

“2019 Was A Year of Martyrs”

The president of Aid to the Church in Need International makes an initial assessment

Königstein, 2 January 2020.

For Thomas Heine-Geldern, president of the pontifical foundation ***Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)***, “2019 was a year of martyrs, one of the bloodiest for Christians in history. It peaked with the attacks on three churches in Sri Lanka that cost more than 250 people their lives. We are also very concerned about the situation in China and India.”

On a positive note, “politicians and opinion leaders in Western Europe are talking about religious freedom much more frequently now.” As a particularly encouraging example, Heine-Geldern mentioned the video message recorded by the British heir apparent, Prince Charles, for ***Aid to the Church in Need*** at Christmas. In this video, Prince Charles refers to the growing suffering and persecution of Christians all over the world and calls for solidarity.

In this context, Heine-Geldern again called upon multinational and international organisations – such as the European Union and the United Nations – to enable and protect religious freedom as a fundamental human right on all levels and in all countries. “More and more is being said about it, but still too little is being done. It is difficult to believe that in a country like France, attacks against Christian institutions far exceeded 230 in number past year. Also shocking were the events in Chile, where 40 churches have been desecrated and damaged since mid-October.”

Looking towards Africa, the president of ACN expressed his deep concern for the situation of Christians in Nigeria, where Islamic terrorists of Boko Haram have been keeping the North and the area along the border to Cameroon in a state of fear. “On Christmas Eve, Kwarangulum, a village in the state of Borno that is inhabited by Christians, was attacked by jihadists. Seven people were shot dead, a young woman was kidnapped and the houses and the church were burned down. Only a day later, a faction of IS released a video that they claimed showed the execution of ten Christians and a Muslim in north-eastern Nigeria. We are deeply distressed by this. We are celebrating while others are in mourning and live in fear.”

According to Heine-Geldern, 2019 was also a disastrous year for Christians in Burkina Faso. He went on to describe how, little by little, Christians are being pushed out in some parts of the country. Schools and chapels have had to be closed. “Our sources have reported at least seven attacks on Catholic and Protestant communities that have led to the deaths of 34 Christians – among

them two priests and two pastors. Our project partners talk about attempts to destabilise the country, foment religious conflict and stir up violence.”

The situation of the Christians in the Near East is always in his thoughts and prayers. In this context, Heine-Geldern quoted the words of the Archbishop of Erbil, Bashar Matti Warda, who drew attention to the dangers and situation of the Christians in Iraq: the invasion of the terrorist Islamic State was only “one of many attacks on this community of Christians”. The bishop had further said that the invasion had been preceded by a number of other attacks in the history “and with every attack, the number of Christians in Iraq – and Syria – is reduced dramatically.” According to the bishop, the escalating crisis in Lebanon exacerbates the situation of the Christians in the country and at the same time has the side effect that it creates many obstacles for providing aid to Syria.

Nevertheless, Heine-Geldern looks back at the year with gratitude. “The beauty of our work is that, in addition to the cross and the suffering, we can also experience at first hand the deep devotion and love of a large number of people. Take Syria as an example. A country that de facto is still at war and is suffering from the repercussions of war. Over the past few years, we have visited the country several times and it is awe-inspiring how everyone – dedicated lay people, religious sisters, priests and bishops, supported by the generosity of our benefactors – is doing everything possible and impossible to alleviate the spiritual and material hardships of the people.”

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