

# WHY THE HOLY LAND'S CHRISTIANS ARE A PRIORITY FOR CANADIAN CATHOLICS

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## What exactly is the Holy Land?

As with most Canadian Catholics, I grew up with the notion that the Holy Land was located in what we call today the State of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The Virgin Mary received the visit of the Archangel Gabriel in Nazareth, Jesus was born in Bethlehem and exercised His ministry mostly in Galilee, and He spent His last days in Jerusalem, where He was put to death and where He rose from the dead.

In looking more closely at the scriptures, we learn that the Holy Family fled to Egypt to escape certain death, that Jesus sought out His cousin, John the Baptist, in Bethany "Beyond the Jordan", and encountered the Syro-Phoenician woman in the Lebanese town of Tyre. And after His death He appeared to Paul on his way to the Syrian city of Damascus.

Many more biblical stories like this reveal clearly that the Holy Land is beyond what we traditionally think. The Holy Land in fact includes pretty much all the countries of the Middle East, but especially Cyprus, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Turkey.

## Who are the Christians of the Holy Land?

In Canada, we are accustomed to *church* as a product of Western culture, divided into Catholics and Protestants. For most, the Catholic church is Roman (or Latin) in its customs and rites. In reality, there are many Catholic churches, 22 to be precise. There is the Latin church (by far the largest) and 21 Eastern Catholic churches, all "under the pope".

Many of these churches are apostolic. They were founded by the apostles who were active throughout the Middle East in the earliest days of Christianity. These include Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite, Melkite and Syriac Catholics. In addition, many Christians in the Holy Land belong to other Eastern churches not in full communion with the Holy Father, but share the same customs, rites and traditions of those listed above.

Ironically, many in the West still think that all Arabs are Muslim when in fact some are Christian, while others belong to other faith communities neither Christian nor Muslim. The Middle East is a mosaic, with a myriad of different faiths and cultures.

The Middle East has been the home for Christians for more than 2,000 years. It is also the homeland of Judaism and Islam. Jews feel at home in one part of it. Muslims feel at home in most of it. Increasingly, Christians don't feel at home there at all.

## Christians' presence at risk

The last 50 years or so have been a real challenge to the people of the Middle East, particularly its Christians. In the last decade, these challenges intensified. From the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, to the Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza in January 2009, violence and instability have shaken the foundation of many communities. Stagnant economies, poverty, fanaticism and political instability are now part of the daily life of the majority of people.

These factors prompted Pope Benedict XVI to go on a pilgrimage of peace to Jordan, Palestine and Israel in May 2009. During this time of reflection and prayer, the pope focussed on the role of the region's Christians as peace builders and also their great vulnerability.

A few months after his return, the pope called for a special assembly of the synod of bishops to take place in October 2010. This gathering of bishops, priests, religious and lay people reflected on current challenges affecting the Middle East's Christians and explored solutions. It was a wake-up call for most, as some believe the situation is dire.

Indeed, on October 31, 2010, only one week after the synod ended, armed extremists stormed the Syriac Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Deliverance in Baghdad while the community gathered there for the Divine Liturgy. Fifty-eight people were murdered, among them women, children and two priests.

On December 27, 2010, terrorists bombed a church in Egypt during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Another 25 Christian worshippers were killed.

Since January 2011, the Arab world has been convulsed by unprecedented mass protests calling for change. Governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have collapsed. Syria



is threatened by civil war. Inevitably, minorities are more vulnerable during times of volatility and, sadly, Christians have been targeted, especially in Egypt, where they make up 10% of the population.

Nobody really knows where it will lead, but Christians especially in Egypt and Syria are worried about their place in the new order to come. Many fear their fate will resemble the plight of Christians in Iraq, where since 2003 more than 70% have fled their homes because of violence directed against them.

As the Middle East of the synod of bishops acknowledged, Christians are the first victims in times of conflict. Combined with economic stress and fanaticism, many choose to emigrate. Scholars predict that within 15 years, Christians in the Middle East will number just six million, a decline of 45% from the 11 million Christians in the region today. A good example is in Israel and Palestine, where the ongoing conflict has decimated the Christian presence. Whereas 63 years ago Christians represented 20% of the population, today they only account for a meager two percent.

### Role of Christians in the Holy Land

Are we willing to stand by and passively witness the disappearance of a Christian presence in the land where our Lord walked? Do we even know what role they play?

Clearly Christians are too small a number to have a direct political impact in the region, but they have a great responsibility to keep alive the message of Jesus through their teachings and actions. Indeed, Christianity is the only Abrahamic faith to claim forgiveness as a condition to dialogue and reconciliation. In a region dominated by a culture of honour, which calls for vengeance when the tribe or family feels humiliated, forgiveness becomes an important value in order to build lasting peace.

Thus, to allow Christians to disappear from the region would mean deep spiritual loss for Catholics and the church in general. It would certainly be a great loss for the region, where Christians continue to serve society through their schools, hospitals, numerous social service outreach initiatives and interreligious collaboration.

For Western Christians, their disappearance would mean a loss of partners who share common values and at the same time form part of the Arab culture. Because of their unique experience, they serve as a credible and necessary bridge to the region's Jews and Muslims.

### The Holy Father's Call for Solidarity

Pope Benedict XVI encourages the Christians of the Holy Land to continue their unique mission of peace, and he has made them a special priority of the worldwide church by calling Catholics in the West to pay special attention to their needs and role.

The Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) is the Holy Father's special agency for the Middle East. Understanding the increasingly difficult conditions Christians face there, the Holy See invited the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to open an office of this agency in Canada. CNEWA Canada officially opened its office in February 2005 and has made the Christians of the Middle East a priority.

For more than 85 years, CNEWA, as mandated by the Holy Father, has been present in the Middle East running programs and projects from its three offices in Lebanon, Jordan and Jerusalem. The staff works closely with local parish priests, religious, bishops, and women and men lay leaders to identify the most essential needs.

In Canada, CNEWA shares its analysis and promotes projects to Canadian Catholic bishops, priests, groups and individuals to connect them with credible partners.

CNEWA's approach favours encounters with Holy Land Christians that will enrich our own faith and strengthen our own church. It is the only way Christ's message of love and hope will survive in this troubled region and in our world.

Let us not be afraid to discover and support our Arab Christian brothers and sisters abroad, but also at home. There are deeply spiritual communities to be discovered, and a warm and friendly reception awaits.

Let's find time to pray together for peace and unity. †