



“HOPING AGAINST HOPE”

Stories of Catholic faith and life amid persecution around the world

Speakers:

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The American Bible Society
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Crossroads: Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to all on behalf of the American Bible Society and Crossroads Cultural Center. I am Mario Paredes, Presidential Liaison for the Roman Catholic Ministry of the American Bible Society and I am also a member of the Crossroads Advisory Board.

Tonight's event is meant to help us know more about the experience of persecution as is lived by many of the members of the Church around the world. On one hand, there is certainly a need to raise the public's awareness about how widespread anti-Christian persecution is today in many countries. A recent study argued that almost 70% of religion-motivated violence in the world takes place against Christians. In our culture, of course, if any other group were subjected to this type of abuse, it would lead to an endless stream of recrimination and public moralizing.

Our purpose, however, is different; we would like to focus our discussion on the experience of the victims of persecution, and how it becomes radically different when it is faced and judged within the experience of faith. Since its early days, the capacity to look at persecution in a different way, and to recognize its mysterious significance, has been one of the great signs of the presence of Christ in the life of the Church, and it still is. We need only to look around to find witnesses who show this to us.

Tonight, we are fortunate to have three people who, in different ways, have had a remarkable personal experience of living their faith in front of great hostility.

First we'll hear from Fr. John Lasuba. Fr. Lasuba is Parochial Vicar of St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in Rochester, Minnesota. He was born in Yei District in Southern Sudan where he grew up and went to school. He completed his theological studies in 1992 and was ordained a priest in 1993 for the Archdiocese of Juba. In 1997, Fr. John joined the liberated area of Southern Sudan, and worked there until the time he came to the U.S. in 2004 (he will tell us more about this). In 2005, he joined St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church on the invitation of Msgr. Jerry Mahon, pastor of St. John's.

Let us now welcome Fr. John Lasuba.

Lasuba: Thank you for this warm welcome. My name is Fr. John Lasuba. I was born and raised in Southern Sudan which by July the 9th of this year [2011] will be the newest country in the world. All my life I lived in that part of the world until I became a priest and today I'm here in your country. I'm happy to be sharing about "Hoping against Hope." Hope is the word that kept me alive. The last ten years before I came to your country in 1997 when I escaped, I worked in the liberated areas of Southern Sudan, by then controlled by the liberation movement and the liberation army in Southern Sudan.

I'm going to tell you my personal experience of faith amid persecution. I was born in Sudan and had lived my whole life, except these past five years, in a faith that was persecuted. So I will start with slides that will show the overall view of where I came from, and the second part will be about my personal life, and the third part will be about my diocese, the Archdiocese of Juba in Southern Sudan.

As you all know, Sudan is on the continent of Africa. It is the largest country in Africa. Sudan's history in brief: From 1899 to 1955, Sudan was under joint British and Egyptian rule. In 1955, civil war broke out in Southern Sudan. Maybe you'll ask why? It was four months before the independence that Sudan got from the British and the Egyptians on January 1, 1956. And from 1955 to 2005 the country had been in civil war. The war that started in 1955 was brought to an end in 1972. Peace lasted only for ten years, and in 1983, again the second civil war broke out. In 2002, a cease fire was signed between the warring groups in the second civil war. This is an overview to give you an idea of all that has happened. Practically the last 54 years our faith has experienced a growing persecution.

The effects of civil war on the people of South Sudan: 50 years of civil war have devastated South Sudan's infrastructure and crippled the local economy. In the South Sudan civil war of 1955 to 1972, 1.9 million civilians were killed. They were Christians murdered because of their belief in Christ. Hundreds of thousands of Southern Sudanese were forced to flee their homes. In the South Sudan civil war of 1983 to 2005, 4 million South Sudanese were forced to flee their homes because at this time most of the Southern Sudanese were about to leave the country. That's why the persecution of Christians in South Sudan came up in the news. The first civil war was not in the news a lot. In the second civil war, we lost another 2 million civilians. In total, 4 million were killed from 1955 to 2005.

About the people, what do they do? There's virtually nothing to do. They raise cattle and farm just about enough to survive. The unemployment rate in Southern Sudan is 60%. Those who do work get employment from non-governmental organizations that come and try to help.

Some of the problems faced by the people of South Sudan: Health is a big one. If you were born today in Juba, your life expectancy would be 59 years, whereas the life expectancy in the United States is 75.7. War effects people's physical health. These photos I took myself for you to see how much people suffer for their faith, and this is mainly from hunger and disease. Some of the results of a shortage of clean water and lack of proper sewage treatment and waste disposal: scabies, hepatitis A, septicemia, cholera, malaria, blindness from trachoma, and guinea worm which is one of the most common diseases. If it comes in your body, there is no medicine. You take something like a piece of wood and you keep rolling it until it falls off. If you are not lucky, it breaks and then you suffer for a long time or you die. Malaria is just part of life. It comes and goes and it kills.

War affects people's mental health. Trauma becomes part of what people undergo. The people of

Southern Sudan have undergone that for the last 50 years and now we're going to have a new country. This is an area that still needs a lot of work because almost all of the people are traumatized from the war. Imagine all these years from 1983 to 2005. You can imagine what kind of experience they have undergone.

