

Heart of Christendom losing its Christians

Religion column by Stephen Huba

With Pentecost fast approaching, now might be a good time to reflect on the plight of Christians living in the Holy Land. Christians are disappearing from the land where Christianity was founded 2,000 years ago at the first Pentecost, according to the Holy Land Foundation.

The Rev. Peter Vasko, president of the Holy Land Foundation, starts a three-day visit to Cincinnati today. It's part of a nationwide tour to promote the work of the foundation and raise awareness of the "Christian exodus" from Israel and the West Bank.

"Most Christian church officials in Jerusalem say that if nothing is done to stem the exodus, within 60 years there will be no Christians living in the place where Christ founded his church," said Father Vasko, a Franciscan. This should be alarming to Western Christians, he said, but often it is not - either out of ignorance or apathy.

Father Vasko gets people's attention with some rather startling statistics. He notes that whereas in the 1950s, Christians represented 25 percent of the population in the Holy Land, today they account for less than 3 percent. In 1948, Jerusalem had 45,000 Christians. In 1998, Jerusalem, a city of 600,000 people, had less than 10,000 Christians.

Of the 164,000 Christians living in the Holy Land today, 80,000 are Greek, Armenian or Syrian Orthodox, another 80,000 are Melkite or Roman Catholic, and the remaining 4,000 are Christians of various Protestant confessions, including Anglican, Lutheran and Presbyterian. The majority of Palestinian Christians live abroad, either in refugee camps in Lebanon or elsewhere, notes travel author William Dalrymple in his remarkable 1997 book "From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East" (Henry Holt, \$30).

Why does any of this matter? Why should Western Christians care? Dalrymple writes, "Without the local Christian population, the most important shrines in the Christian world will be left as museum pieces, preserved only for the curiosity of tourists. Christianity will no longer exist in the Holy Land as a living faith; a vast vacuum will exist in the very heart of Christendom."

What's driving Christians from the Holy Land is a combination of economic and political factors, Father Vasko said. Christians living in the Holy Land have issues both with the Israeli government and the incipient Palestinian state. "Israelis generally take care of Israelis," he said, "and Palestinian Muslims mostly take care of Muslims ... These people have no voice ... no lobby."

Only peace will stem the exodus, Father Vasko said. In the meantime, one thing Western Christians can do to help is, when they visit the Holy Land, use Christian tour guides and resources whenever possible. "When any (Arab) Christian sees a group of (American) Christians coming off an Israeli bus with an Israeli guide, they turn to each other and say, 'Why'?"

Staff reporter Stephen Huba covers religion for The Post.