

Ecumenism of blood

Homily on Luke 21:12-19 – Wednesday of the 34th Week in Ordinary Time

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In the late 1990's the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East was living in exile in Morton Grove, Illinois. He lived here in Chicagoland because the situation in his ancestral see of Selucia-Ctesiphon had become untenable. It was just too dangerous for him to stay. Now, for context, you need to know that he was the former Bishop of Teheran. When Iran is the safe neighborhood for a Christian bishop, you have some idea of just how bad a situation was and is in the ancient seat of the Church of the East near Bagdad.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but Saddam Husain didn't like him. He came to Chicago in 1980. I met His Holiness, Mar Dinkha IV three years later and over the years, until his death March 26, 2015, I would receive wonderful Christmas cards from him. The Archdiocese of Chicago was the only jurisdiction that welcomed him to Chicago and offered him assistance as he tried to minister to a growing immigrant church driven from their ancestral home by the Iraqi wars. I met with him first when I was working for Cardinal Bernardin as

an ecumenical officer, but it was only later on when their situation became more desperate, that I would see him with any kind of regularity. With the vantage point that only the father of a world-wide Christian communion could have, His Holiness narrated to the Cardinal the trials that Christians were suffering in Iraq.

Now, there are Christians and there are Christians. The persecutions which the Church of the East suffered was first of all political. Saddam Husain had a policy of forced Arabization. His goal was a socialist Iraq, with everyone sharing the same Arab language and culture. He would tolerate minority religions only if they committed cultural suicide by abandoning their language and became Arabized. The Assyrians were not about to do this. So, Saddam had little use for Mar Dinkha. He would give millions of dollars to compliant Christians who Arabized. Mar Dinkha he just wanted to get rid of. Now, when you are a totalitarian dictator of an oil rich Middle Eastern state, "get rid of" can have a variety of possible meanings. Mar Dinkha chose exile, first to the much safer Iran (let that sink in for a moment) and then to these United States.

Persecution is an interesting word. Most of the time, it is like a low-grade depression. It's not acute, but you don't make any progress. Doors simply will not open for you, no matter how hard you try. You won't get the job you want. You won't be able to enroll your child in the best schools. If you can enroll them,

there won't be any scholarship money. Everything is just a bit harder, or costs a bit more, and you are paid a bit less. Other times, you are caught in collateral persecution. Some minority religion does something, and all suffer for it. You didn't do anything, but since you are not part of the majority, you experience collective punishment.

Sometimes though, there is overt hostility, where your group is targeted. These are usually short-lived, but quite brutal purges. But the worst of all is what is happening right now, civil war. There is really nothing worse than civil war. You could compare it to cancer, where the cells of your own body turn against you. You are fighting yourself, which means there can be no winners or losers, only losers on both sides, for there really is only one side.

Geography tells most of these stories. On the news, you will hear about ISIS and the battles for northern Iraq. All well and good, until you know that northern Iraq means Christian Iraq. The Nineveh plain was the center of Christian life in that region for two millennia. The Kurds, who you hear about on the news as insurgents, are the only group that consistently protected Christians. If northern Iraq becomes more unstable, emigration will be the only choice and with it one of the oldest Christian communities in history will pretty much be history there. If you want to flee from northern Iraq your options are Syria,

Lebanon or Iran. Again, you know you're in trouble when Syria, Lebanon or Iran are your best options.

The situation of the refugees is grim. I spent all last week with the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo and the Assyrian Bishop of Lebanon. They both fear a permanent emigration from Iraq. The radical forces enter an area and give people about 12 hours to flee. People who have lived side by side for half a century are turned against each other in a matter of hours, as they must make a choice, stay and give instant evidence of support for the radicals, or flee. Christians are usually allowed to flee. A Muslim of the wrong sect is killed on the spot by the radical Muslims. You can imagine how utterly destabilizing such a situation is on the Christian community.

It is for this reason that the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East ended its press statement on the results of the recent plenary meeting with a plea for the Christians of the Middle East. We wrote: "On this occasion, while experiencing joy at the progress of the dialogue, the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East both feel pain over the suffering of Christians in Iraq and Syria and throughout the Middle East. The Commission calls on all people of good will to pray for the end of the violence and strife which affects the lands which first

received the revelation of Jesus Christ, and to work through the means at their disposal for the support and care of refugees and those displaced by violence, whatever their religious confession.”

What are the means at our disposal for the support and care of refugees? This is not a rhetorical question. Look at the person next to you. [I’m serious. Turn and look at the person next to you]. Now, you might know this person pretty well, or not given our size as a major seminary. But none of you know where that person will be in ten or twenty years.

If you did this exercise 20 years ago, one of you would have turned and seen Afrem Athniel. Afrem was a student here in the late 1990’s. Each time I see him, he asked about Mundelein fondly, and especially, he asks about Father Hennessey, whose courses on the Fathers of the Church he loved so. I see him because he is a member of the dialogue commission. Now the Assyrian Bishop of Syria, he was not able to come this year. His cathedral is in the town which is the landing zone for refugees. He is on the front lines, daily, with very little support. What does it mean to us that an alumnus of Mundelein Seminary is there in northeastern Syria? How does it change how we relate to this human tragedy to know that from these very pews, a priest went forth and in God’s providence is

pastor of refugees? What does “doing all in our power to help” look like for each of us as individuals?

As we pray about these scriptures today, and reflect on the liturgical texts of this Mass for Persecuted Christians, one response could be gratitude. The Assyrian Church has no seminaries. Before coming to Mundelein, Afrem studied only with a tutor, an older priest, as his seminary formation. And his is a poor church. Funding had to be raised to pay his tuition. When he talks about Mundelein, his words express deep gratitude.

Each of you is here under similar circumstances. Morris West, in his best seller about the papacy, *Shoes of the Fisherman* wrote the following for his character, Kiril Cardinal Lakota, to speak to his brother cardinals prior to the election of the pope.

We must consider what we are — priests, bishops, pastors — by virtue of an act of dedication to the people who are the flock of Christ. What we possess, even to the cloths on our backs, comes to us out of their charity.

The whole material fabric of the Church was raised stone on stone, gold on golden offering, by the sweat of the faithful, and they have given it into our hands for stewardship. It is they who have educated us so that we may teach them and their children. It is they who humble themselves before our

priesthood as before the divine priesthood of Christ. It is for them that we exercise the sacramental and sacrificial powers which are given to us in the anointing and the laying-on of hands. If in our deliberations we serve any other cause but this, we are traitors.¹

Each of you is sitting in the same pews as Afrem Athneil sat. Each of you, God willing, will receive the anointing and laying-on of hands as he did. And in ten or twenty years, only God knows where you will be. Do all in your power to prepare for those days during these privileged days at this seminary.

¹ Morris West, *Shoes of the Fisherman* (New York: Octopus/Heinemann, 1980), 692.