

Religious Freedom Still Eludes Many Abroad

The Catholic Review

In his story which appeared in the May 9 edition of The Baltimore Sun, reporter Matthew Hay Brown chronicles Maryland's up and down road to religious freedom by taking readers on a tour of Southern Maryland's "Religious Freedom Byway." The journey includes visits to places like Port Tobacco, St. Mary's City and St. Clement's Island, where settlers to the new land first arrived in 1634 and where Jesuit Father Andrew White celebrated the first Mass.

While Maryland is considered the birthplace of religious freedom in our country, Mr. Brown writes that nearly every tour guide along the Byway reported that this freedom did not come without a cost to the early settlers, who often had to worship in private and were unable to participate in government.

Fast forward some 375 years later. Though citizens of this country enjoy the freedoms granted by our nation's constitution, religion being among them, there still are nations in our world where this basic human right is deprived to its citizens.

At a meeting of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace this past week in Washington, D.C., my brother bishops and I were reminded just how prevalent and how violent government-sponsored religious discrimination is in other parts of the world today—2010!

The materials we received were from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent U.S. government commission that monitors religious freedom worldwide and makes policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress. It is the only government commission in the world with the sole mission of reviewing and making policy recommendations on violations of religious freedom in foreign lands.

A few weeks ago, the Commission issued a list of 13 nations (Burma, China, North

Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam) “where freedom of religion is obstructed and related human rights are trampled.”

Religious freedom violations can take many shapes. Though the common perception of this abuse typically conjures images of people being prevented from worshiping as they choose—certainly true in many cases— an equally prevalent threat comes in the form of impunity, government’s failure to punish those who perpetrate religiously motivated violence.

Sadly, the latter was witnessed firsthand by Commission members in nation after nation in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The absence of peacekeeping and law enforcement has not only failed to prevent religiously-motivated attacks against individuals whose beliefs don’t conform, it has encouraged it.

The examples cited in the Commission’s 2010 Annual Report, are disheartening:

- In Nigeria earlier this year,” 500 persons in a Christian village near the northern city of Jos were killed...men, women and children were hacked to death with machetes and then dumped into wells. Not a single criminal...has been convicted and sentenced in Nigeria’s ten years of religious violence.”
- “North Korea bans virtually all worship and imprisons in its infamous labor camps even the grandchildren of those caught praying.”
- “In Egypt...(those) who refuse to compromise their religious principles have been imprisoned...dismissed from jobs, expelled from universities, prevented from receiving inheritance, and denied rights, among others, to open bank accounts, buy cars, or obtain marriage certificates, birth certificates, or driver’s licenses, all as a consequence of religious discrimination.”
- Saudi Arabia, which has financed mosques all over the free world, including in the shadow of Vatican City, will not permit a public cross in any part of its kingdom. Mass is totally outlawed.

After citing what it calls “profiles in courage”—stories of people willing to risk their lives in defiance of such blatant acts of religious discrimination—the Commission asks rhetorically: “Can there be any doubt that it is right and just for the preservation of freedom of religion to be among the fundamental principles of our

nation's foreign policy, national security, and economic development agendas?"

Here in the United States, it is easy to take for granted this right which is the first of our freedoms, according to Catholic teaching. How different would our lives be today without it? It transcends not only how we worship, but also a broad range of activities—including our right to act according to our conscience, our educational and charitable choices and our participation in government affairs. (Some of these even now are facing legal challenges!)

I encourage Catholics in our Archdiocese to pray for our elected leaders and for all who represent our nation in its support to foster such basic human rights for our sisters and brothers in other lands. May we also be reminded—especially as we gaze upon our beloved Basilica and other living symbols of religious freedom—of the rights earned for us by those who came before us as well as those who have fought bravely to preserve and protect them.