

Maronite bishop urges 'profound defiance' in face of persecution of Christians

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Maronite bishop prays during Mass at New York cathedral for safety of Orthodox leaders kidnapped in Syria (CNS)

Bishop Mansour said that Jesus was not a 'passive victim'

Maronite Bishop Gregory Mansour of Brooklyn has told students at Belmont University students about the need for all Christians to respond to persecution with "profound defiance".

Pointing out that this was markedly different from vengeful retaliation or submissive inaction, Bishop Mansour said: "Jesus was not a passive victim. Christians are not just asked to be nice people and doormats."

He told the Belmont students that they are called to stand in solidarity with the persecuted Christians in the Middle East, and to join forces with other Christians, Jews and Muslims of goodwill to raise a voice against "the worst injustice you can imagine," that is currently happening at the hands of Islamic State militants.

Bishop Mansour spoke at Belmont as part of the Nashville university's "Chapel Speakers" series co-sponsored by the College of Theology and Christian Ministry.

"We try to bring in speakers from across the denomination spectrum," said Todd Lake, vice president for spiritual development at Belmont. "We are a multid denominational Christian university," said Lake, noting that about 15

percent of the student body is Catholic.

When Lake approached Nashville Bishop David Choby about his recommendation for someone who could speak on the plight of persecuted Christians in the Middle East, he suggested Bishop Mansour.

In addition to leading the Eparchy of St Maron of Brooklyn, Bishop Mansour is also a leader of Christian Arab and Middle Eastern Churches Together, based in Lebanon, where he was ordained a bishop in 2004. He did his graduate work at The Catholic University of America in Washington, Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and at the University of California-Los Angeles in the Near Eastern languages and cultures program with an emphasis on Islamic studies.

The Maronite Catholic Church is one of the largest Eastern Catholic churches in the world, with more than 3.3 million members. Bishop Mansour's eparchy includes Maronite churches in 13 states in the eastern United States and the District of Columbia. There are currently no Maronite churches in Tennessee.

Bishop Mansour visited Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, his ancestral homeland, over the summer, and saw firsthand the suffering of Christians and other minorities who have been violently forced from their homes.

Witnessing the refugees' plight was difficult, but visiting the region "made me proud to be a Christian," Bishop Mansour said, noting the hospitals, schools, and centers for the poor and disabled that Catholic groups continue to operate in the midst of the chaos.

Even though "Christians in the Middle East are under persecution from every side," he said, they "are the salt and light."

During his talk, Bishop Mansour noted the historical divisions among Christians, even within the Catholic Church, but said that "amazing unity is happening today."

Eastern Catholic patriarchs from around the world recently visited Iraq to show their solidarity with the persecuted Iraqis. Additionally, Bishop Mansour was part of a major In Defense of Christians summit in Washington in September that brought together nearly a thousand Christian leaders, politicians and laypeople to launch a massive effort on behalf of the minority communities of the Middle East.

In remarks at the summit and at Belmont, Bishop Mansour championed the art of nonviolent resistance, which he said worked for the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi and St John Paul II. This requires "much prayer, much fasting, much building of solidarity," he said.

"Peace is possible, but it takes a lot of hard work."

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