

33rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Mark 13:24-32

The most oppressed and persecuted people in the world today are Christians. The so-called mainstream media will not tell you this. Governments will not admit to this. But around the world, Christians are persecuted in more countries than any other faith. Priests are killed, the faithful are kidnapped, women are raped, churches are burned to the ground, and communities forced to abandon their homes. The fact is that of at least three out of four acts of religiously-motivated violence and oppression, it is Christians who are the victims.

In their annual report, Aid to the Church in Need found that in 75% of the countries surveyed, Christian persecution was on the rise. For example, in November 2020 in Eritrea, an attack on a church left almost a thousand people dead. On Pentecost Sunday last year in Nigeria, a massacre killed forty people attending Mass. Last year in India, over 603 churches were destroyed and 150 people were killed. In China, more than 2,000 churches and Crosses were destroyed within one year. In Iraq's Nineveh Plains, almost 13,000 homes were damaged or destroyed in Christian majority towns and villages during a 2½-year occupation by Daesh (ISIS) and 120,000 people were made refugees. In a northern Nigerian diocese, Islamist Boko Haram mass killings and violence caused 1.8 million people to be forced from their homes and the killings left 5,000 widows and 15,000 orphans. In North Korea, there are reports of public executions of Christians, and the faithful meet in secret in groups of two or three and silently mouth prayers. In the Sudan, the government gave notice of its intent to destroy at least 25 churches. In Turkey, over the past five years at least 100 church properties have been seized. In Syria, Syriac Orthodox

Patriarch Aphrem II pleaded for help for Christians exiting en masse, admitting to fears that one of the oldest Christian communities was “on the way out”.

Last year, it is estimated that more than 5,600 people were killed because they were Christians; that’s an average of fifteen people every single day. When BBC News ran a report on the numbers of Christians killed, it called the figures “nonsense” and tried to argue them down.¹ This is how popular media treats the persecution of Christians. Yet there are laws proposed around the world that will make it a hate crime if I so-call “misgender” someone, and the popular media are fully in support of this.

But these acts of violence are not simply “over there” in some foreign country that we don’t really need to worry about. The persecution of Christians happens in western countries as well. A recent report showed that in Europe anti-Christian violence rose by 44% over the past year. Arson attacks against churches rose by 75%.

In France, a proposed law will make it a crime of publishing or even speaking against abortion, and that includes even one relative speaking to another who wants to abort her baby.

In England just last month a man was convicted of the crime of praying silently near an abortion clinic. He was praying for the soul of his son whom he had aborted twenty years earlier. He now has a criminal record for praying.

In Scotland in April of this year, changes to the Hate Crime Bill passed by the Scottish parliament could now make it illegal to own a Bible or a catechism because they could be deemed inflammatory and promoting so-called hate speech against homosexuality and adultery. And if you doubt this, the leader of a prominent Scottish atheist organisation, Atheist Scotland, has already said: “We fully intend to monitor all Holy Books, sermons in places of worship and

¹ Alexander, Ruth. “Are there really 100,000 new Christian martyrs every year?,” BBC News (<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24864587>).

the social media accounts of the various religions and report any hatred to Police Scotland for criminal investigation.”²

In 2022 in Finland, a member of parliament was put on trial for tweeting a Bible verse on the Christian teaching which was said by the government to be homophobic. In her opening statement, the prosecutor said, “The point isn’t whether it is true or not, but that this is insulting.” Think about that: the point is not whether these words are true or not, but that someone’s feelings were hurt by them. The law allows for her to be sent to prison.

What all of this does, all this pretending that Christian persecution doesn’t really exist, all these laws to make the teachings of the faith “hate speech”, all these trials to convict someone for a belief which does not conform to the *zeitgeist* or the spirit of the age, is to lead to the abolition of humanity. You may say that I am exaggerating, but think of what Hannah Arendt, a Jewish historian, wrote as World War II had drawn to a close. She wrote: “In this sense, it must be possible to face and understand the outrageous fact that so small (and, in world politics, so unimportant) a phenomenon as the Jewish question and antisemitism could become the catalytic agent for first, the Nazi movement, then a world war, and finally the establishment of death factories.”³ No one really cared when, first of all there was just a one-day boycott of all Jewish businesses in Germany. And no one really took much notice when Jews and political opponents were banned from the civil service. And no one was too concerned when Germans who consulted Jewish doctors would no longer be entitled to the equivalent of Medicare. No one really cared much about any of this until suddenly the world was at war and six million Jews were dead because of this.

² The Christian Institute, News Release, 28 August, 2020, “Atheist threatens to use Scotland’s hate crime Bill to criminalise the Bible, sermons and church social media” (christian.org.uk).

³ Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, preface (Schocken Books, 1951).

The problem that we face is the unyielding apathy of many Catholics to all of this. Many prefer to ignore this, to pretend it's not really that bad, to think it really has nothing to do with them. Will they think that when, just like three years ago, the churches are once again closed—but this time closed for good? Too many of us have grown lukewarm. As St. John wrote in the book of the Apocalypse, the Angel of the Lord said: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (3:15-16). Maybe Our Lord is demanding that we make a choice: for or against the Faith. Maybe it is time that faithful men and women stood up and said "this far, and no further".

Fr. William Casey said, "It seems as though the enemies of the Church have got all the worldly power on their side. They've got the government, they've got the money, they've got the movies, they've got Hollywood, they've got the celebrities, they've got the media, they control the means of social communication, they've got the courts, they've got the universities—and all we have is God. And if God is for us, who can be against us." As St. Teresa of Avila said: "In every spiritual battle remember, God plus one is an army."

Be that army. Stand up for Christ. Stand up for Him who lay down everything, even His own life, for you.

It is why organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need are so necessary. Aid to the Church in Need exists to support suffering, oppressed and persecuted Christians. In fact, it is the only international Catholic charity dedicated to this mission. Their work supports around 5,000 Catholic projects each year in nearly 150 countries through building convents, supporting seminarians, training catechists and providing emergency relief for Christian refugees. More than that, they also serve to tell us and the world of the devastation of the Christian people around the world. When no one else will speak they stand up and make the truth known.

Next week the Church celebrates the solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. But for those who seek to tear God down from His rightful throne, we Christians know something that the world fails to see: that the throne of Christ is the Cross. Injustice nailed Him to the Cross, but that very same Cross turned it all around and instead brought about the death of evil and the triumph of good.

As we face the persecution of the world because we bow only to God and not to man, let us remember that Christ is not only our King, but He is the King of the Universe, of history, of time and of all created things. In Him we have died. In Him we will live.

“Christus vincit! Christus regnat!”—“Christ conquers, Christ reigns”.