

What Do  
*Their Deaths*  
Demand?

# What Do *Their Deaths* Demand?

*Christian Persecution Today*

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

FOREWORD BY

CARDINAL PIERBATTISTA PIZZABALLA

WORD  on FIRE.



Aid to the  
Church in Need  
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# Contents

Foreword by <i>Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa,</i> <i>Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem</i> . . . . .	ix
Preface . . . . .	xv
Chapter 1 <i>The Most Persecuted Religion</i> . . . . .	I
Chapter 2 <i>Why the Persecution of Christians?</i> . . . . .	26
Chapter 3 <i>So What Can We Do?</i> . . . . .	53
Prayer for Persecuted Christians . . . . .	63
Notes . . . . .	65

# *Foreword*

*Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa,  
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem*

IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE that even today—indeed, I would say especially today—many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world are suffering because of their faith. This book by Bishop Robert Barron comes at a crucial moment. It is a raw, necessary, and urgent testimony. I thank Bishop Barron for having so carefully and courageously gathered the voices of the martyrs of our time, giving them an echo that cannot and must not be ignored.

Reading it, I relived the pain that has accompanied my ministry for years in this Holy Land, a crossroads of faiths and, unfortunately, conflicts. Here, where the Word became flesh, the flesh of his disciples continues to be wounded, humiliated, killed. The stories Barron recounts—from Libya to Nigeria, from Syria to North Korea—are not abstract statistics. They are faces, names, broken stories that I have often had to witness firsthand in my experience of serving the Church in Jerusalem. This means seeing communities decimated by fear or exile,

consoling grieving families, praying over fresh graves. Persecution is not a theological concept; it is the brother who disappears, the church reduced to ashes, the Mass celebrated in secret for fear.

I live in a region where the Christian presence, as ancient and rooted as the olive trees on the hills of Galilee, is under pressure from many fronts—not only because of violent extremism but also because of complex political dynamics, social marginalization, and a conflict that has eroded the existence of all people, including Muslims and Jews, over generations. In this context, being a Christian often means finding oneself in a middle ground, witnessing a reconciliation that seems humanly impossible, while struggling for the simple survival of the community.

I was particularly moved by the story of Father François Mourad, who was martyred in Ghassanieh, Syria. I knew him personally, and I have many fond memories of the beautiful and profound spiritual conversations I had with him. The circumstances of his killing impacted me directly, and I still cherish the images of those dramatic moments and of his death as precious relics. Every now and then, I look at them again to pray and ask for his intercession. The accounts of Father Frans van der Lugt in Homs, Syria, and the Iraqi priests mentioned in the book also remind me of many other religious men and women who, like them, chose to “stay,” not out of partisanship but out of love, to be “here for everyone,” even to the point of extreme sacrifice.

However, Bishop Barron rightly leads us beyond the news to a deeper question: *Why?* Why does the Church,

the body of Christ, seem destined for this confrontation? His theological reflection in the second chapter is fundamental. Persecution is not a mere setback, a sign of failure. It is inscribed in the very identity of a disciple of the One who was “a sign of contradiction” (see Luke 2:34). Jesus was not merely a teacher of wisdom whose message could be accepted or negotiated. His unique claim, that he is the Son of God who came to save, is radical and uncomfortable. He demands total adherence, relativizing every other power, ideology, or worldly system. As the author recalls, the proclamation *Iesus Kyrios* in the Roman provinces was a subversive act with respect to *Kaiser Kyrios*. Today, this same proclamation upsets modern ideologies of consumerism, extreme nationalism, totalitarian secularism, or religious fundamentalisms that exploit God for power.

Our faith proclaims that the kingdom of God is not established by force of arms or cultural coercion but by the weak force of love, forgiveness, and service. This message is destabilizing. This is why the cross, an instrument of torture and defeat, becomes for us the trophy of love’s victory over hatred. Martyrs, from Stephen to Charles Lwanga to the anonymous martyrs of today, die not for a vague ideal but because they cling to this truth: Christ is Lord, and to him alone belongs the ultimate obedience of conscience. Their death is not a defeat but a profound participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus. Faithfulness to Christ, even to the point of sacrificing one’s life, is the supreme response to violence, because love disarms the aggressor. This example, as Tertullian affirmed, gives rise to new Christians.

Yet, as a pastor, I know that in the face of these realities we are tempted by two extremes: sterile indignation, which consumes itself in impotent lamentations, or complicit resignation, which accepts evil as inevitable. In the third chapter, Bishop Barron points us to a concrete path, which I deeply agree with.

First of all, *prayer*. It is not an escape but the first and most powerful act of resistance. In prayer, we unite ourselves spiritually with those who suffer, we bring their cry before God, and we allow the Spirit to transform us into instruments of peace. Praying for our persecutors, as Jesus taught us, is the most revolutionary act, because it breaks the chain of hatred.

