

Vatican II and the Year of Faith The War in Syria and the Catholic Faith

I have a friend in Syria who is a Melkite monk. (The Melkites are an Eastern rite Catholic Church in full communion with the Pope.). He is American, but discovered the Melkite tradition while on Pilgrimage to Syria and Lebanon. He also discovered his religious vocation in Syria, and now lives a life of prayer and service to the Syrian people. Although he and his community are in serious danger from the present war, he has told me that he would not leave Syria for 5 million Euros. He is in love with the people and the land, and has found his calling in this center of ancient Christianity.

Syria glories in one of the oldest, continuous Christian cultures in the world. The followers of Christ were first called Christians at Antioch in Syria. Saints Peter and Paul both spent time in Syria. Paul first met Christ on the road to Damascus. Peter served the Church in Antioch before moving to Rome. Syriac speaking Christians evangelized to the East as far as India and have given us some of the Church's most important liturgical rites. In our own diocese of Birmingham, we are blessed to have *two* Churches of Syrian or Syriac origin: St. Elias Maronite Church, and St. George Melkite Greek Catholic Church. We are also blessed to have priests serving our diocese from the Syro-Malabar tradition in India, which draws from Syriac roots.

Syrian Christianity is of great importance to the Catholic Church and to men of good will everywhere, not only because of its antiquity, but because of its continuous witness to Christ and to unity in a land torn by war and strife. In my friend's monastery, Shiite and Sunni Muslims as well Catholic and Protestant Christians are sheltering together, serving the suffering, and praying for an end to the present conflict.

The Second Vatican Council was deeply solicitous for the Syrian and all Eastern rite Churches. In her decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*) the Council said the universal Church owes these Churches a "great debt." It also taught: "Provision must be made therefore everywhere in the world to protect and advance these individual churches." (*OE*, 4)

The Syrian Church is now in great danger. It is unclear how American involvement in Syria might affect the Christians there. My Melkite friend, however, tells me that the Christians in Syria *fear* American involvement in their crisis. They do not want a repeat of events in Iraq and Egypt, where revolution has led to widespread persecution of Christians.

Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis have all expressed concern about escalating violence in the Middle East and the U.S. role in these conflicts. Pope Benedict (as Cardinal Ratzinger) also condemned the doctrine of *preventative* war. In considering the wisdom of further American involvement in the Middle East and the potential threat to Syria's Christians, we would do well to reflect on the teaching of the Council and the Catechism concerning war and peace.

First of all, the Catechism and the Council insist that "All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war." (CCC 2308). The Catechism is also very specific in delineating the requirements for a legitimate recourse to violence and war. They are

- The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
- All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- There must be serious prospects of success;
- The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. (CCC 2309)

With regard to this last point, it is worth noting that the Second Vatican Council unequivocally rejected the use of "Weapons of Mass Destruction" in any armed conflict. The document *Gaudium et Spes* stated: "Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man." (GS 80) Finally, the Council expressed a preference for an *internationalist* approach to resolving armed conflicts (rather than a *unilateralist* approach), provided this approach be grounded in the universal, ethical norms of natural law. (GS 82)

I would not presume to know the solution to the crisis in Syria. The accusations of brutality and injustice *on both sides of the conflict* are grave indeed and clearly merit international attention. As Catholic Christians, we in the Diocese of Birmingham are not utterly remote from this war. It involves our brothers and sisters who have witnessed centuries to their faith in Christ. Please continue to pray for Syria, and to urge our leaders to seek *just* remedies in keeping the norms of natural law and Catholic doctrine.