

My Brothers and Sisters,

In last Sunday's first reading, we heard about the seven brothers and their mother who were arrested, tortured, and killed because they would not violate God's law. In today's Gospel, Jesus prophesies that his disciples will be persecuted.

It is very easy for parishes to become parochial, concerned primarily with what they are doing and/or what is happening within or to them. When parishes became parochial, it is very difficult for them to recognize that they are part of a larger Church, an Archdiocese in our case and part of the Church universal. Therefore, they do not always pay sufficient attention to what is happening to the Church in other parts of the world. Therefore, today I would like to focus on the persecution of Christians throughout the world.

Author John Allen has written that "the global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century."¹ In his final presidential address to the USCCB General Assembly on November 11, 2013, Cardinal Dolan said,

We are living in what must be recognized as, in the words of Blessed John Paul II, "a new age of martyrs." One expert calculates that half of all Christian martyrs were killed in the twentieth century alone. The twenty-first century has already seen in its first 13 years one million people killed around the world because of their belief in Jesus Christ....²

Both John Allen in his article and Cardinal Dolan in his address cite specific examples of persecution. Both offered some statistics to back up their contention. John Allen wrote,

According to the International Society for Human Rights, ...80 per cent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians. Statistically speaking, that makes Christians by far the most persecuted religious body on the planet.

John Allen cited multiple examples. I will cite just three:

- "In Baghdad, Islamic militants stormed the Syriac Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation on 31 October 2010, killing the two priests celebrating Mass and leaving a total of 58 people dead."
- "India's northeastern state of Orissa was the scene of the most violent anti-Christian pogrom of the early 21st century. In 2008, a series of riots ended with as many as 500 Christians killed, many hacked to death by machete-wielding Hindu radicals; thousands more were injured and at least 50,000 left homeless."

¹John Allen, "The War on Christians," *The Spectator*, 5 October 2013, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9041841/the-war-on-christians>.

²Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, Address to the USCCB General Assembly on November 11, 2013, <http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/usccb-general-assembly/2013-november-meeting/farewell-presidential-address-cardinal-dolan.cfm>.

- “North Korea is widely considered the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, where roughly a quarter of the country’s 200,000 to 400,000 Christians are believed to be living in forced labour camps for their refusal to join the national cult around founder Kim Il Sung.”

He makes the point that these examples make it obvious that this is not just a clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity.

What can we do? Cardinal Dolan reminds us of the need for intercessory prayer for the Church suffering. We also can financially support Catholic groups that work to aid the Church in countries where there is religious persecution. Finally, we can make human rights throughout the world a greater priority in our own lives and encourage elected officials to make human rights throughout the world, including freedom of religion, “a foreign-policy priority for the United States.”

In the last couple of years, partially because of the Affordable Care Act, the Church in the United States has focused on freedom of religion in our own country. I have even heard people suggest that we as Catholics and Christians are persecuted in this country. However, John Allen put it well: “The truth is that in the West, a threat to religious freedom means someone might get sued; in many other parts of the world, it means someone might get shot...”

My brothers and sisters, I would like to end with the words of Pope Francis at his General Audience of September 25, 2013:

When I hear that so many Christians in the world are suffering, am I indifferent or is it as if one of my family were suffering? When I think or hear it said that many Christians are persecuted and give their lives for their faith, does this touch my heart or not? Am I open to a brother or sister of the family who is giving his or her life for Jesus Christ? Do we pray for each other?...It is important to look beyond our own boundaries, to feel that we are Church, one family in God!³

At the same time, today’s Gospel ends with a word of hope: “*By your perseverance you will secure your lives.*”

³Pope Francis, General Audience, Wednesday, 25 September 2013, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130925_udienza-generale_en.html.