



The Blood of Martyrs: Terrorism Against Christians in Nigeria

Around the world, Christians and Christianity are under attack. Asian Communist regimes top the list of repressive regimes that tightly circumscribe or prevent worship by Christians. Some parts of the European Union equate expressing Biblical teachings on the creation of men and women with criminalized hate speech, while Europe and North America have seen attacks on churches and murders inside them.

For brutal violence—murder, torture, rape, ethnic cleansing and kidnapping—even the hostile Communist states fall behind African countries. In 2024-2025, Africa accounted for 93 percent of the nearly 5,000 Christians killed for their faith—likely an undercount.¹

Nigeria, with the largest population in Africa and the sixth largest in the world, contributes by far the largest share of the 93 percent. The most recent attempt to survey the carnage found that Nigeria accounted for 72 percent of the murders of Christians in the continent.²

The Catholic Church in Nigeria

Still, the Christian—and especially the Catholic—population grows. Nigeria is one of the most vigorous Catholic communities in the world. The number of Catholics stands at roughly 35 million at last count, out of a total population of 243 million. That is up from 25 million in 2010, and contributes to the 2.7 percent increase in the continent as a whole. These are faithful Catholics: Weekly Mass attendance rates hover around an astonishing 94 percent.³

Nowhere else in the world comes close to this growth and devotion. Must the blood of martyrs serve as the seed of the Church, as the early Church father Tertullian observed in the midst of a wave of Roman persecution (c. 197 A.D.)?

Portuguese missionaries established a foothold in Nigerian trading ports beginning in the 1500s. A sustained presence waited until the late 19th century, when the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Society of African Missions established a presence in the southeastern section, especially among the Igbo people, the largest ethnic group. Working with traders, the Society of African Missions established parishes and recruited locals for the priesthood in order to curb dependence on foreign missionaries.

While Christians in general gained adherents in mass conversions under British colonial rule beginning in the early 20th century, Catholicism spread especially rapidly through its establishment of English-language schools. The Igbo saw English as the path to advancing in society, and the schools produced converts.⁴

In 1960, Nigeria gained independence from Britain. Persistent ethnic and religious tensions, coupled with corruption driven by oil revenue, has made for fragile government. The first government lasted until 1966, when it was taken down by a coup. Civil war followed, settled by military rule. An elected civilian government has held since 1999, but it has been weak in building public trust and restraining violence.

Still, the Catholic Church thrived. Native men have led the Church since 1963, and despite the humanitarian crises produced by political instability, both vocations and the Catholic population grew. For example, Catholics faced famine and starvation during civil war blockades. Yet according to a Nigerian bishop, vocations to the priesthood increased. The inspiring example of native and Irish missionary clergy smuggling supplies through to feed Catholics and non-Catholics alike helped make the eastern Nigerian seminary the largest in the world by 1976.⁵

There are currently 60 dioceses in Nigeria, and some 6,500 seminarians, the largest number in Africa.⁶ Rather than depending on missionaries, Nigeria exports priests to traditional seats of the Church where vocations are less robust.

The Church operates a network of institutions that care for bodies as well as souls. When Catholic schools were nationalized in 1970, the Church established new independent schools. It operates hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, and schools for children with disabilities. Local dioceses and parishes help people in need not only through food distributions but also through skills and job training.⁷

This institutionally rich and deep church grows not so much from missionaries winning converts as from natural increase. In fact, young Christians outnumber young Muslims in Africa four to one. That could partly explain why radical Islamists have been so much more active in Africa than in the Middle East in recent years.⁸

Violent Persecution

In 2020, Michael Nnadi, an 18-year-old seminarian, was kidnapped along with three of his classmates. While his abductors freed his companions, they held Nnadi, apparently because he consistently proclaimed his faith and said that they were violating the core of theirs. He was murdered.

The same group kidnapped Bolanle Ataga, a Catholic woman, along with her two daughters. She was killed for resisting rape.⁹

In 2020 the Pontifical Mission for Foreign Missions counted eight priests, three religious women and one man, two seminarians and six lay people among the murdered.¹⁰

Violent conflict between Christians and Muslims dates back to at least the 1980s, with riots touched off over such issues as the sale of pork in public markets, alleged blasphemy of Mohammad, the disposition of farmland, and planned Protestant revival meetings.¹¹ For example, in 1992 a dispute in northern Nigeria about farms blew up into a riot that left more than 200 dead.¹²

The rise of militant jihadist Islamic groups in the late 1990s to the present has ramped up the mayhem and

made Nigeria the most dangerous place for Catholics and Christians more generally in the world.

