

CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT OMAR KHADR

We care for Omar because we are called to Love and Justice



“Love the Lord your God with all your heart... Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31)

Omar Khadr is our neighbour. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christ does not mention the merits of the injured man; merely the fact that he has been wronged and that he is in need of help. Do we choose to stop, or walk by?

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be filled; blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy; blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:6-7)

The scriptures are rich with calls to be just, and the Rule of Law and habeas corpus are at the foundation of our society’s concept of justice. Ironically, these two principles, which have been denied to Omar, a Muslim, were originally forged in the 17th century in response to persecution of Christian religious minorities.

Omar’s strength in adversity

Canadian-born Omar Khadr has been in illegal detention since age 15 (2002), initially in U.S. military prisons at Bagram (Afghanistan), then Guantanamo (Cuba) and since 2012 in Canadian prisons. After being picked up from a war zone in Afghanistan, Omar endured five years of torture in U.S. prisons while being denied all protections guaranteed in international and Canadian law. He was eventually charged with ‘war crimes’ by an internationally-condemned U.S. military commission. U.S. accusations against him were never brought before a properly constituted court, and evidence suggests that Omar is innocent. Yet, since Omar’s repatriation in 2012 the Canadian government has kept him incarcerated, rather than redressing the violation of his human and Charter rights as mandated by the Supreme Court.

Despite the abuse and hardship, Omar has retained his dignity and is a positive and cheerful person who wishes to live a normal, productive life. He studies with volunteer professors and hopes to work in the medical field. He wrote “I always feel I’m in this world to help people.” (Letter to CBC, June 24, 2008). Omar’s spiritual nature and warmth shine through in his letters to many who have reached out to him, including those from Christian churches and individuals like Archbishop Tutu; and in statements made about him by people who know him – his lawyers, teachers, U.S. military psychiatrist, and those who visit him.

Omar’s spiritual nature

Omar is a person of faith, who is thoughtful and curious by nature, and he welcomes every opportunity to learn about other faiths. “He is an intelligent and compassionate person who continually demonstrates a sincere respect for the beliefs and values of all faith communities. I have had the privilege of getting to know Omar over the past year and his ability to engage in healthy dialogue with people of different faiths is a testament to his appreciation for Canada’s multicultural, multi-faith values,” says Muna Abougoush, a member of Amnesty International and the Free Omar Khadr Now campaign.

Since 2010, a volunteer team of educators has been helping Omar upgrade his academic skills. Many of these teachers are employed at King’s, a Christian university in Edmonton, where integration of faith and learning is the centre of its mandate. His professors report that Omar is a gifted student who delights in learning and is a very thoughtful and kindhearted person. “Omar’s faith commitments and his own difficulties have made him especially aware of, and sensitive to, the struggles of others,” says Arlette Zinck, a member of the volunteer education team. (See freedomarAkhadr.com for Arlette Zinck’s article, ‘Love Knows No Bounds: A Christian Response to the Omar Khadr Story.’)

Omar’s letters reveal inner strength, resilience, compassion and hope

Omar maintains a lively correspondence with many people, including Christian congregations who have reached out to him.

“Life for me is too beautiful to stain it with unforgiveness or hate. These do not have a place within me. I have more important things than bad things. What I do feel is sadness for people who do bad things or allow bad things to happen to others.” (Omar, Jan. 2013)

“Eid of the sacrifice was a few days ago and I thought what better time to write back to you. The beautiful coincidence is how ThanksGiving was one day before Eid, so we were all celebrating God and showing him our gratitude and joy. So with these two occasions I send you and your wonderful community my happy (belated) ThanksGiving and happy Eid.” (In letter to congregation, Oct. 2013 Omar refers to Eid al-Adha, commemorating the willingness of Abraham to follow God.)

“One of the blessings that came with my hard experience is coming to know such wonderful people like yourself.

We as humans are special from other creatures (among other things) by the ability to extend our hands in help and support to those who are in need. Being able to be compassionate with our fellow humans is what defines us as Canadian." (Omar, Letter to congregation, July 2013)

"I have to admit that this experience is not easy. I thank God for keeping me safe and with blessing me with an open heart and mind." (Omar, Letter Feb. 2013)

In response to a letter concluding, "our congregation has offered prayers for you," Omar wrote, "send my greetings and thanks to the congregation at your church for their support and prayer." (Omar, Letter Oct. 2012)

"In life there are things that remind us that there are others who have gone through hardship too. That is how I felt when I read 'Long Walk to Freedom'. A man [Mandela] has gone through a lot but came after 27 years a better man for himself and his people." (Omar, Letter to congregation, Oct. 2012)

"Be hopeful and know that there is a very merciful and compassionate creator watching us and looking out for us and taking care of us all ... I leave you with HOPE and I am living on it." (Omar, Letter to lawyer Dennis Edney, May, 2010)

Dear [redacted]
Thank you very much for your letters. Your words are kind, and I'm always looking forward to hear about what new is going on in the community.
Your last letter came a few days before Nelson Mandela's death. I wanted to send my condolences to you and to every peace loving person. Our solace is knowing that he left this world a better place.
This is a Christmas card, so sorry for bringing sad thing in it. So, I hope you, your family and friends and community have a very merry Christmas and a new year filled with happiness, success, and peace in the world.
My greetings and best wishes to all.
your friend Omar 16 Dec 2013

Omar's message on one of the lovely Christmas cards he sent in 2013 from prison, part of correspondence with a Christian congregation.

The card was sent shortly after Nelson Mandela's death and offers a view of Omar's empathetic character and his openness to other faith groups. Omar wrote: "Our solace is knowing that he left this world a better place."

Some Omar supporters

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, during his visit to Canada in May 2014, spoke with Omar by phone. Tutu made the following statement about the treatment of Omar:

"It has been galling in the extreme to discover that those in other countries who even helped us overthrow our oppressive system of apartheid, should have no qualms it seems in employing the same discredited methods as those of a system they purported to oppose"...

"He [Omar] struck me as a very gentle and caring and courteous human being who does not belong where he is at present." ...

"The Canadian authorities would do their stature much good if they released him immediately." (The Witness, July 10, 2014). **Omar's lawyer, Dennis Edney**, stated:

"They are both men of faith, and the older Tutu could provide moral support to the young man. ... Tutu is a man of peace, he also understands reconciliation and healing. ... Omar was delighted and honoured to speak to such a statesman. The conversation was a spiritual discussion between them that helped to further strengthen Omar's belief in humanity." (The Edmonton Journal, June 7, 2014)

Romeo Dallaire, who retired from the Senate in June 2014 so as to advocate for child soldiers, has provided unwavering support for Omar. Speaking in the Senate:

"the most serious violations of Khadr's rights have been covered up" – despite the fact that the Supreme Court of Canada twice ruled in Omar's favour. Mr. Dallaire concluded "the case of Omar Khadr taints this government, this country and all of its citizens."

U.S. Brigadier-General Dr. Stephen Xenakis, a retired military doctor and psychiatrist, met with Omar for hundreds of hours in Guantanamo. Dr. Xenakis was overwhelmed by Omar's "thoughtfulness, his sensitivity, his civility, his honesty." He said it was wonderful to see Omar again in the Edmonton prison, that Omar is "a pawn in a bigger political dynamic..." in which "who he is and his character is lost." The doctor believes that as a physician, doing what's right and following the rule of law, he has a responsibility to advocate for Omar. (CBC interview, Nov. 30, 2013)

“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

