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## **A Christian genocide**

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The joy and thrill of Easter is still close to our hearts, and we rejoice at the ancient acclamation: “Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!” But the joy of Easter will be diminished for many Christians who are suffering great persecution, especially in the Holy Land and much of the Middle East.

Last August, I attended the national convention of the Knights of Columbus in Philadelphia. During the course of the convention, a visiting bishop from Syria spoke before the thousands in attendance and gave a powerful testimony about the struggles of the Christian faithful in his country. His message was quite simple. If we do nothing, there will be no Christians left in the Holy Land and the Middle East.

It seems that our government has come to the same conclusion. Just a few weeks ago, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry officially determined that the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) is committing genocide against Christians and other minorities in Iraq and Syria. With this finding, the U.S. government acknowledges that Christians are being targeted and attacked in a particular way. The U.S. House of Representatives also passed a resolution in a unanimous vote which called the attacks against Christians and other ethnic minorities a genocide. We have all seen or heard the heartbreaking stories of death and destruction involving Christians in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East. As one observer noted, “They are killing Christians simply for the fact that they are Christians. It is important to call it what it is.”

Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recently made this appeal: “The very future of the ancient Christian presence in the Middle East is at stake....With each passing day, the roll of martyrs grows. While we rejoice in their ultimate victory over death through the power of Jesus’ love, we must also help our fellow Christians carry the cross of persecution and, as much as possible, help relieve their suffering.”

When we think of martyrs, we often think of those brave souls from the early centuries of the Church who gave their lives in the Colosseum of Rome, or missionaries who died in foreign lands as they spread the Gospel. But the age of martyrs isn’t over. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters have paid the ultimate price for their faith in Jesus.

It is easy at times to become indignant at the inconveniences we have to face in our daily lives. And we can even become perturbed at the little challenges we experience in living out our faith: a penance we choose for Lent, having to get up early for Mass, a song we don’t like at church, a boring homily, and on and on.

But we would do well to remember the sacrifices that our brothers and sisters make for the faith around the world. For them, it is often a life or death struggle. Even now in the Middle East, tens of thousands of our fellow Christians have been forced into exile, sold into slavery, raped, murdered or seen their homes and churches destroyed because they openly confess their faith in the name of Jesus. It seems that we are seeing a new age of martyrs, one that is both terrifying and inspiring. Many stories of heroism have emerged from the tragedy, stories of Christians who refused to renounce their faith despite a gun being put to their heads or a sword to their necks.

What should our response be? Certainly we cannot ignore the plight of these modern day martyrs. As people of faith, our first response should be prayer. Just as we pray for the needs of our families and loved ones, we should also pray for those who suffer persecution simply for being Christians. In our personal and family prayer, let us remember those who bravely face hardship and suffering for the name of Jesus. And in our parishes too, we should regularly include prayers for persecuted Christians in our prayers of the faithful. Perhaps it would also be appropriate to consider a form of fasting for this intention. Even though we are in the midst of the Easter season, fasting in solidarity with our fellow Christians would not be out of place and would be a great form of intercession before our merciful God.

Material support is also needed. Many Christians have become refugees, and were forced to leave their homes with nothing but the clothes on their backs. They now live in primitive camps and have been reduced to abject poverty as they flee for their lives. Fortunately, many groups are stepping in to assist, like the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. Our contributions to these or other charitable organizations can demonstrate our solidarity and our willingness to share in the sacrifices of those who have given up everything for their faith in Jesus.

On so many occasions, the people of the Church have stepped forward to assist those who face crises and natural disasters. It's what we do. And this crisis, finally called a genocide, should be no different. Once again, we are called upon to lend support to those in need, both spiritually and materially. Jesus has commanded us to "love one another," and our brothers and sisters in faith need our love now more than ever.

Pope Francis has said that "God's world is a world where everyone feels responsible for the other, for the good of the other." And certainly we should feel a deep sense of responsibility for our fellow Christians who are suffering. Let us share the joy of Easter through our prayer and our works of mercy for persecuted Christians in the Middle East. And let us never take for granted the gifts of faith and freedom.