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Kenyan bishop says 'stop playing around' on anti-Christian violence

Any Catholic who's ever attended a parish council meeting in the States knows the kind of thing that typically comes up – how to handle turnover in the parking lot between the 10 and 11 a.m. Masses on Sunday, for instance, or whether it's finally time to spruce up the nursery.

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Now imagine this on the agenda: Whether to teach Mass-goers to recite a line from the Qur'an in Arabic, so they can pretend to be Muslim and save their lives the next time a terrorist puts an AK-47 in their face demanding to know their religion.

According to Bishop Anthony Muheria of Kitui in Kenya, that's among the grim choices his flock is pondering these days.

It comes in the wake of an April 2 attack by radical Islamic Al-Shabaab gunmen on a university in the neighboring Kenyan diocese of Garissa, which left 150 people dead and 80 injured. As they have on other occasions, militants took their victims hostage and demanded to know whether they were Christian or Muslim, leaving the latter unharmed while killing the former.

Muheria spoke to reporters in Rome, where he and 25 fellow Kenyan bishops were on hand to meet Pope Francis. He praised the pontiff as the lone global leader who's spoken forcefully about the Garissa massacre, saying that otherwise Kenyan Christians have been appalled by a "deafening silence."

The Kenyan prelate's message was that it's time to "stop playing around" about anti-Christian persecution.

"We're seeing an alarming rise in Islamism," said Muheria, who belongs to the Catholic organization Opus Dei. "We are under threat as Christians, and our institutions are not defending us."

Kenya is a nation of 45 million that's 80 percent Christian, but the eastern zone bordering Somalia is almost entirely Muslim. In this region, the challenges of leading a small Christian flock in such an

environment are staggering, especially for Westerners who have never experienced anything like it. Sources have reported over the years, for instance, that Christians are forced to run a virtual "witness protection program" to protect a tiny handful of converts from retribution.

Today, Muheria said, the agenda of groups such as Al-Shabaab, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, is to "make Africa entirely Muslim," and he charged that some Islamic moderates in his environment sympathize with their aims if not necessarily their means.

He stressed it's not just the poor and desperate being swept up in these networks.

He pointed to Abdirahim Abdullahi, one of the Garissa gunmen, who was the son of a Kenyan government official and described as a talented

law student with a bright professional future.

Muheria expressed frustration that in the wake of the massacre, government spokesmen tried to characterize it as an attack on “all Kenyans,” that was not religious in nature.

“These are smokescreens to avoid saying that the persons under threat are Christians,” he said. “It's time to stop playing around. It's not 'minorities' who are getting killed, it's Christians.”

Charging that security officials failed to intervene at Garissa until eight to ten hours into the attack, Muheria said Kenyan Christians are experiencing “many, many feelings of bitterness.”

He warned that unless things change, some may decide to take up arms and fight fire with fire – an option, he

said, the bishops are doing their best to discourage.

The bishops' strategy, he said, is to encourage Christians to channel their anger and fear into putting up a "strong public witness to the faith," in effect communicating that they won't be driven out.

They're also pressing Kenyan leaders for a more aggressive response to the threat posed by radical groups, Muheria said, including stepped-up security measures. They'd like to see global opinion brought to bear to make it happen.

In that regard, Muheria charged a double standard in reaction.

He noted that the January 2015 "Charlie Hebdo" attack in Paris that left 11 people dead sparked a wave of visits by politicians to France to express solidarity, but after the death of 150 Kenya Christians "not a single

head of state" has traveled to his country.

He also cited the late March crash of a German plane in the French Alps, which elicited enormous media interest and commentary, complaining that the Garissa massacre killed the same number of people without anything like the same fanfare.

"It was very, very glaringly absent," he said, asking, "Do all lives have equal value?"

If Muheria and other Christian leaders are indeed compelled to teach their people Quranic verses because there's no other way to protect them, that may be one way of answering his question – with the response, apparently, being "no."

John L. Allen Jr.

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