There is currently only one doctor for every 10,000 people. Only 59% of the children are immunized against measles. The infant mortality rate is 82.43 in 1,000 children whereas in the United States it is 6.26 in 1,000. And of course due to the war the area was closed and it was difficult for aid to get in. 400,000 Sudanese live with HIV/AIDS, and this includes 21,000 children.

There are currently 1.3 million orphans in South Sudan. I myself am an orphan. I was one of eight children. Three of my brothers and my father were massacred during those seven years. Then in 1992 another sibling was martyred. When I became a priest in 1993, again they were running after me and I was advised to leave the city. I ran and joined the liberation army until the time I came to the United States in 2004. In every family in South Sudan you'll find that there's an orphan, mainly from the war.

The illiteracy level is very high. Those who get an education are those who succeed to make their way to a neighboring country—Kenya or Uganda. Children from age 10 are only allowed to go and protect the land and that's it. And some of them have lost their parents and what they want to do is be with the army and this is what's happened. When I was in the movement, I tried to give students the basics—ABCs. We taught the first graders and when they got to the third grade they had to teach the younger ones. The fifth graders had to teach the fourth of third graders. That's what we did in that time. 2% of the children finish primary school. This is the lowest rate of education in the world. We are going to have a new country, and I don't know how it's going to be without educated people.

Overpopulation is becoming an issue. Our people were scattered all over the world, and after signing an agreement in 2005, many returned to Juba which is the capital city of South Sudan. That of course brings issues. They thought they could find jobs, but the liberation army that came from the bushes is causing tension.

You cannot talk of an infrastructure in Southern Sudan. Practically all the buildings were destroyed. In my hometown you cannot see one single standing building. During the time of the war, the planes bombed day and night, so all the buildings are destroyed. The roads don't exist anymore. The bridges that existed were all destroyed in a ten year period.

On a personal note, I was born in Yei, South Sudan in 1962. When I was a young boy, my father and brothers were murdered during the war. My mother and sisters and I left Yei and settled in Juba. I entered the priesthood and was ordained for the Archdiocese of Juba, which is the capital city for Southern Sudan today. I ministered to the Yei Diocese when I was in the liberation army. This used to be my hometown church, but it is no more like this photo. When the town of Yei was captured, our brothers in the north were using it to store ammunition and so forth. That is part of the persecution.

There is a group of churches, nine different denominations that come together as Christians to work together and whatever we find we share with the other churches.

There are prisoners of war. These are our brothers from the northern part. Have you heard of the area called Darfur? That poor area was a Christian area, but during the wave of Islamization in Sudan, they were made Muslim. Then our brothers in the northern part used them. They were told, "Go and kill the

infidel and you will go to heaven.” They were captured and I used to go and pray with them and talk to them and explain to them why we are struggling; we are struggling for our right to be free and practice our faith. When I was in the government controlled area, I could not leave the facility without a permit. I could not organize prayer or Bible sharing in my church without a permit. Those were the kinds of things I used to explain to them. I told them, “When you go to the mosque, you are not asked for a permit. Why should I, as a Christian, be asked for a permit?” So they started to understand, and maybe when they were released they changed their way of thinking.

We tried to establish a civil society in Yei, and the commissioner, because of the trauma, killed himself.

I had a car that I used for a pastoral work, given to me by a bishop in Uganda. Uganda is the place where we get the basics—sugar, salt and so forth. People were sent to kill me. Fortunately I was not on that trip, but they killed my driver and burned that car.

Once I went to get a child who was a victim of a bombing from a Russian built war plane. I was not trained as a nurse, but I did what I could to help him. He survived.

I had a temporary hut, it was my rectory that I stayed in when I first arrived in Wondruba, South Sudan. If we were running, I had to run with that tent. I used to go to the front lines and I had to cover the hut sometimes so the enemy planes would not be able to see it. There were Christians there, so I went to be with them. Sometimes I would stay for six months and that was my house. Then the men helped me to make a permanent residence out of raw bricks. That was my rectory when I was in the movement, and until the time I came I was living in that house. I have six of them around there. I used to move. Soldiers would help to protect me. Sometimes you are in the middle of Mass and you are attacked. So I had six of those huts. I had a truck from Catholic Relief Services and I went to Uganda and got some supplies. Bridges and roads had been destroyed so it could take you seven days to go 46 miles.

The third part of my talk is about the Archdiocese of Juba now, made up of seven dioceses. It is 9,709 square miles. Yei is where I was born. South Sudan has seven dioceses and there are two in the northern part of the country. The Juba Archdiocese has 11 parishes. The towns are controlled by the government. Outside we don't count them. The Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Juba is Paolino Lukudu Loro. He was ordained in 1970 and became a consecrated bishop in 1979. In 1983 he became the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Juba. He lives in the town civilly controlled by the government. I was outside. I could come 40 miles, but I could not get to where he lives because I worked for the liberation movement, so for the last ten years I was there, I never came into contact with him until 2005. That's when I saw him. In the last 25 years, Archbishop Loro has ordained 41 diocesan priests, three deacons, and 37 major seminarians.

What is it like to live in Juba Archdiocese? Conflicts in the southern part of the country, compounded by drought and floods, have caused instability, along with all the other things I mentioned earlier.