It continues with *information*. We cannot love them if we do not know them. Media silence is another form of persecution. We must seek out reliable sources, listen to the stories, and circulate them. Truth is light.

Next comes *charitable and political action*. Supporting organizations that help victims, such as Aid to the Church in Need, is not secondary. We must also use democratic channels to defend religious freedom as a fundamental human right, especially wherever it is violated. Diplomacy and international pressure can—and must—play a greater role in this effort.

Finally, and here I am addressing Christian communities in the West in particular: *the joyful and public witness of our faith*. The “soft” persecution that Bishop Barron speaks of—cultural marginalization, ridicule, pressure to relegate faith to the private sphere—must be countered not with arrogance but with a humble, firm,

and joyful presence. Living the gospel consistently in daily life, at work, and in society is already a powerful form of evangelization and resistance. Building bridges of sincere dialogue with those who think differently, as we do here in the Holy Land between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, is essential. Christian witness is never against anyone; it reaches out to all, for the whole person and for every individual, as the Second Vatican Council teaches.

This book is a powerful appeal to our conscience. It asks us: *What do their deaths demand of us?* We cannot honor the martyrs with emotion alone. Their legacy demands conversion, courage, and commitment. The martyrs of all times ask us today to become witnesses of the Love that conquered death—that is, to live a faith that is not defensive or triumphalist but transformative. A faith that, without inferiority complexes and without a spirit of conquest, seeks to “conquer the world” with the only invincible weapon: love that serves, that forgives, that hopes against all hope.

I entrust these pages to the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of Martyrs, and all the saints who have watered this region and the whole world with their blood. May their intercession sustain us and may the reading of this book instill in us a renewed zeal to proclaim, serve, and bear witness to the Lord Jesus, with love and without fear.

## *Preface*

WHEN I WAS IN MY SECOND YEAR at Mundelein Seminary outside Chicago, I was privileged to hear an after-dinner speech by Bishop Alfred Abramowicz, one of the auxiliary bishops of the Archdiocese of Chicago. I was twenty-four years old at the time, living a fairly easy life, and in a lighthearted mood after a good dinner.

Bishop Abramowicz, who knew very well the precarious political situation in Poland at that moment in history, commenced to speak about Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. A young and eloquent priest, Father Jerzy had galvanized the people of Poland through a series of sermons in which he called out the oppressive Communist government. Bishop Abramowicz movingly spoke to us of the sway that this priest, not much older than we, had on the people. Then he told us how government thugs killed him. They beat him to death, trussed up his body and placed it in the trunk of a car, and then dumped it in the Vistula River. I remember Bishop Abramowicz's speech as if it were yesterday. It woke me out of a complacent slumber and

called me to a new seriousness about my own priesthood. And it lit a fire that has yet to go out—and that, in fact, led to the composition of this book.

The other inspiration for this text was my year of service, together with Cardinal Timothy Dolan and members from a variety of religious traditions, on the presidential Religious Liberty Commission, which began on May 1, 2025. In this role, I sought to bring Catholic social teaching to bear on the commission's important work of defending religious freedom. While there is, as I'll argue anon, much to do in this regard here in the US, the commission's charter also speaks of the need "to further the cause of religious liberty around the world." And this global fight for religious liberty brings us, inevitably, to the fact of religious persecution. Indeed, as the charter notes, there's a historical connection between the two: "The roots of religious liberty stretch back to the early settlers who fled religious persecution in Europe, seeking a new world where they could choose, follow, and practice their faith without interference from the Government."

And Christianity, as we'll see in the first chapter of this book, is by far the most persecuted religion today, all around the world. What are we doing to help our brothers and sisters? More to it, do we even hear their cries at all? In "El Salvador: Requiem and Invocation," the poet Denise Levertov writes,

What do they ask,  
the martyrs,  
of those who hear them,

who know  
the story, the cry,  
who know what brought  
our land to this grief?  
What do their deaths demand?

*What do their deaths demand?* The violent killing and persecution of Christians the world over puts this question to every one of us—especially members of the Church who live and worship in relative comfort and ease.

For many of the stories and case studies in this text, I'm indebted to the fine research of Robert Royal in *The Martyrs of the New Millennium: The Global Persecution of Christians in the Twenty-First Century* (Sophia Institute Press, 2025). I would also like to express my gratitude to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), a pontifical foundation supporting the pastoral care of suffering and persecuted Christians—not only for their help in researching for this book but also for their indispensable work throughout the world. The research provided by ACN draws on information collected through its worldwide engagement and international activities in support of these communities. Please note that the reflections and perspectives expressed throughout this book are uniquely my own.