

Introduction

During his speech at the IRLA World Conference on Religious Freedom held in Manila, June 10-13, United Nations Special Rapporteur Abdel-fattah Amor exhorted the participants with these words: “Resist, Resist!” What a great slogan for those who are committed to promote and defend religious freedom!

Such a slogan reminds me of the word carved on the edge of a hole in the center of the Tower of Constance in France, near Montpellier. A young lady had been arrested because her brother was a Protestant pastor. She was 17 years old and would spend the next 37 years on the third floor of the tower. Her name was Mary Durand. To comfort her fellow prisoners and to keep her faith alive she wrote this word on the edge of the hole, with a nail. This word was: “Resist!” Just a word, but what a great slogan: “Resist!” It is far better to resist when you are free than when you are in jail. Resist to keep your freedom, your freedom of choice, your religious freedom.

I am always shocked to see the apathy of people who live in freedom when it comes to fighting for someone else’s freedom! Most of them think that it is not their business. Yes! Today if we let freedom down, it will decline and fade; it will be too late. Those who are living in free countries should do more to help those who are persecuted. They should help promote religious freedom around the world. It is easier to oppose a restrictive bill before it is voted into law, than to obtain permission to visit the prisoners of conscience when freedom has been killed.

Religious freedom is still a major challenge!



The *2002 World Report on Religious Freedom* is a contribution to this challenge that highlights major concerns. After September 11, 2001, the priority of many governments has been the fight against terrorism and the building of strong alliances. Some countries have been tempted to justify their restrictive policies against religious minorities as part of their fight against religious extremism. Others intentionally confuse terrorism with religious conservatism. Even a war on behalf of freedom may restrict the freedom of some religious minorities. We saw this in a city in Azerbaijan before the official visit of the president of the country. The police forced the pastor and his family to leave and ordered our members to stop their spiritual meetings. The reason given was: “Protection against terrorism!” We contacted the authorities in Baku and received a positive reaction. In other countries, achieving a positive reaction would have been more difficult.

For example, in Pakistan religious freedom has not been improving. Even after the discriminatory legislation on elections was abolished, the law against blasphemy continues. Religious extremists have killed innocent people only because they have another religion. China is still fighting some unregistered religions groups. What about Indonesia? Georgia? Russia? Turkmenistan? No major progress is evident. In Russia the tension between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican has involved the expulsion of seven Catholic priests. Their visas were not renewed. The Russian government is looking closely at the status of foreign missionaries, and so is the government of Bangladesh, under the pressure of religious extremists. But, perhaps the best news comes from France. The new government seems to be changing its approach about the rights of religious minorities. The previous one had been known for its “anti-sect” policies.

The words of the United Nations Special Rapporteur: “Resist! Resist!” are appropriate for our post-September 11th world. Religious freedom is still a big challenge, and



it is our duty to take up that challenge. We believe that in so doing we are following fundamental principles of justice, strong spiritual convictions and faithfulness to human rights.

The *World Report on Religious Freedom 2002* contains more information and reports than the first one issued in 2000. We are attempting to list most of the countries and nations, rating the best and the worst places in the world in terms of religious freedom.*

We hope this information will be useful to you, and that the World Report can be a tool for improving the quality of life for those who are discriminated persecuted for their faith! We are not forgetting them. They are important to us. Their suffering helps us to be more serious about the freedom God has given us.

John Graz
2002

* For some countries we have received little or no reports. We hope to include some of these countries in the 2003 World Report.