Some atrocities gained world-wide attention. Boko Haram (formal name: “Group of the People of Sunnah for Dawah and Jihad”) remains the best known of the jihadist perpetrators. Emerging from government suppression in 2002, they aimed to establish an Islamic caliphate free of Christians and impure Muslims. They were responsible for the highly publicized kidnapping of 256 schoolgirls, most of whom were Christian. Some died in captivity; others were sold into sexual slavery.

Jihadist Terrorists

In 2014, Boko Haram attacked a series of villages, focusing on Church property and government offices. Because so many people fled and the attackers, disguised as soldiers, cut communication lines in preparation, there is no reliable number of deaths. Estimates put it at as many as 500.¹³

More recently, other terrorist organizations have replaced Boko Haram as the main driver of anti-Christian carnage. According to the Observatory for Religious Freedom in a six-year study, the Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM) has “killed four times as many civilians as Boko Haram and ISWAP combined.”¹⁴

The report notes that the Fulani people—an ethnic group spread across sub-Saharan Africa—are not the issue. The terror group, however, has attacked Christians and non-Fulani Muslims alike, raiding villages and kidnapping victims. Once captured, Christians occupy the lower rung of a two-tier system: While Christians deal with beatings, sexual assault, starvation and high ransom payments, many non-Fulani Muslims get off relatively easily.¹⁵

While Fulani terrorists also target non-Fulani Muslims, the six-year count by the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa reveals a greater danger to Christians, especially in the north and north central regions. Among the 42,033 civilians killed were 22,835 Christian civilians, versus 10,519 Muslims, 184 traditional African religious observers and 8,595 unknown.

The violence is ongoing. The 2026 Palm Sunday attacks, leaving at least a dozen faithful dead, illustrated terrorists’ targeting of Christians by their choice of

timing. In late July, another wave of coordinated terror hit central Nigeria. Islamic terrorists rode motorcycles into villages while residents were mostly asleep, and picked off agricultural workers tending their crops. Early reports put the death toll at around 22.¹⁶

Islamist Exacerbation of Violence

The liberal secular press tends to dismiss the ongoing violence as a matter of tensions produced by climate change or simply the sort of turmoil they seem to expect in Nigeria. The *New York Times* account of the Palm Sunday killings described the battles as the action of bandits and as a clash between Muslim herders and Christian farmers, as if they were the cattlemen and sheep herders of the American West. American conservatives, the *Times* asserts, “falsely” claim radical Islam motivates the conflict for their own political gain.¹⁷

The *Times* does not reckon with reports by residents. One described being “woken up by gunfire by about 50 well-armed Fulani Jihadists on more than 25 motorcycles, followed by chanting of ‘Allahu Akbar’ and people began running in every direction.”¹⁸ They were not bandits but terrorists bent on murder. Or, as the Bishop of Ondo put it in describing an attack on a Pentecost Mass, “40 of my people were not killed because of global warming, but because they were Christians.”¹⁹

Nor do mainstream accounts recognize that while Nigeria has a history of violence and instability, the rise of radical Islam changed the situation for the worse. One Christian resident of central Nigeria, who was imprisoned for speaking out, described the shift in the 2000s. Previously Christians and Muslims had no issues: In the dry season, Fulani herders grazed their cattle in Christian areas in the south and then returned to their homes with the rains. “We also had Muslim families living among us, and some of my dearest friends growing up were Muslim civilians.”²⁰

Extremist Teachings, Sharia Law

Then some northern Muslim clerics, after training in Saudi Arabia, began spreading extremist teachings. By 2000, despite Nigeria’s prohibition against state religions, 12 northern states had instituted Sharia law, reflecting the Islamist capture of local government. With

the support of the state political establishment, “an ethno-religious terrorist group,” the Fulani Ethnic Militia, began terrorizing both non-Fulani Muslims and Christian civilians.²¹

As this eyewitness narrative points out, government, both national and state, is complicit in the waves of violence. U.S. government and advocate groups claim that Nigerian government officials had verified intelligence in advance about the Palm Sunday attack but did not act on it. Eyewitnesses allege that government forces did not enter the area until the attackers withdrew and then failed to chase them. Some sources claim that the Nigerian military has joined in terrorism and that killing has been “elevated to state policy.”²²

Bandits who kidnap for ransom payments certainly are part of the landscape of terror, such as the 265 Catholic school students abducted in 2025. But the ethnic and radical Islamist thread connecting the murders is clear.²³

Potential Solutions

Ultimately, stopping the religious violence in Nigeria will come down to the willingness of the government to act. Thus far, it has disappointed Catholic Nigerians in both security and economic policies.