So a general overview of the Archdiocese: We have about 500,000 Catholics which makes up 61% of the population. As of 2009, we have 50 priests, 3 deacons and 60 nuns. Of all 11 parishes in Juba, there are only 3 standing church buildings. All the others have been destroyed by civil war. Mass is now celebrated in grass huts. The number of priests is increasing in the Archdiocese which has one minor seminary and one major national seminary. Amid all this devastation the Church is growing. The Archdiocese's biggest asset is that today the Church is now free, the people are now free to practice

their faith, and there is now relative overall peace with the signing of the agreement, and the Church is now able to concentrate on administering to the people's spiritual needs. Also, the Archdiocese is now working with the government of South Sudan to promote security and there are now at least 12 Catholic schools in the Archdiocese, as well as a hospital and three clinics, and is working together with world health organizations to find the best ways to handle the diocese's health issues.

You are probably asking yourself, "What can I do?" Well, I'm glad you asked that question. You can raise the awareness of the needs of the Archdiocese and form a group of people to work with the Archdiocese or volunteer to do something for the Archdiocese. You can make a donation. Even small contributions are helpful. There's a lot of work that needs to be done. We are going to be a new nation. I'm glad that your country has stood with us over all these years, and I know that without your country we would not have South Sudan which is going to be born on July 9, 2011. So I continue to appeal to you.

Paredes: Thank you, Fr. John.

Now may I introduce Deacon Raj Srinivasa who is deacon at Saint Antoninus Church. He was born in India into a Hindu, Brahmin family. He arrived in the U.S. in 1979 with his first wife, Gita, and daughter, Nivedita. Raj encountered the Lord Jesus in a dramatic way in March of 1980, after the tragic death of his wife. He was baptized in 1982, he remarried in 1983 and was ordained a Permanent Deacon of the Archdiocese of Newark on June 2005. Deacon Raj works as a Global Product Manager for EMC Corporation. He has an undergraduate degree in Mathematics, and Master's Degrees in English (from India and Ireland) and in Theology (from Seton Hall University).

Let us welcome Deacon Srinivasa.

Srinivasa: Why don't we offer this to my God and your God? In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Father, we come before You and we want to give You glory in all things through Your Son, Jesus, Our Lord and may your Holy Spirit kindle within us the flames of Divine Love. Amen.

I don't have any slides to show anything from my background, but I'll talk a little bit about my background, my story of conversion to the faith, and a little bit of the type of persecution I experienced after my conversion, what's happening in India as far as Catholicism goes, Christianity goes.

I am from a Hindu Brahmin background. I'm not sure if people know what Brahmin means. The caste system in India is a gradation that occurred many thousands of years ago. So we really do not know exactly when things happened in India. History, the timing, is not even considered; as long as it happened in India, that is sufficient for people to believe it. It doesn't matter when it happened or how it happened. Christianity didn't happen in India, so it's not Indian, even though it's been there 2,000 years. Indians are very particular about things happening in India regardless of when it happened or how it happened.

Hinduism is a gradation, and from a Hindu perspective, the godhead they have, there are three gods—Brahma, the one who creates life, creates the world, the universe, Vishnu, the sustainer of this life and the life from birth that begins to decline, and Shiva, the one who is the destroyer. It is cyclical; life is constantly being created, sustained and destroyed. The Hindus believe in this cycle. Brahmins believe in created humans, but they don't have any idea when or how human beings were created. They don't

really agree or accept the Christian creation stories. For them it doesn't matter; they don't even know how a human being was created, but a human being is here on earth with a soul, and the human being was created, based on Brahma, some were created in a very pure state, and some were created in a very impure state. And this state changes based on birth and rebirth. So based on my existence on earth and what I do today, based on my actions, I can promote myself into a higher form of life or I can demote myself into a lower form of life. The purest form was the Brahmin.

When I was born, I was born into a Brahmin family, and we were poor. We were eight children. My father was a physicist; he had two doctorate degrees; he taught in England; he was a very educated man, but he did not believe in God. He always had the question of who made God which is a classic question, and he didn't want to wait for the answer. He went on to believe in science more than anything else. He believed in education. In India when I was growing up, the population was 450 million people, and now it's 1.2 billion people, but being a Brahmin, even though we were poor, we would never starve because a lot of the Brahmins are involved in the temples of India. The temples own land and from the land rice and grain is donated to these temples. The Brahmins always had part of that grain for themselves. But the poorest of the poor in India are about 170 million people known as the Dalits, the "untouchables." These are marginalized people. They have been driven out of the caste system. They are so low on the caste system, they are not even considered to be of any worth. Because of the karmic law, like the story of Lazarus and the rich man, these people are always at the doorsteps of the wealthy, but they are not given the opportunities to promote themselves upward in society because the belief is that only by their actions in this world in the present time can they promote themselves or remain in that inferior state. So the Hindu religion is based on these rigid barriers that they can't move across.

2000 years ago, in 56 A.D., Christianity enters the scene of India when St. Thomas lands on its shores. India had already had a Jewish presence; there was a Jewish synagogue in Kerala. Even in King Solomon's days, trading was already taking place in India. The Jews were already welcomed in India. The Jewish people were treated very well in India. According to research, India was the only country that never persecuted the Jewish person. Even today, the Jews have never been persecuted in India even though they persecuted their own 170 million untouchables in India, not allowing them to go anywhere. The Jews are taken care of by the kings of India. And so in 56 A.D. when Christianity came in, Christianity focused on the fringe.

