they added.

The leaders -- from Israel, Jordan and Cyprus -- offered prayers for those "who join their efforts to ours, and for those who are harming us now or even killing us."

"May God transform every human being from the depth of his or her heart, enabling them to love every human being as God does," they said.

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