



A Roman Holiday Global Persecution of the Catholic Church

A self-proclaimed atheist bemoaned on the Internet that he was a persecuted minority. He was forced to endure a culture riven with Christian symbols that included statues, paintings, cemetery crosses, and December greetings of *Merry Christmas*. Had he lived in a Communist country, he could have swum in godless artifacts. He would also have known the fear of death and the grim specter of a life in the Gulags for speaking out.

MODERN MARTYRS

Persecution of the Catholic Church has been endemic to its 2000-year history. Hate and violence were constant threats for Jesus and his disciples. Christ's promise of pain, suffering, and persecution is a theme that runs through the Gospels, especially John (15:18) where Jesus warned: *If the world hates you, know that it hated Me before you.*

Religious persecution has been widespread, especially during the 20th century. The Keston Institute at Oxford University, a religious rights vigilance group, has continually revised its Persecution List of those oppressed for religious belief during this past century. The History Department at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, has established a website which focuses on the major persecutions of the Catholic Church in the 20th century.

Such research reveals that more Catholic martyrs perished in the last century than all the previous 1900 years of Church history. On December 4, 2000, the Papal Committee for the Commemoration of 20th Century Catholic Martyrs presented Pope John Paul II with eight volumes listing 13,400 martyrs in the 20th Century. Historian Robert Royal's 2000 book, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century*, is an excellent compendium for reflecting on the martyrdom of thousands of Catholics.

TWIN PERSECUTIONS

There are two kinds of persecution. The most familiar is usually bloody and often involves death. Like a fraternal twin, the second is more psychological and sometimes happens without the conscious notice of its victims.

The most serious *persecution* in this century has come

from the nations of Islam. While the Church has been instrumental in eliminating discrimination towards other religions in the name of ecumenism, Islam has not returned the favor. It has shown little interest in reversing its 14-century campaign to eliminate Christianity from the face of the earth. While Pope John Paul II welcomed the construction of a mosque in Rome, the construction of a Catholic Church in Saudi Arabia has been strictly forbidden. As one leading Muslim put it, *Thanks to your democratic laws, we will invade you; thanks to our religious laws, we will dominate you.*

In a 2004 column, Patrick Buchanan compared Muslim persecution to what happened to Europe in the late 15th century. Queen Isabella of Spain was determined to expel the Muslim Moors and de-Islamize all of Spain. This was called the *Reconquista*, which lasted from 1492 through the Thirty Years War in 1648. Islam appears intent on expelling Christianity and Western culture from the Islamic world. This has been largely prompted by Western presence in the Middle East and a resurgence of Islamic religious fervor. While oil czars flex their petro-muscles, Islam plots to extend its jihadist tentacles into a Europe it once dominated. It is estimated that more than 53 million Muslims currently live in Europe. (Christian News 10/31/05)

SPECIAL TARGETS

Catholics and other Christians have been special targets in the Islamic world. This is especially true in Africa where the spread of Islam is cause for grave concern. The worst Islamic persecutions of Christians have taken place in the Sudan. In its northern states, Khartoum declared the draconian Islamic *Sharia laws*, which include stoning to death for adultery, and the illegality of any form of Christian worship. In Southern Sudan, millions of Christians are suffering torture, slavery, rape, mutilations, starvation, and random massacres at the hands of Sudanese Muslim soldiers.

Sudan is a preview of what will go on in all of Africa if the South falls, said William Sanders, who founded the Bishop Gassis Relief Fund to assist the struggling Sudanese in the Nuba Mountains. In the northern states of Nigeria the *Sharia* have

also been implanted. Nigerian Bishop Akio Mutek sees troubling signs in Kenya and Uganda.

A VANISHING BREED

Christians are a vanishing breed in the Middle East. In 2004 several Catholic Churches were bombed in Iraq's major cities. Patrick Buchanan reported one of the previously untold stories of the war, that Iraq's 650,000-strong Christian community was swiftly depleting, with thousands moving abroad to avoid persecution. The refugees, who have fled to Damascus, report the murder of Christian shopkeepers by local Muslim gangs for daring to sell cigarettes and alcohol. Lebanon's once thriving Christian population has also endured the same fate.

Muslim militants have been very active in Indonesia since 2001. They have been waging a *Jihad* or *Holy War* against Christians in the Indonesian Moluccas that has seen over 9,000 people perish. The intense hostile climate forced the Sisters of the Poor of St. Joseph to abandon their work in a province where they had labored for 50 years. As they left, they sadly witnessed their 12 schools, a hospital, leprosarium, and two clinics go up in smoke. After the Indonesian invasion, the tiny country of East Timor witnessed the murder of hundreds of Catholics.

