

This Thanksgiving, Count the Blessings You Take for Granted

Christians in parts of the Middle East are in danger of total extinction. That was the conclusion of a report released last month by Aid to the Church in Need, an international Catholic charity. The report said that Christianity has disappeared from towns in Iraq and Syria because of the wave of genocide carried out by ISIS.

In Iraq, the number of Christians in Iraq has fallen by 90%, the study said. In Syria, the Christian population has fallen by two-thirds since the country's civil war began in 2011, when there were 2 million believers there.

A report in *The New York Times* last year confirmed that most of Syria's once-Christian villages are now ghost towns. ISIS fighters kidnapped villagers and executed them. Women disappeared and became sex slaves to terrorist leaders. Churches were bombed and burned. Traumatized believers fled the country. The defeat of ISIS fighters in 2019, and the death of bloodthirsty ISIS commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Oct. 26, will not bring martyred Christians back from the dead or convince refugees to return to their homeland.

As you celebrate Thanksgiving this year, I hope you are grateful that your church wasn't bombed or that you weren't forced from your home. I encourage you to make a list of blessings you may take for granted. My list for 2019 might help you think of others:

1. **Do you have religious freedom?** The majority of the world's population—75%—live in areas with severe religious restrictions. And Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution simply because of their

belief in Jesus Christ. About 1.6 billion people in the world live in repressive societies where they have no say in how they are governed.

2. **Do you make your own decisions?** There are 29.8 million people living as slaves today, according to the Walk Free Foundation. These people live as forced laborers, forced prostitutes, child soldiers and child brides in forced marriages. Walk Free investigated 162 countries and found slaves in every one.
3. **Do you have money in a bank?** More than 2.5 billion adults around the world are unbanked, according to data based on Gallup polling in 148 countries. Two-thirds of people without accounts said they simply don't have enough money to use a bank.
4. **Do you own shoes?** About 300 million children around the world don't own a pair of shoes. It is estimated that 2 billion people worldwide are currently plagued with parasitic diseases that could be prevented simply by wearing proper footwear.
5. **Do you drink clean water?** About 1.1 billion people in the world don't have access to clean drinking water. Because of that, about 9 million people will die this year because of water-related illnesses. The next time you open a bottle of Dasani or drink from your tap, remember that millions of women around the world spend an average of four hours daily walking to get water.
6. **Did your mother survive when you were born?** Approximately 800 women die every day from complications during pregnancy and childbirth. This is equivalent to 33 women an hour. Almost all these deaths occurred in developing countries, and most could have been prevented.
7. **Did you live past age 5?** Some 21,000 children die every

day around the world because of poverty and preventable diseases. That is equivalent to one child dying every four seconds. The annual death toll is 7.6 million children a year.

8. **Do you eat three meals a day?** The World Health Organization estimates that one-third of the world's population is overfed, one-third is underfed and one-third is starving. Approximately 925 million people in the developing world are chronically undernourished.
9. **Do you enjoy reliable electricity?** About 1.5 billion people in this world have no access to electrical power. Do you enjoy that oven in your kitchen? The next time you prepare a meal, remember that 2.5 billion people in the world still use wood or charcoal to cook their food. Do you enjoy your washing machine? About 5 billion people in the world still wash their clothes by hand.
10. **Do you have a roof over your head?** The U.N. Commission on Human Rights says there are 100 million homeless people in the world. One in 3 children in the world live without adequate shelter. And today there are about 42 million people who are living as refugees. Most were displaced by war and live in crude camps.
11. **Do you own a car?** The United States still has the highest number of motor vehicles in the world. Globally, only 1 out of every 8 people has access to a car. Many of the others either walk, take crowded buses or public vans or ride on bicycles, rickshaws or animals. Did you fly somewhere in the past year? You are blessed. Only 5% to 7% of people in the world have ever flown in an airplane.
12. **Do you have a flushable toilet?** The United Nations Development Program reports that 2.6 billion people do not have access to any toilet facilities. India has the largest percentage of people who lack adequate

sanitation. About 638 million Indians must go outdoors.

13. **Can you read?** Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names. There are 72 million children who should be in school but are not enrolled. And if you have a college degree, you are in a privileged minority; only 6.7% of people in the world have a college diploma.
14. **Can you see?** Over 285 million people in the world are visually impaired. About 39 million of these are blind and 246 million have a moderate to severe visual impairment. India is home to the world's largest number of blind people, due to the country's acute shortage of optometrists.

King David wrote: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits" (Ps. 103:2). Thanksgiving is not an optional virtue. Without it, our pride swells and our selfishness consumes us. Thanksgiving is an important exercise because it adjusts our attitude. It calibrates our hearts so that we stop complaining and instead remember how we are blessed and who deserves the credit for our blessings. Happy Thanksgiving!