




**BLESSED CARLO.** Cardinals, bishops, friars and priests attend the beatification ceremony of Blessed Carlo Acutis Oct. 10 at St. Francis Basilica in Assisi, Italy. Blessed Carlo, who died in 2006 from leukemia, created a website dedicated to cataloguing each reported Eucharistic miracle in the world. Vatican Pool/Getty Images



**CATHOLIC CRACKDOWN.** Hong Kong Catholic media tycoon Jimmy Lai is handcuffed and escorted by guards leaving Lai Chi Kok Reception Center on Dec. 12 in Hong Kong for alleged crimes against the state. The Communist Chinese government stepped up efforts to curb free speech and freedom of religion in 2020. Keith Tsuji/Getty Images



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# Across the Globe, Christians Were a Light in the Darkness

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

BY PETER JESSERER SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

While the world experienced the toll of a pandemic, Pope Francis called on Catholics to continue to spread the Gospel as disciples, without fear of violence or persecution. “What is important is the frankness, the courage of our witness, of our witness of faith: ‘recognizing Jesus before others’ and continuing to do good,” he said in June.

And across the world, Christians would live that witness through 2020, in and out of lockdown situations. Three Catholics gathered for Mass at the Nice Cathedral were killed in hatred of the faith by an Islamist terrorist on Oct. 29 — just some of the victims of terror attacks in Europe this past year. Pilgrims flocked to Assisi, Italy, to visit the tomb of Carlo Acutis, the first of the millennial generation to be declared a “Blessed,” whom Pope Francis beatified in October. As 2020 wore on, Catholics in various European countries started pushing back on state restrictions on worship and showed the faith was central to their lives. In Nigeria, one of the most dangerous countries in the world after Afghanistan and Iraq, Catholics face a ferocious, genocidal persecution by Boko Haram and other Islamic militant groups that have killed hundreds of Christians this year alone. One new martyr, 18-year-old seminarian Michael Nnadi, fearlessly “continued preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ” to his captors up to his death.

Sustaining the Christian witness in the Middle East became more urgent in 2020.

Turkey, which is suspected of supplying military-grade weapons to Islamist militants in Nigeria, this year turned Hagia Sophia, the ancient Orthodox cathedral, from a museum into a mosque. Turkey also backed Azerbaijan’s major offensive that overran Armenia’s army in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, sparking fears of a new Armenian Christian genocide, until Russia intervened. Lebanon was devastated by the catastrophic Beirut port explosion on Aug. 4, and while its corrupt political class has failed to put the country first, Catholics have worked hard to bring aid to suffering families.

Faced with reports in 2020 that Iraq’s Christian communities are dwindling toward extinction, Pope Francis’ announced journey to Iraq in

2021 shows the Holy Father is willing to put himself on the line for peace and for the enduring Christian presence in Iraq.

On the far side of the world, China’s communist authorities continue to persecute the Church, suppress Hong Kong democracy and carry out the genocide of China’s Uighur people.

In Australia, the High Court ended the legal saga of Cardinal George Pell, acquitting him of child sexual abuse after he spent 404 days in solitary confinement. “God our Father, help me to yearn for you, just as I yearn for the light and sight of the sun,” he wrote in his now-published *Prison Journal*. Pope Francis created the first cardinal from Brunei, on the island of Borneo, Bishop Cornelius Sim, a move that brings the witness of this tiny local Church into the heart of the global Catholic conversation.

Closer to home, across Latin America, the Church saw renewed attempts to legalize abortion. Pro-life advocates won a legal victory in Mexico but found themselves (even with the support of the Pope) facing a difficult battle to stop abortion in Argentina. In Brazil, Catholics battled South America’s epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a floating Catholic hospital named for Pope Francis delivering aid into the heart of the Amazon River region.

But a miracle in Brazil — a boy healed from a life-threatening defective pancreas — showed how close and universal the saints are. The saint who interceded for him? Blessed Carlo Acutis.



**CHRISTIAN HERITAGE.** Tourists listen to their guide during their visit to the Chora (Kariye) Church Museum, the 11th-century Church of St. Savior on Aug. 21 in Istanbul. The Chora Church Museum, as well as the more famous Hagia Sophia, were converted to a mosque and opened to Muslim worship, as ordered by a Turkish presidential decree. The interior of St. Savior is decorated with some of the oldest surviving Byzantine mosaics and frescoes. Burak Kara/Getty Images



**FREED.** Cardinal George Pell of Australia talks with a young priest near St. Peter’s Square Oct. 4 in Vatican City. Melbourne’s High Court freed the Australia cardinal April 7 following more than 400 days of incarceration after unanimously finding he was wrongly convicted of sexual abuse of a minor. Franco Origlia/Getty Images



**GENOCIDE RENEWED.** People visit the graves of their relatives killed during the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict in Yerevan, in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Dec. 12. Azerbaijani aggression toward Armenia renewed memories of the Turkish campaign of genocide in the early 20th century. Karen Minasyan/AFP via Getty Images



**RESPONSE TO TERRORISM.** People attend a Mass for France Oct. 30 at Notre-Dame de Reims Cathedral in Reims in remembrance of the three victims of a knife attack at Nice Cathedral the previous day. A 21-year-old Tunisian Muslim cut the throats of two of his victims. The government described the killings as an act of Islamist terror. Francois Nascimbeni/AFP via Getty Images



**DEADLY FIRE.** Smoke billows from the Beirut Ports Free Zone following a massive Aug. 4 chemical blast that killed 190 people and crippled the already economically depressed country. Haytham Al Achkar/Getty Images