

A Plea for Solidarity with Religious Minorities in Iraq

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The recent attack on the holy shrine in Samarra is a heinous crime and an ominous sign of the political and sectarian violence engulfing Shia and Sunni communities. Also particularly disturbing are the recent killings in Mosul of Father Ragheed Aziz Ganni and three subdeacons, Banna Daoud, Ghasan Bidawid and Wadid Hanna, immediately following Sunday Mass. These incidences of violence make the possibilities of a secure, stable and democratic Iraq ever more difficult to achieve. The deadly cycle of violence must stop if peace with justice for all Iraqis is to be achieved.

In a special way, we are deeply concerned for Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq who are especially vulnerable. We call for an immediate halt to the deliberate violence against our Christian sisters and brothers and other religious minorities in Iraq. The situation of Christians is particularly dire. The estimated prewar Christian population of 1.2 million has dropped dramatically to an estimated several hundred thousand. Forced to flee to neighboring countries as refugees or to other areas of Iraq as internally displaced persons, Christians fear an existential threat to their ancient presence in Iraq.

Christians continue to suffer a rash of killings, hostage takings for the purpose of extortion, destruction of churches and adjacent properties, and specific threats against their communities. Examples of a disregard for religious freedom and traditional values of tolerance include: demanding removal of crosses from churches, requiring non-Muslims to pay special religious taxes, mandating that Christian women wear veils, and calling for Christians to abandon their faith and become Muslims. Many Christians no longer feel safe gathering in churches and Christian institutions, resulting in the closing of parishes, seminaries, and convents. These targeted actions against Christians and other religious minorities are not simply signs of general societal violence, but are also attacks on Christianity and religious freedom by the most extreme elements within Iraqi society.

We make our own the words of Pope Benedict XVI who prayed in reference to the recent killings of Father Ganni and the subdeacons that “their costly sacrifice will inspire in the hearts of all men and women of good will a renewed resolve to reject the ways of hatred and violence, to conquer evil with good and to cooperate in hastening the dawn of reconciliation, justice and peace in Iraq.”

As an expression of solidarity with our brother bishops in Iraq, we urge U.S. and Iraqi authorities and religious leaders within Iraq to do everything possible to help end the violence and the targeting of Christians and other religious minorities.