The Brahmins that I come from is a society of intellectuals, the priestly caste people who use their own reason and intellect to get around Christianity. So they would always try to reason it out because the Hindus are pantheistic; they worship many gods. I come from a family that worships many gods, and Jesus became a god that you could put on the wall and say, "We are very broad-minded people; we allow other gods to come in. But you Christians are narrow-minded people because you only worship one God." So reasoning was very unique and interesting for them because to be able to convert a Hindu Brahmin to Christianity was the toughest task that St. Francis Xavier had in the 1500s. He was my patron saint. I took his name when I got baptized as Catholic.

So I was born in this family of Hindus that was so steeped in Hinduism, even though they did not practice. Very few Indians really practice Hinduism. They are Hindus; they live a philosophy of life, but their life is based on their karmic principles that they were born into certain situations. They have many gods; they are pantheistic people, so they have three ways of attaining freedom from this birth and rebirth. Hindus believe in a salvation; they want to be freed from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Hinduism offers three ways to do that: through knowledge of their scriptures, by studying and

meditation on scriptures; secondly, by being devoted to their gods. You pick one god and stay devoted to this god; it's called *Bhakti*. In fact, among Hindus there are Christians who have now become not Christians but Jesus Bhaktis in order to get around this problem of persecution in India and become one with Hindus. They've taken Jesus as a god and meditated on him so they can attain this salvation from a Hindu perspective. Thirdly, the way is the karmic way which is considered to be alms-giving. If you give alms to poor people then you can be liberated at some point in time. They don't know when, what the criteria are, because there are no criteria. It's up to the Brahmin to tell you, "Okay, you've done it; now you're freed." So there's no understanding of how you're going to break this cycle, but you're going to keep trying and trying.

So Hinduism is a religion where man attempts to break free from his own self by his own methods, reaching out to God through yoga and all these things of self. By meditating upon oneself they want to give enough velocity to their soul that it releases them like a rocket does. How many miles per hour, how much meditation should one do to be released from this cycle of birth and rebirth? They think of their life like a river that's flowing and then goes into the ocean of the soul, but they don't know how it is, what it is. What is salvation? What is the afterlife? So there's a certain hopelessness about this whole faith.

So when I grew up, I had the same issue as a child, grappling with problems of purpose in my life. I went through many dark days in India in my teen years, but my father being so much into education, being a professor at the university, was able to send his children to all the best schools in my city. That's what he did. He educated all of us—four brothers, four sisters—a couple of them are doctors, one is a nuclear engineer. They are highly educated. We moved out of poverty through this education. I was sent to an Anglican school run by the Australians. Missionaries have been in India. There is also Catholics, Jesuits, but they're not allowed to proselytize in India. God forbid if someone proselytizes, meaning tries to convert someone to Christianity; they'll be shipped out of India. Mother Teresa couldn't do it. She was monitored day and night by the Indian government. She trusted God in her life, that God would do the converting through her lived experience in India. By being Christ to other people day in and day out, she was able to baptize 63,000 Indians without preaching Christ openly.

The problem of persecution in India, which is rampant all over northern India, churches being burnt, people being killed, everything happening... is because people are following methods that are in your face a lot of times of open conversions and proselytizing in areas that they shouldn't be, but they are being confronted by a sect in Hinduism which is militant. The majority of Hindus are non-violent people. They are not out to kill you, but there is this now-growing menace in India of militant Hindus who say that because Christianity is of foreign origin, they do not want it on their soil. Get it out! It doesn't matter if it's been there 2,000 years. So they've changed all foreign names. Bombay is now Mumbai. Madras is now Chennai. So all these are Indian names. They're getting rid of all English-sounding names because they now want to be so focused on India as a Hindu nation.

So when I was young studying in that school, no one taught me about Jesus Christ, but one thing happened when I was eleven years old, I was convicted of something called *sin* which was never mentioned in Hinduism. Karma is action—good action or bad action. It doesn't say sinful or not sinful. You could be walking on the street of New York and suddenly somebody drops a flower pot on your head, not on anyone else's head but your head. An Indian would say, "That's my Karma. I did something really bad in my last birth." The guy who dropped the flower pot, whether it was deliberate or not, that action will have consequences for that person in a future life, will affect that person being born as an inferior person or a superior person. That's the belief system of India, but sin is not

something really understandable because in Christianity, sin is an offense against the truth of God, the absolute truth. And so when I became convinced of sin, for me it was, “I have offended God.” I knew there was a God then. I didn’t know who He was, what He was, nothing. So I would go upstairs, kneel and pray and say, “God, please take away my sin.” I didn’t know what I was praying for, why I was praying, who I was praying to, but I knew there was a God and I knew there was sin.

So when I moved out of that state, even as I grew up—I left India, got married in India to a lower caste woman. I had to fight for that marriage for four years to get married within the Hindu system. For marriage, India has Hindu laws, Muslim laws, but no Christian law. If a Hindu marries a Christian woman, that marriage is null and void according to Hindu law. If a Hindu converts to Christianity, the Hindu loses all natural rights to his own children and all rights to parental property. India is now passing anti-conversion laws and almost all of the northern states have them. That means one cannot openly proselytize or even say to someone, “Come and see.” If you say that, that’s alluring. If you offer money to a poor person, saying, “You are poor; let me give you some money,” a Christian doing that is considered trying to convert the poor person, and that’s against the law. So persecution is now slowly taking on different faces in India. Remember there are only 23.4 million Christians in India compared to a population of 1.2 billion people. The Hindus are afraid. They don’t want people to be converted to Christianity because Hinduism will decrease. But you can see the disparity, the calculations.