Islam is not the culprit in China. While there have been signs of improvement in the ties between the Vatican and Beijing, there has been a resurgence of the repression of the Church that dates back to 1957 when the Church was outlawed. In the province of Hebei, with over one and a half million Catholics, the government has launched a new campaign of persecution against the underground Church. All Catholics, especially the clergy, must register, not only with the State Office for Religious Affairs but also with the state-sponsored Patriotic Association. No priest can administer the sacraments without his government card. Failure to comply would mean prison. A puppet national church, independent of Rome, is the government's ultimate goal.

THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS

Persecution in the West is more of the subtle kind. In 17th century colonial New England one had to have a *conversion experience* before being admitted to the body of the elect. The fear of imminent death at the hands of savage Indians or the thought of slow starvation usually prompted the catharsis of emotion that sent the candidate into paroxysms of frenzy. Without that fear, religious faith is often more susceptible to the seductive charms of the world, the flesh and the devil.

Traditional bulwarks of religion and family have been so weakened by the erosion of faith due to materialism and indifference that the defense of the faith has lost its fervor. While they may attend Sunday Mass, too many Catholics passively accept and even practice the hedonist and relativistic tenets of the *culture of death*.

How a nation treats the birth of the Christ Child is a good sign of its Catholic fervor. Christmas has always been surrounded by a cornucopia of secular traditions including Yule logs, holly and mistletoe and religious symbols such as Nativity scenes and the sounds of *Silent Night* and *Joy To the World*.

These religious traditions have prompted a national attack from the left, even on the Christmas tree. Despite its Nordic origins, there is no more universal symbol of Christmas. Its presence has become a *cause celebre*. Those who attempt to conserve this annual tradition have become lost in a forest of complaint. The left rests its case on the fallacy that were government or school boards to allow anything, even with a patina of religious flavoring, they would be in violation of the extra-constitutional of *separation of church and state*.

Fox News anchorman John Gibson has addressed this assault in his new book, *The War on Christmas*. In the context of the culture war, he presents this anti-religious iconoclasm as a national attack, raging within school boards and university faculties from Plano, Texas and Eugene, Oregon to the suburbs of Maplewood, New Jersey.

Writing in the National Review, Catholic author Michael Novak talks of the *battle of Christmas* as becoming a *major event in the current history of liberty*. In city after city in the United States and Europe, Novak warns that *a war of sorts is being declared on Jesus Christ*. The name of *Christ* is quickly disappearing from the public sector. According to Kelly Shackelford, the founder of the Liberty League Institute, which protects religious freedoms from secular attack, *religion is the new pornography...it is treated like pornography would be treated if you brought it into the school*.

AN UNINVITED GUEST

The situation is a mixed Christmas bag around the globe. Rich food prevails during Christmas celebrations in most of Europe. In Spain, France, Iceland and Holland, family, friends and gift giving around a Christmas tree, festooned in the festive seasonal colors, characterize the event. Like some uninvited guest, Christ is looking in the window as children, parents, relatives and friends celebrate His birth with hardly a mention of His name.

Eastern Europeans still show signs of maintaining the faith in the face of past persecutions, especially in Poland, where Christmas Eve is a day of fasting and feasting. Thanks largely to the reign of Pope John Paul II Poland has rebounded nicely from 50 years of Nazi and Communist persecution. Christmas in Slovakia is largely a celebration of family, food, and friends and religious observances.

In the Czech Republic thousands attend Midnight Mass, despite the fact that most surveys hold them among the most atheistic people in Europe. The Czech constitution promises religious freedom yet state workers, who go to Church, risk losing their jobs.

In Russia, Christmas is a time of conflicted emotions. Since the collapse of Communism in 1991, the Russian people have accepted Western materialism. Under the Czars, Russia had a very strong spiritual sense which 74 years of Communist rule did everything to eradicate. The Communist Grinch stole the spirit of Christmas, drowning it in a flood of Christmas toys, lights, snowmen, and secular hymns, such as *Jingle Bells*, and *Deck the Halls*.

Unlike the Russians, Ukrainians cherish Christmas. Their celebration begins on December 19th with the giving of gifts to children by St. Nicholas. It centers on the traditional Christmas Eve Holy Supper. The floor is covered with straw and upon the table is placed clean, fresh hay, recalling Christ's humble birth. During the meal, carolers enter to wish the family the happiness and blessings of the Infant Jesus.

