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POPE'S PROFOUND SORROW AT DEATH OF CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ

VATICAN CITY, 25 FEB 2010 (VIS) - The "Osservatore Romano" today published a letter from Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone S.D.B. to Nouri Kamil al-Maliki, prime minister of Iraq, in which he expresses the Holy Father's concern at attacks against Christians in that country. The letter bears the date of 2 January.

The "Osservatore Romano" explains that the text has been published today after the Pope, currently involved in his annual spiritual exercises, learned "with profound sorrow" of the murder of three members of a Syro-Catholic family in the area of Mosul. Benedict XVI, "with his prayers and affection, remains close to those suffering the consequences of violence", the newspaper writes.

In his letter, Cardinal Bertone mentions al-Maliki's "important visit" to the Vatican in 2008, where he was received in audience by Benedict XVI. After that meeting, "the hope was expressed that Iraq may manage to rebuild itself morally and civilly through dialogue and co-operation among all ethnic and religious groups, including minorities, while respecting their respective identities and in a spirit of reconciliation and of searching for the common good.

"You will remember", Cardinal Bertone adds in his letter to the prime minister, "how His Holiness called for freedom of worship in Iraq to be respected, and asked that Christians and their churches be protected. On that occasion, I too raised this question with you, and you assured me that your government gives very serious consideration to the situation of the Christian minority, which has lived alongside the Muslim majority for so many centuries, making a great contribution to the economic, cultural and social wellbeing of the nation".

Cardinal Bertone gives assurances of the Pope's solidarity with the prime minister "and with those who have been killed or injured in the recent series of attacks on government buildings and places of worship, both Muslim and Christian, in Iraq. He fervently prays for an end to violence and asks the

government to do everything possible to increase security around places of worships throughout the country".

The cardinal secretary of State concludes his letter by expressing his "appreciation for the numerous initiatives undertaken for the benefit of the entire Iraqi community".

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