So when I left India in 1977 for Ireland, I was married and in Ireland I had my first daughter who is sitting here today. We came here to this country in 1979, and in 1979 we were economically distressed and we had a terrible life here and I had a terrible marriage because of economics and I sent my daughter, she was a baby, and my first wife back to India and nine days later she committed suicide by dousing herself with kerosene. That day in my life I had an amazing experience in Jersey City. When I was about to wake up I saw this white image bathed in light coming to my bedside and I lifted up my hands and said, “Jesus Christ, my Lord, take unto yourself, place your palm on her head, heal her.” And I cried this twice. The white image receded. I didn’t know what happened that morning, but when I came home that evening they said she had died. I went to India, cremated her, came back to the U.S., and four days later I was going to commit suicide. I had all these sleeping tablets. I was crying to God for help. And this thought came into my head, “Get up and go to Two Guys.” [Two Guys is a discount department store that went out of business in 1982.] My brothers, my sisters, that was a beautiful thought for me because there was nothing else in my head. God’s reason is so much different from our reason. God penetrated my reason with a simple message saying, “I’m here for you; get up and go to Two Guys.” I thought he was going to send somebody there to meet me. I went; I didn’t see anyone, but I did end up buying a copy of the Living Bible. The Living Bible is Jesus. Later on I realized that the Word of God had entered into my life, the Word of God made flesh. Then I got into parapsychology and a month later I would call the medium up in New York, trying to reach my wife. I said, “Let me come and do a séance,” and she said, “Come tomorrow morning and let’s have a séance.”

I went and was having a cup of coffee on a sidewalk café and a couple was walking on the other side of the street. They crossed over, they came to my table and they said, “You just came back from a long journey.” And I said, “Yes, I was in India recently.” Then they stopped and the man said to me, “You are hankering after your wife. Your wife wants to be left alone. Do not idolize your wife. Leave her alone.” These total strangers, never met them before, I ran to the apartment, crying to God, opened the Bible to Matthew 26:26: “This is My Body; take and eat.” I felt a hunger in my heart that I’ve never felt ever again. But I said, “Lord, I want you within me.” And I rushed out to the first church that I’d ever been into—the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Montclair. And the moment I entered, the priest was saying, “The Body of Christ.” And I said, “I read this just now, and I’m hearing this. This is

for me.” Jesus, the Eucharist, Jesus who entered my life in the Word, now entered me, my life, in His sacraments.

I tried to kill myself a few days later again after drinking for eight hours straight. I got in my car and took my hands off the steering wheel and the car was totaled, but I was safe. And a few weeks after that I was again miraculously brought to this church in Newark where I am now a deacon, but my daughter was in India and they would not give her back to me because I had become Christian. They wanted to raise her a Hindu. By using a Hindu law they said I didn't have any rights over her. So when I got married to my second wife, Maureen, we had a devotion to the Blessed Mother, and through her intercession I was able to snatch my daughter out of her classroom and bring her back to this country. I fought a court battle, even going all the way to the Supreme Court of India a couple of times until she was 18 and then she was able to survive this type of persecution which I experienced.

But my life now that I want to share is just living Jesus who has permeated my whole existence and redeemed every part of me. When we live the Christian experience in India as the arms of God, the feet of God, the mind of God, the empathy of God, the compassion of God...to live Jesus every day in and out with our faith in Christ Jesus because Jesus is sovereign. Who says that we have to preach the Gospel to every person in the world for salvation? I still believe that sovereign God works sovereignly in those countries where there's no hope because God is sovereign and His presence permeates the entire world. The Word has gone out to the ends of the earth. We are called to be arms, legs, eyes, ears, mind, the mind of God. There is ignorance in the world, but only through the love of Christ that is so powerful, that can shatter nations, that can shatter any barriers, this love is what will transcend all the barriers in India.

Pray for those 170 million people who have nowhere to go, still living in pathetic conditions in India. India has reached a progressive state of technology, but that's only for the 300 million middle class people who have been able to do this, but they still don't want to care so much for the poor.

So that's my story of faith. The persecution is of the heart...that their pain is being felt here. I had to ask God, “Lord, why me? What did You see in me that brought You to me?” I was so worthless. God saw something so precious in me that he raised my dignity to what it is today as a son of God. And so this power that He has given to each one of us to live this Christian experience, not only here, but through prayer, I asked him, “Why me as an Indian?” He said, “Why you as an Irish woman? Why you as an Italian?” He said, “I have made you all that because when you pray, turn toward your own countries and pray on your knees and I will save them.” Amen.

Paredes: Thank you, Deacon, for this very personal testimony.

And now our third speaker tonight is Fr. Vincentius Do, an Associate Pastor at Regina Pacis Parish in Brooklyn. Fr. Do was born and raised in Vietnam. He came to the United States at the age of 16. Very young he joined the Congregation of St. John the Baptist, a Chinese missionary order where he completed his studies in theology and graduated in May 2005. After that he left the Congregation and joined the Diocese of Brooklyn. He was ordained a deacon on December 2006 and a priest on June 2007. Fr. Do...

