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ASIA/IRAQ - After the massacre, the "dilemma" of Iraqi Christians

Baghdad (Agenzia Fides) – "Iraqi Christians are now terrified and in shock. They are faced with a terrible dilemma: emigrate and save the lives of their loved ones, or stay in the country and witness to the faith, risking death." This is what Fides has learned from Fr. Vincent Van Vossel, CSSR, Superior of the Redemptorists in Baghdad, after the massacre that took place October 31 in the Syrian Catholic Church of Our Lady of Salvation. A commando of terrorists linked to al Qaeda stormed the church, crowded with faithful during the Mass, taking those present hostage. Iraqi security forces made a raid to free them, but the the militants reacted with a massacre that left 58 dead, including two priests, and about 70 wounded.

Fr. Vincent, who has lived in Iraq for 40 years and teaches at Babel College in Baghdad, the college affiliated with the Pontifical Urban University, has issued a heartfelt testimony to Fides: "We are living something that is really terrible. There had never been a massacre of such magnitude, all within a church during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. I have visited the church and listened to the testimonies of the faithful in shock. The terrorists mercilessly killed women and children. The community is traumatized. The church looked like a cemetery."

The Christian community in Baghdad has lost two young Syro-Catholic priests, Fr. Wasim Sabieh and Fr. Thaier Saad Abdal, while a third priest, Chorepiscop Fr. Rufail Quataimi, is still in the hospital in serious condition.

"What a tragedy! The two priests who died, not yet in their thirties, were my students at the College. They were very active in Bible apostolate, in interfaith dialogue, and charity. Fr. Thaier was in charge of a Center for Islamic Studies, and Fr. Wasin was very involved in helping poor families. We will miss them," says Fr. Vincent.

The Redemptorist recalls that "yesterday a number of attacks hit Baghdad and Shiite areas, which means that not only Christians are under attack, but the whole area is flooded by terrorism. It is hard to see a hopeful future for the nation right now," he says. "We do not know who is behind these acts, nor where the nation is headed. Meanwhile, the people suffer. There are such great evils that beset the country."

Hence, the dilemma for Christians: "The faithful say their life has become impossible. Many Christian families are organizing themselves to leave the country. The excruciating dilemma is whether to flee in search of a better future, or stay, risking their lives. In this tragic moment, the Bishops have a great responsibility to speak to the faithful, to give their reasons and hopes, to convince them to stay. The task of our pastors, today, is very difficult," he remarked.

The funeral was held yesterday, says the Redemptorist missionary. "It was attended by many Muslim leaders who asked the government to defend Christians. We hope that, after yet another massacre, civil authorities listen to the cry of Christians in Iraq and place an end to their suffering." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 3/11/2010)

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