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The Plight of Iraqi Christians

The July edition of Catena contained a letter from Brother Faiz Tappouni of Kingston upon Thames Circle highlighting the plight of Christians in Iraq. Faiz quoted from a letter from the Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Iraq, the Rt Rev Andros Abona in which the bishop related how "militant Islamic groups recently issued a fatwa, or religious edict, to the Christian residents of the Bagdad suburb of Dora: Convert to Islam or face death. At the same time Muslim neighbours were instructed, over the loudspeakers of local mosques, to confiscate the property of Christians and enforce the edict. The majority of Christians remaining in Dora immediately gathered what they could carry and fled the city. Iraq's Christians know quite well that these latest threats are serious. Since the US-led invasion in 2003, over 25 churches across Iraq have been bombed in a highly symbolic and co-ordinated manner. The Islamic group claiming responsibility for the bombing of four churches in August 2004 issued a warning, To the people of the crosses: Return to your senses and be aware that God's soldiers are ready for you. You wanted a crusade and these are the results. Many of the families have no-where to go and are sheltering in churches in relatively safer areas... Hope your circle and the Catenians continue to pray for our suffering Christian community."

Brother Faiz has a further letter in this edition of Catena in which he mentions the website of a charity set up to help "Iraqi Christians in Need". All brothers are urged to look at this site and see how they might be able to help them. Such is the state of the modern world that anyone following the Western media would be tempted to think that the bloody events in Iraq involved just the invading forces, the Shia, the Sunni and the Kurds. It almost seems that our fellow Catholics do not exist because they do not fall into a category which is readily understandable in the convoluted affairs of that unhappy nation.

Pilgrims on the Rise

Catena doesn't usually involve itself in church matters unless they have a Catenian link but it might be interesting to our readers to note the following:

Despite the Holy Father being involved in what is often portrayed in the Western media as controversy, it is interesting to note the high level of popular appeal enjoyed by Benedict XVI, who is attracting large numbers to his public appearances. The continuing popularity of religious pilgrimages is another sign of life in European Christianity. In the 1950s Lourdes drew around one million visitors a year. The number now is close to six million. The Polish shrine of Czestochowa draws several million a year, many of them young people.

Fatima reports around four million visitors annually. In Spain numbers of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela have risen to around half a million a year, with up to a million in holy years. Italy too sees large numbers of visitors to shrines such as Loreto.

It might be argued that the large numbers of new saints created by John Paul II has helped to strengthen popular piety. In fact, the efforts of John Paul II and Benedict XVI might be compared to the era of the Catholic Reformation, when the Church brought about a revival in its fortunes after a period of grave difficulties.

The founding of dynamic new religious orders and movements in the Catholic Church is another indication that Christianity is far from dead in Europe. Evidence of this were the gatherings of members of the new movements held in Rome at Pentecost in 1998 and 2006. Charismatic groups within the Catholic Church have also flourished in many European countries.

Thus, while clergy numbers may be declining, increased participation by lay people is providing a source of renewal for Church life. The large numbers of young people who attended the World Youth Day activities in Cologne, Germany in 2005 is hopefully another positive sign for the future of Christianity in Europe.