

Catholic Review Column: Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq Demands Our Attention

Sectarian violence in Iraq has worsened dramatically in recent days, especially for Christians in the war-torn nation, prompting Pope Francis to announce this past Sunday that he is sending an envoy to meet with religious and government leaders as well as with those Christians who have been forced from their homes in fear.

"The news reports coming from Iraq leave us in dismay and disbelief: thousands of people, including many Christians, driven from their homes in brutal manner; children dying of thirst and hunger in their flight; women taken and carried off; violence of every kind; destruction of historical, cultural and religious patrimonies," the pope said. "All this gravely offends God and humanity. Hatred is not to be carried in the name of God! War is not to be waged in the name of God!"

The pope's words came shortly after just one overnight period saw Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters attack the predominantly Christian town of Qaraqosh and other neighboring villages, causing some 100,000 people to flee with just the clothes they were wearing. Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako of Baghdad compared the exodus of Iraqi Christians to the Way of the Cross, saying, "Christians are walking on foot in Iraq's summer heat (and are) facing a human catastrophe and risk a real genocide. They need water, food, shelter ... The situation is going from bad to worse."

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which is providing humanitarian relief through its partner agency Caritas International, is reporting that 1.2 million people have been displaced since the start of the year as ISIS has taken control of a number of Iraqi provinces. The militant group is specifically targeting Christians and other religious minorities and has set up checkpoints where they seize the possessions of those attempting to flee the violence. "Many are living in empty houses, schools, clinics, church compounds and abandoned buildings, with living conditions deteriorating," according to CRS.

During his address to those gathered at St. Peter's Square last Sunday for the mid-day prayer, the Holy Father announced he was sending to Iraq the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the former nuncio to Iraq, Cardinal Fernando Filoni. In addition to meeting with displaced Christians, Cardinal Filoni will offer financial support on behalf of the church for the effort to assist those who have fled their homes.

The pope also asked Catholics throughout the world to pray for persecuted Christians in Iraq and for people of goodwill "to take initiatives to put an end to the humanitarian drama underway, to take steps to protect those involved and threatened by violence and to ensure the necessary aid for so many displaced people whose fate depends on the solidarity of others." The Holy Father's appeal for prayers and support came as Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, asked the bishops of the United States to invite the people of their dioceses to pray for peace in Iraq on Sunday, Aug. 17.

Here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, I have asked that a prayer for the people of Iraq be included in the Prayers of the Faithful at every Mass this Sunday. In addition, a special interreligious prayer service will take place Aug. 24, at 2 p.m. at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. I have invited leaders of faith communities to join me in leading this prayer service which all the people of the archdiocese are invited to attend.

I also invite you to consider making a donation to Catholic Relief Services through the organization's website, www.crs.org, to directly assist its efforts to provide humanitarian relief in Iraq.

Finally, I join my prayers to those of Pope Francis, who appealed "to the conscience of all people and every believer," when he said, "May the God of peace create in all an authentic desire for dialogue and reconciliation. Violence is not conquered with violence. Violence is conquered with peace. Let us pray in silence, asking for peace."