

With Hell Arriving in Syria, Christians Urge Pope Francis to Help

Syrian Christians who fled a village near the border with Turkey after it was captured by Islamist rebels say they refuse to leave the country and urged Pope Francis to pray for them and help them return home.

In March, rebels including fighters from the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front captured the majority-Armenian village of Kasab in the coastal province of Latakia, a stronghold of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Thousands of people fled to the city of Latakia and accused hardline Sunni fighters of targeting Christians and desecrating holy sites. Rebels denied the accusations.

Christians interviewed by Reuters said they hoped Pope Francis, who visited Bethlehem on Sunday, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, would pray for peace in Syria.

"The pope's visit is a holy one, we wish for him to work for peace and pray for peace in Syria," Father Miron Owadesyan said.

The Argentinean pope made an urgent appeal for an end to Syria's war on Saturday at the start of his first trip to the Holy Land as pontiff.

In the first days of the attack on Kasab, more than 1,500 people sought refuge in the Armenian Greek Orthodox church of the Virgin Mary in Latakia city 30 miles away.

Most of them have since moved and now only about 100 people are living in the 1,200-year-old-church, mainly surviving on donations and support from the government.

Narik Louisian, a priest from Kasab, said he hoped the Pope would use his influence to help Christians in the Middle East who have felt threatened by violence and political turmoil.

“(It is) our right as Christians to live in the East, the East is our land too,” he said. “We are an inseparable part of the Holy Land.”

Tamar Minoknian, a 40-year-old housewife, said she wanted Pope Francis to help Syria’s displaced Christians return to their villages. “We want him to help us return to our houses. We do not want aid, we just want to go back to our homes.”

Latakia and neighboring Tartous provinces together form the Mediterranean heartland of the Alawite faith—the Shi’ite-derived sect of which Assad is a member.

Many Alawites have remained loyal to the government throughout the three-year-old conflict which has killed at least 160,000 people.

Syria’s Christian community, about 10 percent of the population, is wary of the rising power of Islamist groups within the rebel movement, and only a small percentage of Christians have taken up arms.

“I cannot live outside Syria, we were born here and we will die here,” Nerneen Boinashikian, in her fifties, told Reuters while she was preparing lunch. “All that we want is to return to our homes. Enough destruction.”

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