

Christians Look to Revive ISIS-Ravaged Town: 'They Can't Defeat God'

On August 6, 2014, nearly 60,000 people fled the Christian town of Qaraqosh just hours before ISIS overran the area. A few weeks ago, the Kurdish military liberated the city, uncovering a trail of destruction and devastation left behind by the occupiers.

CBN News joined Sister Diana, a Dominican nun, and her team who showed us what ISIS did to their city. We visited her home church, the Immaculate Conception Cathedral, first.

"This is considered the largest church for us in the Middle East," Sister Diana said. "We do all our worship in here. I would say my parents got married here. We had our first Communion here, and we used to worship every single day during feast days, Christmas (and) Easter."

From the floor to the ceiling to the altar, ISIS left its mark.

"What we were told is that they gathered so many of these benches, they put it inside in the middle and burned them. So the church was burning for days," she explained.

ISIS, she said, was intent on destroying everything that represented Christianity.

"They have took [sic] the host and threw it on the ground, so they are against every Christian symbol. Everything actually, wherever they saw a cross, they took it down," she said.

"If you see here, you have the altar. There were crosses in there," she said. "Wherever you see the damage, they tried to

do as much as they could in their power to say, you know, you Christians stop living here. This is not your land. It makes me speechless.”

In the rubble, she found charred pages from a New Testament.

“The letter to John first, chapter 4th and 5th, because He’s the One to come and save us with water and blood,” she said. “It says do not follow evil, but follow everyone who does goodness because he’s from God. Whoever [has] done evil does not see God.”

Terrorists Train in Church Courtyard

When ISIS occupied Qaraqosh, they used the church courtyard as a training ground, littering it with bullets. They used the far end of the courtyard for target practice.

The insurgents took thousands of books from the convent and burned them in the courtyard, leaving behind a pile of ashes.

“This is what we honor and it has turned into ashes; those are our books,” Sister Diana said.

ISIS used the church courtyard to train killers.

“You see, they were training for target practice, especially this area,” she continued. “Imagine how many people they trained to kill.”

‘We Lost Everything’

CBN News witnessed more devastation on the street, some of it caused by coalition airstrikes targeting ISIS operatives.

“What you see here, those were houses,” she continued. “As a matter of fact, one, two, three, four, five houses, and that has been destroyed and that has been destroyed. Those houses belong to families, families that worked so hard.”

We met with one family who lost their home and money, but most devastating was the loss of their 3-year-old daughter, whom the terrorists snatched from her mother's lap.

"We lost everything. Her daughter has been put down. Everything we own, we lost it," a survivor explained. "These streets used to be so busy, active. These are all markets and you see it's empty."

ISIS scribbled graffiti all over Qaraqosh. One place says ISIS will crush or squish all the unbelievers (non-Muslims) and another place says the Islamic state will expand, with Allah's permission.

On another wall, the graffiti reads, "We destroyed your crosses; we beheaded you, you infidels."

Throughout the city, ISIS destroyed or burned Christian houses of worship. They especially damaged crosses. And they pillaged Christian graves.

ISIS not only destroyed the homes of the living, they also desecrated the final resting place of the dead. In one cemetery, they destroyed memorial plaques and opened graves to steal valuables from the corpses.

Sister Diana says without faith in God, the devastation would be overwhelming.

"They destroy everything dear to us, but we tell them, they could not destroy our will, our faith, our strength," she said. "They could destroy material things, but what lived is the eternal things."

Townpeople Need Assurance

Sister Diana prays the townspeople will return but says they need assurance.

"No. 1 is security. If I don't feel secure, you know, I won't be able to stay here. If a father, a mother doesn't feel secure, they won't send their children to school," she said.

Kurdish soldier Mafook Sata told CBN News, "After we liberate Qaraqosh, we hold the ground. The purpose of the Nineveh Protection Unit is to hold the ground."

The town now sits under the control of a Christian-based militia, but Sata says they need more help.

"People, they need to come back, but they need to feel safe," Sata explained. "They need force on the ground. They need, you know, international protection that would be true, like a guarantee that it will never happen again."

"It's really scary to think that if something really big doesn't happen, that ISIS could be successful in trying to destroy this community," said Kelsey Beal, with the Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organization. "It isn't without hope, but people need to help."

"People, if they want to rebuild and return to their homes, they're going to need help. They are broke already. They are homeless already. They are living in a place not their homeland. This is their homeland," he said.

No Matter What, We'll Be Faithful

Sister Diana fears the discouragement may convince many Christian families to leave the area. But, she says, the Christians of northern Iraq are its salt and light.

"That's what the gospel says, and that's what we try to be – to carry the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are going to be faithful to Him. No matter what they do, they can't defeat God, and the glory of this church and this town is coming back. Sooner or later, God has promises for a better

life, and you know what, we're going to look for that promise."

In the meantime, Sister Diana asks for prayers that their faith will remain strong as residents of Qaraqosh trickle back to see their homes, their church and to worship.

{eoa}

Reprinted with permission from . Copyright The Christian Broadcasting Network, Inc., All rights reserved.