Catholic leaders in Nigeria have spoken out often against the violence aimed at Christians and begged for help from their government, international organizations that promote human rights, and the United States. While grateful to President Trump for correctly identifying religious terrorism in Nigeria, one bishop has asked for the intelligence and tools to combat it. President Trump has also named Nigeria a country of particular concern because of its failure to defend religious liberty, and conducted a missile attack against Boko Haram and ISIS positions. Some Republican members of Congress support economic sanctions to pressure the Nigerian government.²⁴

Pope Leo XIV has condemned the violence in Nigeria directed against Christians and Muslims. Archbishop Ettore Balestrero, the Holy See’s Observer to the United Nations, spoke sharply about the martyrs for the faith in Africa, while also condemning the softer repression of faith in Europe and elsewhere.²⁵

Barring the Nigerian government taking decisive action, the blood of martyrs will continue to flow. Vivian Uchechi

Ogu, a Catholic teenager abducted and killed because she resisted rape in 2009, may now be referred to as a “Servant of God,” the first step toward potential sainthood. She was not the last Nigerian to die for the faith.

Mindszenty’s Wise Counsel

Our inspiring namesake Cardinal Mindszenty, designated “Venerable” by Pope Francis in recognition of “heroic virtue,” gave the following timeless message to Hungarians living in the U.S. on November 5, 1973 (excerpts):

“The deep crisis of the Church today should not frighten us! Every individual and every generation of all the nations should struggle for their faith like Jacob did with the angel of God. God is young. The future is His. He can call forth the new, the young and the tomorrow in the individuals and nations. Therefore, there is no room for despair.”

“This is my testament to those I have met, who have heard of me, or who have avoided me. Let’s put aside competition, excessive personal ambition! Without looking to the right or the left, everyone should do their part where life has placed them. Let us create a church community built on Christian faith! Let there be children in the families, according to God’s will! This is a blessing and a future, no matter what the world says. Let the children receive the Christian faith. . . . All this without hatred and hostility, only with work, faith and sacrifice.”

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¹ <https://www.opendoorsus.org/stories/13-christians-killed-every-day-for-following-jesus>.

² <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/africa/nigeria-accounts-for-72-percent-of-christian-killings-worldwide-new-report-finds>.

³ <https://www.thecable.ng/church-life-africa-nigeria-now-has-35-million-catholics/>.

⁴ F. K. Ekechi, “Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo Case, 1900-1915,” *The Journal of African History* 12, no. 1 (1971): 103–15.

⁵ <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/bishop-says-churchs-example-in-civil-war-helped-nigerian-vocations/>.

⁶ <https://www.acnmalta.org/nigeria-africas-breeding-ground-for-vocations-amid-violence/>.

⁷ <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/4834/11542>.

⁸ Robert Royal, *The Martyrs of the New Millennium: The Global Persecution of Christians in the Twenty-First Century* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2025), 107.

⁹ Bishop Robert Barron, *What Do Their Deaths Demand? Christian Persecution Today* (Elk Grove Village, Ill.: Word on Fire, 2026), 11.

¹⁰ Royal, *Martyrs of the New Millennium*, 110.

¹¹ <https://ncgfonline.org/a-chronicle-of-attacks-on-christians-and-churches-in-nigeria-by-muslims-since-1980/>.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/20/world/nigeria-quells-religious-riots-200-dead.html>.

¹³ Royal, *Martyrs of the New Millennium*, 114–115.

¹⁴ <https://orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ORFA-6-YEARS-REPORT-290626.pdf>.

¹⁵ <https://orfa.africa/captivity-by-creed-the-religious-sorting-system-nobody-talks-about/>.

¹⁶ <https://organiser.org/2026/08/03/373200/world/nigeria-fulani-islamic-terrorists-massacre-over-52-christians-as-renewed-wave-of-jihadist-violence-ravages-middle-belt/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/30/world/africa/palm-sunday-attack-nigeria-dead.html>.

¹⁸ <https://organiser.org/2026/08/03/373200/world/nigeria-fulani-islamic-terrorists-massacre-over-52-christians-as-renewed-wave-of-jihadist-violence-ravages-middle-belt/>.

¹⁹ Quoted in Royal, *Martyrs of the New Millennium*, 117.

²⁰ <https://orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ORFA-6-YEARS-REPORT-290626.pdf>, p. 5.

²¹ <https://orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ORFA-6-YEARS-REPORT-290626.pdf>.

²² <https://dailycaller.com/2026/03/31/nigeria-intelligence-briefing-christians-killed-palm-sunday-fulani-islam/>; Royal, *Martyrs of the New Millennium*, 120.

²³ <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/africa/hundreds-of-nigerian-students-remain-captive-cameroon-archbishop-warns-of-church-closures>.

²⁴ <https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/africa/nigerian-archbishop-to-trump-give-our-nation-intel-and-weapons-to-combat-violence>.

²⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2026-03/holy-see-christian-persecution-religious-freedom-human-rights.html>.

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