

## **Statement from Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan on extremists and the recent threat against Christian churches in the Holy Land**

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First of all, I thank you for your attention to this problem which is growing, not only in my country, but around the world. Extremism is not a problem belonging to any one religion. Extremism is a perverted version of religion, and unfortunately we are noticing its rise among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Such extremists are not only threatening to those who are different, they are a threat to their own communities of believers.

This is why, today more than ever, we must teach the value of diversity and pluralism in our churches. We must teach the importance of seeing the image of God in the other. We must raise young people who see God in their neighbor of a different religion, race, culture, gender, ideology, or tradition.

The Lutheran Church can be even stronger in addressing the influences of extremism among us. I would say to my Lutheran sisters and brothers: Do not be shy in speaking against this perversion of religion. In the spirit of our Lord Jesus, we must always peacefully but boldly speak against extremists and their teachings. Such extremists always claim their speech and actions are justified because they love God, but the truth is that they hate their fellow human beings. These two positions are incompatible. As it is written in 1 John 4:20:

*Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.*

Of course today many are asking about the recent threat from a Jewish extremist group, promising to burn all churches in the Holy Land. This threat comes after the Church of the Multiplication was already devastated by an arson attack early this summer.

In the face of this violent threat, I have two messages which I would like to share with you:

First, the Christian church has been in the Holy Land for two thousand years. We have always been a church of *martyria*. This church has been here through changing powers and changing cultures, through difficulties and wars, but we have always succeeded in carrying the Gospel of love in this multi-religious and multi-cultural society. We will continue to be witnesses to the Gospel of love, no matter what the price. If it costs us our buildings, if it even costs us our lives, we are not afraid, for we have already won the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, as much as we as the church denounce these extremists and their rhetoric and threats of terror, we also think the authorities should play a role in stopping them. We want to see more than punishing them or putting a stop to a few outspoken leaders. We want authorities to ask the question, "What are these extremists being taught, in their synagogues,

mosques, or churches?" This wave of extremism will not stop until we look carefully at the source of these ideas.

If we are to combat the threat of extremism in our midst, we must first look inward and examine our own religious speech. Are we bearing false witness against our neighbors of different religions? Are we teaching and preaching the love of Christ? A reformation of religious speech must start in our own pulpits.

We must also consider the curriculum being taught in churches and schools. In a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, and in a world which is becoming increasingly globalized, we must be boldly teaching acceptance of difference. We must raise young people who view the other with love and respect.

Finally, the media has some responsibility in this matter. The media must stop promoting these extremist ideas, which represent a small minority in any religion. We need media outlets to promote images and stories of moderation, reconciliation, and cooperation, rather than giving these extremists the microphone in order to make a profit.

Dear sisters and brothers, I ask for your prayers for the churches in the Holy Land, as we carry the Gospel of love in an increasingly difficult situation. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land is committed to being a church of *martyria*. I ask also that you be bold witnesses in your own context. Challenge extremist rhetoric with the message of the cross. Do not remain silent, for silence allows the extremists to claim religion as belonging only to them. By the power of the Holy Spirit, be witnesses for the Gospel of love.

*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* -- Acts 1:8

May the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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