

Franklin Graham: Persecution of Christians Is 'Genocide'

Franklin Graham, son of the famed evangelical preacher Billy Graham, urged fellow Christians to struggle against a "Christian genocide" that he says has killed in greater numbers than most believers can fathom.

Graham, who has been criticized by some evangelicals for calling Islam "evil" and for portraying President Trump as aligned with the Christian church, spoke Wednesday (May 10) at a conference aimed at highlighting an issue many feel is ignored by politicians and the media.

"It is safe to say that over 100,000 a year are killed because of their faith in Christ. In the last 10 years that would be close to a million people. It's the equivalent of a Christian genocide," Graham told the World Summit in Defense of Christians.

"I am sure the number of Christians who are in prison or martyred each year would stagger our mind if we really knew what the total number really was. And it would send us to our knees in sorrow and in prayer."

It's not clear what Graham's numbers are based on.

The nonprofit Christian organization Open Doors—which tracks Christian persecution globally and the increasing number of Middle Eastern Christians who seek safety outside their homelands—estimates that every year, around 4,000 Christians are killed because of their faith worldwide.

Genocide is both a moral and legal term, used only a handful of times in U.S. history. Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry applied the label in 2016 to the killings of Christians, Shiite Muslims and Yazidis by the group known as the Islamic

State.

But some political leaders and bodies hesitate with the term, because of the specificity of the definition and because its use obligates intervention.

Graham described violence against Christians in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere as part of a larger, global antagonism toward the faith.

“Far more widespread, however, is the discrimination and open hostility that millions of believers encounter every day because of their loyalty to Jesus,” Graham, 64, told an audience of about 600 Christians from a variety of denominations and countries.

“In the name of tolerance, Christians are often treated with intolerance because they stand for moral purity and they stand for God’s truth. In the name of patriotism, Christians are often treated as unpatriotic because they follow a higher authority, almighty God.”

Ahead of his planned rallies in Vancouver and San Juan in recent months, Baptist and other evangelical pastors in Canada and Puerto Rico have publicly denounced Graham for fanning Islamophobia.

The four-day World Summit in Defense of Christians, being held for the first time, features panels and speakers including Vice President Mike Pence, who will address participants on Thursday. Graham’s own Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, named for his 98-year-old father, is sponsoring the gathering at a historic, downtown Washington hotel.

To get to their seats for Graham’s address, attendees passed between two electronic billboards, each 10 feet tall, scrolling the names of “Martyrs for Christ.” Graham and other speakers noted the diversity of Christians assembled, with contingents of Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox.

Preceding Graham at the podium, Pope Francis' representative in the U.S. expressed the pontiff's hopes for the conference. Christians have their differences, said Apostolic Nuncio (ambassador) Christophe Pierre, but they must unite to defend the persecuted among them because "peace triumphs through solidarity."

Also speaking at the opening of the summit: Metropolitan Tikhon, primate of the Orthodox Church in America, and the Rev. Mouneer Hanna Anis, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt, who stressed that Christians have shown love to the killers of their relatives.

"The forgiveness that has been expressed by families of martyrs is the most powerful witness in the face of terrorism," he said.

Forgiveness and Christ's call to love one's enemies were invoked during the evening far more than Islamic militants were blamed for the sufferings of Christians. But Graham, at one point in his 25-minute speech, presented Islamists as threats to Christians globally.

He said the Islamic State fighters who beheaded Coptic Christians on a Libyan beach in 2015 had then promised to conquer Rome.

"This threat to Rome was not just a threat to the Roman Catholic Church but to all Christians everywhere," Graham said. {eo}

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