

Students join in prayer for second annual March For The Martyrs

Students at St. John's Catholic High School in Beloit, Kansas, will meet at the school on Saturday, Sept. 25, to pray for the estimated 340 million Christians who are persecuted around the world.

They will be in solidarity with the second annual March For The Martyrs in Washington, D.C., which is expected to draw 1,000 participants looking to bring attention to Christians living in countries where religious freedom is stifled.

The march is hosted by [For the Martyrs](#), a nonprofit established in 2019 to raise awareness, advocacy and aid.

St. John's students became involved when teacher Alan Holdren, who recently worked for EWTN's Vatican bureau, was asked by founder Gia Chacon to help enlist other Catholic schools and religious organizations. His entrepreneurship class came aboard with the project.

"I'm very excited to be part of this initiative," he said. "What really stands out is that there are so many different Christian confessions involved."

Speakers at the conference after the march include, among others, David Curry, president of Open Doors USA, a nondenominational group that strengthens Christians where they're threatened; Father Benedict Kiely, founder of Nasarean.org; Bob Fu, a Chinese defector and founder of ChinaAid; and Toufic Baaklini, president of In Defense of Christians.

Chacon, 24, met persecuted Christians when she went to Egypt

in 2017 with Chesed Hope For Humanity. Her grandmother, Dr. Michelle Corral, is founding president and previously a coworker with the Missionaries of Charity, when she met Mother Teresa. She also helped to smuggle Bibles into China in the 1980s.

“I heard stories from my grandmother that had an impact on my life,” Chacon said. “And when I was in Egypt, I realized that it wasn’t just the older generation but also younger people who were willing to lay down their lives for Christ.”

The young Catholic called it a “defining moment when God was calling” her to do something greater for the persecuted Church. She took those experiences back home, had conversations about the issues, and prayed.



Gia Chacon and children along the Jordanian-Syrian border. Courtesy photo

“I asked God, how can we as the body of Christ in the United States advocate on behalf of our brothers and sisters who are suffering persecution?’” she said. “We march for so many causes. We march for life. We march to celebrate. So why not march for the most persecuted religious group, the Christians, and be in solidarity with them and be their voice?”

The movement is growing, and students at St. John’s are part of the grassroots response. Involvement is spearheaded by The

Forerunners, their club named after St. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

“I think we are very interested in this because persecution has been stereotyped as a thing of the past when it’s very much a modern day problem,” said Gemma Clark, one of the leaders. “I was already aware of it because I follow some Catholic social media accounts.”

This week, she presented a skit based on the beatitude “Blessed are the persecuted.” Discussion included suicide bomber attacks on three churches in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday and 3,500 Nigerian Christians who were killed in 2020.

“The students were surprised,” she said, adding, “We have talked about every time we go to Sunday Mass and have the opportunity to receive Jesus, that we have gratitude for being able to practice our faith freely.”

For the Martyrs’ social media is reaching tens of thousands of Christians in all denominations.

“I want to educate them about how to become engaged in prayer and action,” Chacon said.

Advocacy focuses on calling on our government to put pressure on governments around the world that are persecuting Christians, and to take action to fight against religious extremist groups doing the same.

“We supplied aid in small projects like Operation Christmas that presented gifts to Armenian children displaced by a recent war that was fueled by religious extremism,” Chacon said. “We’re also raising funds for Christians in Afghanistan.”

Holdren praised young people for becoming engaged.

“It’s difficult for them to imagine living in a place where we could die for our faith,” he said.

People are invited to pray wherever they are during the hours of the march and conference, from 3 to 8 p.m. Eastern time.

“The message to Christians who persevere through persecution is that we are with you,” Holdren said. “We are praying for you and we are one in Christ.”

Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.