Do: It's a great honor and privilege to be here and share with you the story of my life and faith and hope in my country.

I don't know if you are aware, but according to the group called The Voice of Martyrs, there are 52 countries in the world today that are still persecuting Christians. In those 52 countries it is illegal to be Christian. What does that mean? It means that the government can arrest you for the simple reason that you profess your faith in Jesus Christ. As long as you are Christian, they can arrest you and put you in prison. My country, Vietnam, is one of them. If you go to certain parts of Vietnam, you can see the faith thriving; you can see churches and bishops and priests and parishioners doing wonderful things there. And yet, the faith is persecuted there. In Vietnam, the faith is not persecuted outright, but it's persecuted by limitations, by limiting what the Church can do. The constitution of Vietnam guarantees religious freedom, but that freedom is not the same as the freedom that we understand here. That freedom is not free. That freedom is conditional, and that freedom has many requirements.

When I was born, I was born during the last month of the war in Vietnam. We call it the Vietnam War. Over there they call it the American War. So I was born during the last month of the American War, and it was when the war was fiercest, when the fighting was fiercest. At that point, my family belonged to a group called the Vietnamese Missionary Society. This group included priests, seminarians, sisters, and lay families, and my family belonged to that group. So my family was on mission when I was born. We were in the middle of Saigon in a part that was mostly Chinese, and at that time my family was renting a room from a Chinese landlord. And on the day that my mother went to the hospital to give birth to me, the landlord went to a fortune teller, and for some reason the fortune teller told him that the boy who was going to be born would be troublesome for the Chinese, and so he didn't allow my mother to bring me into the house. So as soon as I was born I was persecuted. It was not for the faith, but I was persecuted. So while the war was at its fiercest point, my mother carried this little boy, poor little boy, home and was not allowed to come in. So she went to the mission priest who was stationed in that area and said, "Father, help me! What am I going to do with my boy here?" And so the priest allowed my mother to bring me into the sacristy of the church behind the altar to live my first two weeks there, but with one condition, that I would not cry during Mass. And I guess I didn't cry, because I stayed there for two weeks until my mother and father were able to find a place to bring me. But according to my father, as soon as we left the church and went to our new place, he had to dig a drain for my mother and me to hide in because the fighting was going on and the bullets were going in all different directions. But I survived, as you can see. I didn't get hurt.

About a month after I was born, the war ended. As the Vietnamese say, "The Americans got out." But the whole country fell under the rule of the Communists. I was born on May 3rd, the Feast of St. Philip; that's why I was named Philip. I was baptized Philip. Besides the priest who baptized me, there was an Italian priest and a Chinese priest present at my baptism. But not long after my baptism, they were made to leave the country because all foreign priests were chased out of Vietnam, and the missionary group that my family belonged to was disbanded. So my parents took me and my older sister to live with my grandparents in the countryside outside of Saigon. But then the persecution began because the pastor of the parish was a relative of mine; he was my great uncle and he was very powerful. During the former Vietnamese regime, the provincial governor would come to wish him a happy new year and all that, and he would get all kinds of gifts, and all these important people would go to him. As soon as the war ended, the Communists started to put him under house arrest. And because my family had close ties to him—he really liked my father, so he gave us the best piece of land. By the way, this priest was from North Vietnam, and in 1954 when they divided Vietnam into north and south, he took the whole parish from the north and took them to the south and established themselves in the south, and so he was partitioning lands for different families and he gave my family the best piece of land. It was right in front of the church, in front of the school, and in front of the market. But because of that, we were persecuted because the government thought that my father worked for the CIA. I didn't even know

what CIA stood for, but they thought that my father was an agent and that our house was the meeting point for all the agents. So they would come and knock on the door at midnight and my father would open the door, and they would say, “Oh, sorry, wrong house.” And they would do that over and over again. And then they killed our dogs. We had three beautiful dogs, and they poisoned them just so they could get close to us. So when I was about five, my father decided that this was not the kind of life that we were going to lead. And besides, if I were going to stay there, because of my family background, I would never be able to be admitted into college and get any kind of good education, so my father decided that this was not the life that his children were going to live. So he sold the house and moved us near the sea so we could escape the country by boat.

So that’s when my odyssey to freedom began. I say “odyssey” because it took me ten years. With the money that my father got from selling the house, he paid for the fare for my whole family to get on the boat, but when we got on the boat, word had already gotten out that the boat was going to leave Vietnam that night, and so people who hadn’t even paid swarmed the boat and my father being concerned for his little children (I was only five and I had my little brothers and little sisters with me) and so he took us off the boat. As soon as we got off the boat, the boat left. So there went our fortune—all our money, all our future, all our hope. Now what?

My father went to the mountainside. He bought a little piece of land, and he built a little mud hut for us to live in. For many months our staple food was sweet potatoes. I hated it! When you have sweet potatoes for breakfast, lunch and dinner, after a while, excuse my language, but it looks like the “s” word! With the sweet potatoes that my parents grew, my father was able to make enough money to send my mother on another trip. So with some money, with some savings, and with him working on some people’s boat, they allowed him to send my mother with my youngest brother on the boat. So my mother got on the boat and she went. Probably it was her karma. She went once and she was successful. She went to Malaysia, and from Malaysia she went to Rochester, New York, and she stayed there. I was seven. At the age of seven I started to live without my mother.

