

Jean-Clement Jeanbart, Syrian Christian leader, tours U.S.

by [David Gibson](#) in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue

During a recent tour of the United States, Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart of Aleppo, Syria, described the fighting that erupted Easter weekend, targeting the Christian quarter of the city and killing and injuring dozens. Three churches and several apartment buildings were destroyed and rockets hit Jeanbart's offices, which sit less than 200 yards from the Old City, where the rebels are based. The archbishop spent the next week looking for some place to bury the bodies of a family of four, since the Catholic cemetery was a battle zone.

"I was without any words to say to my people," the Catholic prelate said.

It was a low point amid the strife that has devastated Syria since 2011. "A country of blood and fire," he calls it.

Jeanbart, 72, heads the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Aleppo, an Eastern Catholic rite that is in full communion with Rome. The Catholic relief agency Aid to the Church in Need organized his tour, which ended May 1.

A few decades ago, Aleppo was home to about 170,000 Catholics, about a third of the city's population. Since the war broke out, Jeanbart has seen a third of his flock reduced by death, dislocation, and emigration. Militants have killed priests; the tires on Jeanbart's car were shot out as he traveled to Beirut.

Aleppo has become the main battleground between the government forces of President Bashar Assad and an assortment of rebels, who include growing numbers of fighters affiliated with the self-described Islamic State. Christians in Syria felt protected by Assad, he said, much as Christians in Iraq were under Saddam Hussein. Many on Capitol Hill, however, want to send more arms and funding to the rebels and remove Assad, who has been accused of using chemical weapons.

"He's not an angel," Jeanbart said of Assad. "But he's not bad. Compared to the other Arab leaders, he may be one of the best."

If Assad falls, Jeanbart fears that the ensuing chaos—like that in Libya and Iraq—may sound the death knell for a Christian community that predates even the conversion of the apostle Paul.

“As a successor to the apostles I feel a responsibility, a duty, to do what I can,” he said. —Religion News Service

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