

# Libyan Christian clergy vow to stay on amid violence

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#)

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Nairobi, February 23 (ENInews)--Christian clergy in Libya said they have no intention of leaving the country, where several days of protests and retaliation by government armed forces have left hundreds of people dead.

"We feel we belong here with our sisters who are giving their services in social centres. Their work is so much appreciated by the Libyans here and often finds support and appreciation," Rev. Daniel Farrugia, a senior Roman Catholic priest at the St. Francis Catholic Church in Tripoli told ENInews on 22 February.

He said the leaders were safe as well as the church structures, with the church's life in the mornings being almost normal, although many foreigners were leaving the country.

"We pray for all those who are suffering in these moments and for the leaders to have wisdom in their decisions," said Farrugia. In Libya, 1.8 percent of 6.7 million people are Christians. Islam is the dominant religion.

The Catholic Church, which is the largest denomination in Libya, has been allowed two places of worship: St. Francis Church in the capital of Tripoli and Immaculate Conception church in Benghazi. There are also Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and some Pentecostal churches.

The priests serve more than 80,000 Christians who come from Asia, Africa and Europe. Together with the pastoral care service, the church also offers social services to large number of African immigrants. Nearly 100 nuns are working in hospitals and health centers in various places.

With violence intensifying, Bishop Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli, Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli in Libya was quoted media reports on 22 February saying that many Christians were going into the churches to pray for peace.

"The two churches in Tripoli and Benghazi have not suffered any damages. The different communities of religious sisters working in hospitals in Cyrenaica (the eastern coastal region of Libya which includes Benghazi, Tobruk and other areas), are busy treating those wounded in clashes," said Martinelli.

He had on 21 February told Vatican Radio from Tripoli that the unrests were based on legitimate and fundamental requests by young people for better future such as to be able to have a house, a better salary and a job. "Libya is relatively well-off," he said, "and perhaps here is where the crisis arises. Young people see a country that could help them, but that doesn't," said Martinelli.

He told the radio service that it was difficult to foresee a resolution of the crisis, but the Catholic Church wanted to see a form of reconciliation that allows the Libyan people to have what is just.