Of course it seemed against all hope, but we did not give up. My father said, “We have to get out of this country or we’re not going to have a future.” With my mother gone, my father had to work double. He worked all day and all night in order take care of us and at the same time to save money to pay for our fare to get out of the country. I remember the first time after my mother left, I was seven or eight, and my father sent me on a boat alone. He gave me to one man that he trusted, and the man drove me on his motorcycle to a meeting place. We all acted like tourists with our bags and things, and we went to a certain place, and then they would send us to another house and then about an hour before we were supposed to get on the boat, they would send us to another house, just to escape the suspicions of the neighbors and also to escape the eyes of the police. Then they would put us on a small boat and take us to the big boat.

The first time I did this, I was seven or eight. But this man drove me on his motorcycle, and I didn’t know anybody there, but we were all treated the same way, like passengers. And they sent us to one house, then to another house and another house, until it was time to go to the boat. And they sent us to the seashore. As soon as I got to the seashore, I started to hear gunfire all over. Somehow the police got word of the trip and they were there waiting for us. So we ran, and this man whom my father entrusted me to, grabbed me and we got on his motorcycle and sped away. That was my first experience. But it didn’t stop me. I would continue eight more times. Probably it was not my karma; I was not meant to go by boat. I was meant to go by airplane.

Another time I went with my father, my brothers and my sisters, and also my uncle. And the same thing happened. We got to the water, and just before we got on the boat, bullets! My uncle said, "Run for your life!" And so we ran. I didn't know where we were because we were taken by different people to different places. I didn't know where we were, but we just ran. For some reason we were able to run home, but the next day, my whole body was full of bruises and scratches because we had jumped over fences, bushes. We did not know where we were. The only thing we knew was that we were running for our lives. We ran and we ran and we ran. We ran home.

A few months later, we began again. And the next major time that I remember was we got on the boat and we got almost to the international water when five soldiers from Cambodia (they were fighting in Cambodia) caught us on their way back. We were almost to the international water and they caught us and they chased after us for about an hour until they caught up to our boat, and they brought us back and put us in jail.

Now this is when the persecution began. I don't know if you have to think twice when somebody asks you about your religion. I did. We were put in jail because we were considered political criminals because we were making a political statement by leaving the country, even at my age—I was still a little kid! They asked us to fill out forms and they asked us questions. When it came to the question of my religion—and I had heard people say before, "When they ask for your religion, just say, 'I have no religion'." And at first I was tempted to do so because the prospect of being persecuted twice—not only for the crime of escaping the country, but also for the crime of being Christians, was scary. So I wondered whether I should put down "Catholic." I was a coward. I put down "Christianity." More or less the same thing. But the next day, they asked us questions again. I said to myself, Who cares? I'm in jail already. So I put down "Catholic." But I never forgot that because that was the first time I was confronted with being able to be a witness, to say who I am. Here we take it for granted. We say, "Oh, I'm a Catholic." Over there, saying that has a great consequence. "Who do you say that you are?" has a great consequence, and you have to be able to say it and suffer the consequences.

So I was put in jail for one month, and my father was sentenced for obviously longer, but being that he was by himself, and we kids were nagging the people every day to have him released, so they released him after a few months because he had to take care of us. But I was in jail. That was my first time in jail.

Talking about hope, that of course, didn't stop us. Even hopelessly hoping we went again, of course. This time after my father finished his prison term, and he went back and he saved money again. This time he bought a boat himself. He bought an old boat, fixed it up, and then he registered as a fisherman with the government, and he pretended that he was going out every day to fish, but in reality he went out to scope out the area and find out which was the best route to escape. And on the way back, he would stop other fishing boats to buy their products to go back and give to the government as his tax. My father was smart. I think I get that from him! So after a few months doing that, he decided, "Okay, we've got to go." So we got the people on the boat who paid, and off we went. This time, again my karma, we ran into a huge storm. I don't know how many of you have seen the movie, *The Perfect Storm*; I cried when I watched that movie because it brought back all the memories. I remember those waves; they were like a house crashing on the boat. My father's boat was just a little one. We felt so helpless. So my father got up, being the owner of the boat, and he said to the people, "Pray. Pray to your God." The Buddhists prayed to Buddha, the Catholics prayed to God and to the Blessed Mother, the Christians prayed to Jesus. We were all praying, but the engine broke, and so we were floating with these waves crashing down the whole night long. The next day when the storm had died out, we

worked on our engine, and so we were floating for a few days. All our hopes were dashed. That was it. We were going to die. But then a fishing boat passed by and we waved them down. They were gracious enough to take us back, but they had to turn us into the authorities, otherwise they could lose their license. So they took us to the authorities and I was in prison once again. I was about nine or ten, and this time we got put into a stricter prison, well-known for its strictness. The first night, they put me right next to the makeshift restroom. At night the urine started to seep out and by morning I was covered. And they give you five minutes and one bucket of water to get cleaned up. I can never forget that night. And as you stay longer, you start to move further away toward the door, and the newcomers stay closer to the restroom in the back. But I was in that prison about a month or so, and after I was released we decided, that's it; we're not meant to go to America.

But then, after nine years, my mother sent us documents to sponsor us to come over. I forget to mention that in those nine years, from the age of seven to the age of sixteen, every night my only prayer was, "God, let me see my mother." Why did I continue to pray that prayer every night for nine years? As a child, I prayed day after day. Now when I look back, I see that God was always there with me; that was the source of my hope. After I got to this country, after two years in high school I left home and began my journey into the priesthood. Why did I never give up? I took the long way. When you go to Brooklyn you take the Brooklyn Bridge or the Manhattan Bridge or the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. I took the whole world before I got to Brooklyn. I went to California, Oregon, Connecticut, Rome, Taiwan before I got to Brooklyn, but I never gave up. I was always hopeful even though things didn't work out as I had wished and I really didn't know why I was hopeful. But now as a priest I look back and I realize that every step of the way God was always there. And even in my journey to the priesthood, God put people where they needed to be. For example, all of a sudden my godfather appeared. I hadn't seen him for 18 years. He appeared at my uncle's wedding and my father told him that I wanted to be a priest and he said, "Oh, perfect! My friend is a vocation director of an order of priests and he's in town!" Things fell into place like that.

But I would like to get back to talking about the persecution in Vietnam. After I was ordained in 2007, I went around to say my Masses of thanksgiving, and one of them was in Vietnam. As soon as I was ordained, I had the diocese give me a certificate and a letter to certify that I'm a priest, and I sent it to Vietnam so my uncle could apply for a permit for me to say my Mass of thanksgiving. We do not have to do that in this country. I went all over the country with my relatives and all I had to do was ask the pastors, and that's it; I would say the Mass. But my uncle had to apply to the provincial government in Vietnam to give me the permission to say my first Mass in Vietnam. I sent my documents as soon as I was ordained, and my uncle submitted the application a month before I got there, but my Mass of thanksgiving was on Saturday at 9 a.m., and I didn't get the permit until Friday night. And if I hadn't gotten the permit, I wouldn't have been able to say that Mass because my family would have been persecuted. After that, I stayed in Vietnam for three weeks, but the pastor could not allow me to say public Mass because the government doesn't allow it. The government was afraid that I would tell the people my "revolutionary thoughts." One time my father sent a tape of us celebrating Christmas and we were putting on a show; people were dressing up as soldiers and different things, and we were dancing and singing, and he sent the tape home. They sent us a note back saying that the tape was confiscated because it contained revolutionary images—the American flag. So when I was in Vietnam, the pastor, even though he's a relative of my family, would not allow me to say Mass publicly, so I said Mass behind the church every day.

Persecution is still going on, but the people in Vietnam are still hopeful. The population of Catholics in Vietnam is only 8% of the population, but they are very strong and they are very hopeful because they

know that God has never abandoned them, and I can tell you that with my life. I gave you just a little bit, but I intend to write a book. I'll let you know! But until then, I stand here in front of you to tell you that God never abandons His people, and even in the most hopeless case, God is there. I'm the living proof.

Crossroads: Thank you, Fr. Do. That was very moving and very beautiful.

We are grateful to our speakers tonight for their example of faith and for making us a little bit more aware of many, many Catholics and Christians living their faith in heroic conditions. In front of these men and women carrying such a heavy cross, we feel that we cannot remain indifferent. And nothing, not even a little prayer, can be too small to be useless. It is not up to us to measure. From this point of view, I would like to briefly mention a remarkable example of how the awareness of being part of the same mystical body, coupled with the means of today's technology, can make a dramatic difference. It relates to the situation of the Catholic Church in another very troubled part of the world, Iraq. It all started from this e-mail message that a good friend of Crossroads, actually a member of our Advisory Board, wrote to some of her friends on November 11, 2010

Dear Friends,

As you all know, our Christian brothers and sisters in Baghdad have been suffering persecution for a long time, and today there was another attack, possibly from Al Qaeda, just 10 days after more than 50 Catholics were killed in a Church during Sunday Mass. They have been killed for their faith, martyrs of our time.

I kept thinking about their suffering, about their mysterious participation in the cross of Christ, and what this means for me and for the history of Iraq, the Middle East and the entire world. I thought to offer my work for them, to do it very seriously as my way to be present to them. And to pray for them, to ask the pastor of my Church to say a Mass for them, that they could be sustained in this difficult time and not feel alone in their struggle, that they could recognize Christ in these challenging circumstances.

Suddenly, I had an idea and this is why I am writing to you.

In addition to praying for them, why don't we all write letters to them, many, many letters as soon as possible, also from our kids, to tell them that we are with them, that even if we are far, we are one in Christ, we pray for them, and we thank them for their presence in that precious land and in our lives? We can witness to them the miracles we see in our lives, the path we are following, our certainty in the presence of Christ in any circumstance, so they could be sustained in their faith. It is a small gesture, like a drop in the ocean, but Christ can use it to make great things, because, as He said, when two or three are united in His name, He is in their midst."

This invitation went around, literally, to the entire world and in less than a couple of months more than 3,000 letters and e-mail messages from the 5 continents (but above all the U.S.) reached, via the Apostolic Nuncio, the various Catholic Dioceses in Iraq. In his visit to New York a couple of months ago, the Bishop of Baghdad, during Sunday Mass at Saint Patrick's, publicly acknowledged this simple initiative thanking the U.S. Catholics and underlining the importance of not forgetting the people who are suffering for their faith. So let's again thank our speakers for helping us not to forget.