

## **Christians in Libya Face Safety Concerns**

by Jamie Dettmer

February 18, 2013

Questions of safety for Christians are being raised in Libya. Three communities of Roman Catholic nuns are leaving the country because of threats from radical Islamists. And four missionaries were arrested over the weekend for distributing religious literature.

Ash Wednesday at St. Francis, a Roman Catholic church in central Tripoli, was somber as usual.

The Apostolic Vicar, Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli, concluded the service by urging the congregation of 23 mainly Filipino worshippers to "be faithful to the Gospel."

Beyond the whitewashed church, though, there is no spreading of the good news by Martinelli or the parish priest, Father Dominique - that would be dangerous.

During the weekend, four Christians - a Swedish-American, an Egyptian, a South African and a South Korean - were arrested in the eastern city of Benghazi on suspicion of proselytizing and distributing religious literature.

If they are found guilty of charges leveled against them, they could face the death penalty.

Two communities of Roman Catholic nuns have left eastern Libya, a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism, after threats from Islamists.

French-born priest Father Dominique explains:

"What happened is that the sisters, the religious sisters, three communities thought it was better for them to go, to leave. Two communities left already and one is going to leave [soon]. They received some threats, you know, and they heard about, they saw some people going around and talking to them in a way that they could think maybe their life could eventually be endangered."

They are not the only Christians who have faced threats - or worse.

In December, two Egyptian Copts were killed in a bomb blast at a Coptic church in the Mediterranean town of Dafniya. Assailants broke in and burnt icons in September at St. George's Greek Orthodox Church. And shots were fired last May, narrowly missing the priest. An Italian cemetery in Tripoli has been vandalized.

Despite the incidents, Christians still worship at the handful of churches in Tripoli and Benghazi.

Father Dominique sees little drop-off.

"Really we don't feel anything as you could see this morning that people are coming to church and they will come this afternoon, Friday and Saturday."

Before the fall of Moammar Gadhafi two years ago, there were an estimated 100,000 Christians in Libya, nearly all of them foreign workers mainly from Egypt, the Philippines, Africa and India. But there are probably half that number now.

At the Coptic Orthodox St. Mark's Church in Tripoli, the congregation numbers a thousand at the main weekly service.

The church's Father Timotheus Bishara Adly is critical of Christian attempts to proselytize.

"Our Christianity teaches us not to do [things] like this - we must respect others and if you want to tell them, tell by [your] good behavior. We must respect the government."

Still, outside the church there are guards - something that wasn't needed before Libya's revolution.

Copyright Voices of America 2013