

KNAPP, Andreas. *The Last Christians: Stories of Persecution, Flight, and Resilience in the Middle East*. New York: Plough Publishing House, 2017, 223p. ISBN: 978-0-87486-062-7.

For readers seeking information on the terrible situation that Christians in the Middle East are facing, there are many books that can be recommended, but those wanting to truly experience their plight should read *The Last Christians*.

The book is the most recent of Fr. Andreas Knapp, who resides in Leipzig, Germany. Formerly head of Freiburg Seminary, he is now dedicated to the pastoral care of the poor, serving college students, refugees and the prisoners, as a member of the religious congregation Little Brothers of the Gospel.

One day, somehow, he met some Christians from the Middle East who were living in his neighborhood at Grünau in Leipzig, Germany. “Having listened to their stories – he tells us – I was so moved I had to write them down. They may not be entirely politically correct, but they are correct in the sense that they are authentic. Sometimes my closeness to these victims of persecution and displacement causes me to feel a sense of powerlessness, grief, or indignation” (p. vii).

This was the beginning of a new chapter of his life, which would eventually lead him to visit the Middle East several times and share the stories of Syrian and Iraqi Christians who have

become his spiritual brothers and sisters. To them and to all Christians in the Middle East who have been persecuted or murdered for their faith, he dedicates his writings.

He summarizes the main issue in these words: “For a long time Christians in the Middle East have been condemned to silence. For centuries they have been discriminated against by a predominantly Muslim society and, as a minority, they have been forced to quietly accept injustice and lead an inconspicuous life in the shadows. Even I, a priest and theologian, was for a long time unaware of the moving story of Christians in Syria and Iraq” (p. vii). He is appalled by the atrocities they have suffered.

His neighbor in Germany is a Christian from Iraq who had to flee from Mosul because he was threatened with death for being a Christian. His name is Yousif. He escaped first to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq, where he left his family in a safe place, but as he could not find a job he decided to go to Germany. The journey, which cost him 17 thousand dollars, was made hidden in a truck in such bad conditions that he almost died on the way. At the same time, Mosul was occupied by IS militants, forcing

his parents and relatives, as well as the entire Christian community, to flee to Ankawa, 5 km north of Erbil.

Shortly thereafter, Yousif's father, Abu Yousif, dies. He flies to Ankawa for the funeral and Fr. Knapp accompanies him. It is a real eye-opener for the German priest, who describes in detail all he sees, filling the pages with his memories.

He explains how, in the Muslim world, policies are motivated by religious belief, but this is problematic, given that Islamic belief in itself is not well defined; at times it is ambivalent and in some cases even contradictory.

"At the beginning of his mission, Muhammad was well disposed toward Jews and Christians. For one thing, the prophet – whether consciously or unconsciously – borrowed much of the content of the Koran from the two older faiths. Secondly, he was keen to win Jews and Christians over to his new religion. It is to this early period of Islam, when Muhammad was active in Mecca, that the Koran's positive statements about both faiths can be attributed.

"When many Jews and Christians refused to recognize Muhammad as the definitive prophet of God, however, he began to adopt a more aggressive tone. And since, according to current interpretations, the later revelations (of Medina) cancel out the earlier ones, the suras that laid the foundations of today's

anti-Christian ideology tend to prevail" (p. 213).

The followers of the Jewish and Christian religions are regarded as fundamentally inferior members of society in all Islamic-led political systems to date. These discriminatory practices run deep and are constantly being fueled in Islamic countries through preaching and social customs. From an early age, children are indoctrinated with contempt for "impure Christians" through schoolbooks and songs.

Violent attacks against Christians with the aim of "converting" them to Islam or driving them out are now once again the norm in all Islamic countries.

As an example, amongst many, he mentions that "the Salafist sheik Yasir al-Ajlawni of Damascus issued a fatwa on April 5, 2013, stating that it was not against the laws of Islam to rape Christian women" (p. 214-215). And that "in December 2015, imams in Baghdad banned their followers from wishing their (last remaining) Christian neighbors a Merry Christmas" (p. 214).

Thinking about all the Christians he has met in his trips to the Middle East, whose ancestors have worshiped Jesus Christ since early Christianity in that same place, and who are now being forced to choose between flight or death, he asks himself: "Are these the last Christians, singing their last song with their last breath?" (p. 22).

In clear and compelling language, the author carries their voice to the

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Western world. This book effectively combines dialogue, eye-witness accounts, photographic illustrations and explanatory segments to bring

vividly to the fore the reality of the most persecuted religion in the world today.

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