A BLEAK HOLIDAY

In Japan, secularism has adopted a Westernized Holiday season with festive lights, Christmas trees, store Santas and gift exchanges. The holidays are a time for group parties and family celebrations. It is a day for lovers to exchange gifts and stroll under colored lights that government and businesses have erected to create a romantic mood.

In the Philippines, Filipinos attend Mass for nine days before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, they parade through the streets carrying colorful star-shaped lanterns called parols. They are displayed in most homes. This is in great contrast to Vietnam where Christmas is a bleak holiday. One of the most lasting results of the Vietnam War was the subjugation of the Church, which had enjoyed a primary position in South Vietnam. The Communists closed hundreds of churches and incarcerated Catholic leaders.

In Latin America, as the countries lean more to Socialism, Catholic observance of Christmas has severely declined. Yet the religious themes and rituals of Christmas still exist. In Mexico, the nine days before Christmas have special significance. They are called *posadas*, which means *inns* or *lodgings*. Each day Mexicans reenact Mary and Joseph's search for lodging. Children carry statues of the Holy Family to several houses and ask for lodging. They are refused at first but finally granted entry to a festive meal.

In Venezuela, people have a late supper after returning from Midnight Mass. Their religious future is under a dark cloud. In August of 2005, Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Laura said that the government of neo-Castroite, Hugo Chavez, was a dictatorship. Chavez branded the Cardinal an *outlaw*, *bandit* and *immoral*.

SO FEW LIONS

What is really at stake here? Under a banner of *political correctness*, cultural Marxism has laid a subtle siege of persecution that has caught the West unaware. Its aim has been

the deconstruction of all suggestion of Christmas and its ornamental reminders, such as trees, carols, plays and the crèche.

In the United States, the foundation for this siege has rested on the fallacious charge that the Supreme Court will not allow this breach in the impenetrable Jeffersonian *wall of separation of church and state*. According to Gibson's book, *The War on Christmas*, the Supreme Court of the United States has never said that Christmas trees, carols or the salutary greeting *Merry Christmas* were unconstitutional.

Gibson also warns that the secular left intends to rid society of all Christian influences so that it will be free to pursue its impious self-interests. He stresses how *liberal crusaders are treating Christianity as if it were second-hand smoke from cigarettes*. They want religious people to stay in the closet, a place once reserved for homosexuals and child molesters. A bumper sticker in Eugene, Oregon underscored their hostile feelings about Christians: *So Many Christians, and So Few Lions*.

Gibson's book begs the question: *what is so offensive about Christmas that would warrant such an annual campaign?* How could the Christmas message that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to save it be so offensive? Why do many Catholics sheepishly go about their business and say *Have a Happy Holiday*, for fear someone will think them religious?

To acquiesce in the state's official agnosticism's is no virtue. It is no more than *the smiley face* of cultural Marxism. Catholics must distinguish *apologia* from *apology*. Christmas is the perfect time to re-affirm in words and deeds the joyful birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God! Have a Blessed Christmas!

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Christmas Blessings

In our own lifetime, the scourge of Atheistic Communism has caused much darkness, as godless tyrants have sought to smother the light. The darkness into which so much of the world was plunged, brought untold misery to countless children of God who cried out for hope and light.



That's why I ask you to support the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation with a Gift at Christmas!

We quote Cardinal Mindszenty when Communism threatened his nation:

"Now is the time to put our hand to the plough. Let us arise and labor for our most sacred values, for Church, homeland, family and the individual!"
Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty (Memoirs p. 257)

One of the ways in which God answered these pleas was through the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation, which since 1958 has indeed become a light in the darkness. Through the efforts of our members, hope has been given to many, and thanks be to God, the yoke of Communism has already been lifted from many parts of the world.

Your countless prayers, sacrifices, Masses and rosaries, fulfilling Our Lady of Fatima's requests, have been richly rewarded. But there are still over one billion people suffering under the tyranny of Communism, such as China, North Korea, SE Asia, Cuba, Sudan, and more.

Your Christmas donation to this constantly caring CMF apostolate is one way you can make this Holy Season brighter with hope for the New Year.

At this blessed season of *Christmas*, be assured that I and the other CMF Council Members will offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for you and your intentions during *Christmas* week.

May the Christ Child shower His blessings upon you and your families!

Kevin E. Rettig

Reverend Kevin E. Rettig
CMF Council Member

ISAIAH 9:6

"For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given...and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, God the Might, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace."