

Editorial: Slaughter of Christians drives nail into Iraqi Church's coffin

The massacre of 58 Catholics in Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral Oct. 31 was far from being the worst incident of violence since the U.S. invasion of the country in 2003. But it was the worst slaughter of Christians and it occurred in a place of worship. The event may well drive nails into the coffin of the Church in that blood-stained country.

As Pope Benedict noted Nov. 1, the attack "struck defenceless people, gathered in God's house, which is a house of love and reconciliation."

In 1932, one in five Iraqis was a Christian; today, the number is one in 33 and falling. The country was once a diverse collection of religious beliefs and ethnicity, apparent proof that in the midst of an Islamic majority, tolerance and mutual respect could prevail.

That was before the haters swung into action. The haters, it must be said, were not all Muslims. Nor did they manage to spread their hatred without provocation. It is no coincidence that those countries where Western influence was strongest – from Iran to Egypt – are the places where so-called fundamentalists have the strongest popular support.

Seven weeks ago, Father Thaer Abdal spoke to a Western reporter about the incendiary effects in Baghdad of Florida preacher the Rev. Terry Jones' threat to burn the Koran. Thaer talked about how his church's Muslim neighbours wanted to know if Christians found it acceptable to burn the Koran.

Although Father Thaer assured them that Christians oppose such actions, he was the first one murdered in the Oct. 31 assault on the cathedral. "All of you are infidels," the gunmen screamed. "We are here to avenge the burning of the Korans and the jailing of Muslim women in Egypt."

Bassam Sami, a survivor of the attack, described the assailants: "They came to kill Iraq, not Iraqis. They came to kill the spirit of Iraq." That's what haters do: Their atrocities kill people; they also kill freedom and drive minorities from their midst.

Iraqi Human Rights Minister Wijdan Michael, a Christian, said of the attack: "In my opinion, it is an attempt to force Christians to leave Iraq and to empty Iraq of its Christians." If so, the attempt will likely succeed. Who would want to raise their children in the midst of such mayhem and constant threats? To live a Christian faith in peace, people are forced to leave their homeland.

This is happening across the Middle East, but nowhere with such ferocity as in Iraq. The Oct. 31 attack on the cathedral may well be a watershed event, one

that is the death knell for the Church in Iraq. The gunmen will get what they want. But Iraq, the Middle East and the world will be all that much poorer for it.