

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Modern Martyrdom

Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was born in Iran. His family was Muslim, but not observant. At a young age, he converted to Christianity. He eventually married, had a family and became a pastor of a series of small evangelical churches in Iran. In October 2009, he launched a protest against a law requiring that all Iranian students study the Koran. For this, he was arrested and charged with what in Iran is an unforgivable crime: renouncing the Muslim faith. According to Amnesty International, Nadarkhani was offered leniency if he would recant his Christianity. He refused. Nearly three years later, he was still in jail.

For doing that, he had been sentenced to death. According to Iranian law, he could have been executed by hanging.

While international human rights groups lobbied for his release, his story went largely unreported in the mainstream press. But his story wasn't the only one. A report by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran noted that "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Organization abruptly had taken over the oversight of Christian churches in Iran." Tens of thousands of Christians were facing the very real possibility of persecution, or even punishment.

Widespread discrimination against Christians is an ongoing fact of life in many parts of the world. A website—aptly named Persecution.com—even keeps track of incidents such as attacks on churchgoers in Nigeria, the flood of refugees pouring out of war-torn Syria, Coptic Christians in Egypt living in fear for their lives, and the growing number of Christians in the Holy Land who are fleeing for Europe or America.

In Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh, the grand mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, told a crowd that it was "necessary to destroy all

the churches in the Arabian Peninsula." These kinds of comments are extreme, but they resonate with other like-minded people in countries where the concept of freedom of religion is considered a fanciful fiction. Reports alleging forced conversions are cropping up even in the Gaza Strip, not far from the very ground that Jesus walked.

We're used to hearing about the martyrdom of Christians back in the early days of the Church. (It's worth noting that two patron saints of deacons, Stephen and Lawrence, both died as martyrs.) Down through the centuries, countless unnamed men, women and children also sacrificed their lives instead of sacrificing their faith.

But what we may not realize, or want to comprehend, is that modern martyrdom continues today. Innocent people are being punished, or even slaughtered, for believing what we believe, for worshipping as we worship and daring to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

If you can, spare a prayer for them. Pray for all the persecuted around the world. Pray for religious freedom, and tolerance, and respect. Pray that the international community will finally rise up and say "Enough." Pray for all the Youcef Nadarkhanis of the world.

As a community, we will soon mark an important parish feast, Our Lady of Sorrows (September 15), which is the feast of the Queen of Martyrs. I can think of no better way to honor our sorrowful mother than to honor and pray for all the modern martyrs of the world—our brothers and sisters in faith who continue to suffer for the sake of her son.

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see p. 2 for alternative version

Modern Martyrdom: Part I

The *Wall Street Journal*, not too long ago, took note of something that hasn't been on most people's radar screens: It reminded the world of the story of Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani.

Nadarkhani was born in Iran over 32 years ago. His family was Muslim, but not observant. At a young age, he converted to Christianity. He eventually married, had a family and became a pastor of a series of small evangelical churches in Iran. In October 2009, he launched a protest against a law requiring that all Iranian students study the Koran. For this, he was arrested and charged with what in Iran is an unforgivable crime: renouncing the Muslim faith. According to Amnesty International, Nadarkhani had been offered leniency if he would recant his Christianity. He had refused. Nearly three years later, he was still in jail.

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While international human rights groups had lobbied for his release, his story had gone largely unreported in the mainstream press. But his story wasn't the only one. In June, a report by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, noted that "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Organization abruptly had taken over the oversight of Christian churches in Iran." Tens of thousands of Christians were facing the very real possibility of persecution, or even punishment.

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(Part II next week, September 6, 2015)

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