

## Disappearing Christians: The Vatican Synod for the churches of the Middle East

*Catholic leaders to convene to address problem of steady emigration from region*

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In October 2010 the Catholic Bishops and Patriarchs of the Middle East will convene in Rome for a Synod to discuss the problems of the region as they affect the church. Here in Lebanon, the notion of a Synod is familiar. John Paul II convened a Synod on Lebanon in 1995. The Catholics had become alienated from the hierarchy as a result of an intra-Christian clash at Nahr al-Mawt in 1990; the Synod, despite various obstacles and objections, turned out to be positive and strengthened the Catholic church in Lebanon.

**What are the possibilities of a successful Synod on the Middle East? What is the problem and why a Synod?**

The problem is that the steady emigration of Christians from the Middle East has reached frightening proportions. The Iraqi hierarchy asked for a Synod to discuss the problem. Since its institution in 1969 by Paul VI in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the Synod has become a standard instrument for treating church problems. There are several types of Synod: ordinary synods, extraordinary synods and special synods. There have been only two extraordinary synods, one in 1969 on "Cooperation between the Holy See and Episcopal Conferences," and another in 1985 on "The 20th Anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II." Ordinary synods, treating general church problems, are the most frequent. Special synods deal with matters concerning a particular region or nation, like those for Europe (1991), Africa (1994), Lebanon, (1995), America (1997) and Asia (1998).

The special Synod for the Middle East proposes to reflect on "the current situation, which is a difficult one of conflict, instability, and political and social evolution in the majority of our countries."

The real concern is the exodus of Christians from Iraq and from Israeli occupied territories in Palestine. The Christian population has decreased from 20 percent of the total to less than 2 percent of the 4 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Iraqi Christians have been fleeing to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon to escape the kidnapping and violence perpetrated by extremist Sunni groups to destabilize the regime. There are no statistics for Iraq but estimates indicate that the Christian population which was between 800,000 to 1.3 million when the Americans invaded is now less than 300,000. Given all the problems afflicting Iraq at present, the flight of Christians has low priority in international political circles. Meanwhile, Israeli colonization of the Occupied Territories obscures the Christian exodus which is provoked by small but constant irritations for Arab Christians in the area. One such case received a bit of publicity in 1999 when a Muslim group supported by the Israeli government laid claim to part of the property of the Basilica of the Annunciation at Nazareth on the pretext that it had been a tomb of a nephew of Salah al-Din.

Much has been written of late on the exodus of Christians from the region. It is a political and socio-economic problem at base. Christians are leaving the Middle East because of fear and even more so because their future and that of their children in the region is extremely dim and problematic. Christians in the Middle East, Lebanon excepted, have rarely had a place in politics. The political realm was a Muslim reserve. Commerce, on the contrary, was an open sector and many Christians did well, buying and selling and investing. When Arab socialism became the mode in the 1950s and 60s, the commercial sector was absorbed into government institutions and Christians were squeezed out. The result was Christian emigration in slow but steady numbers.

Now with the conflict in Iraq and Israeli expansion, the slow seepage has reached alarming proportions. Some observers are predicting that soon there will be no Christians in the Middle East. This is considered a real setback for the general development of societies. The 21st century was seen as the century of pluralism, giving all societies a new caché. Christian Europe is absorbing sizeable Muslim emigrant populations which provide labor. Emptying the Middle East of Christians goes counter to this tendency and raises the specter of an invasive Islam in search of lost glories.

## **What does the upcoming Vatican Synod propose?**

The convening of the Synod should give hope to the many Catholics and Christians remaining in the region, a sense that they are neither forgotten nor neglected. The Iraqi hierarchy in proposing the Synod was seeking a means to encourage Christians to remain and the "Lineamenta" for the Synod (general guide lines) published by the Vatican at the end of last year states that "the aim of the Synod is twofold:

I to confirm and reinforce the Christians in their identity by the Word of God and the sacraments, and

II to revive ecclesial communion among particular churches, so that they may bear witness to Christian life in an authentic, joyful and winsome manner."

The document proposes that the Synod will offer an occasion to give Christians a clear vision of the meaning of their presence in their Muslim societies and of their role and mission in each of the countries. In fact, the Synod will be "a reflection on the present situation which is difficult, a situation of conflict, instability and political and social evolution in the majority of our countries."

Such is the aim stated in the Introduction of the Lineamenta. It concludes with two questions asking: do you read the scriptures personally, in family or in community? And does scripture inspire your choices concerning family, professional or political life?

Reading the introduction, one gets practically no sense of the plight of Christians and the urgency of finding a solution, especially a political solution. On the contrary, the message of the introduction seems to be: you are on your own, bear up, it is your mission to be where you are. Reflect on the current situation and read the scriptures.

## **The Lineamenta**

The document is divided into three parts, following the introduction:

I. The Catholic church in the Middle East: the situation of Christians, the challenges they face, and their reactions.

II. Ecclesial Communion: in the Catholic church and among other Christian churches.

III. Christian Witness: in the church and with other churches; particular relation with Judaism; relations with Muslims; and Christian contribution to society.

General Conclusion: what future for Christians in the Middle East? "Fear not little flock."

Part I presents an overview of the history of Christianity in the region and notes that:

It would be a loss for the Universal Church, were Christianity to disappear or be diminished precisely in the place where it was born. Consequently, we bear a grave responsibility not only to maintain the Christian faith in these holy lands but, still more, to maintain the spirit of the Gospel among Christian peoples and their relations with non-Christians, as well as to keep alive the memory of these Christian beginnings.

Then in describing the challenges confronting Christians and the resulting emigration, we find a more appropriate reflection concerning emigration. "Although certain measures can be taken to reduce emigration, still the root cause remains in existing political realities. It is here that action must be taken, and the church is called to engage itself." (No. 26) Here, the English translation lacks the force of the French. The latter reads: "On peut prendre certaines mesures pour réduire l'émigration, mais les racines sont les réalités politiques existantes. C'est là qu'il faudrait agir, et l'Église est invitée à s'y engager." The English reads: "Where certain measures can be taken to reduce emigration, its roots lie in prevailing political realities, which should be the focus of action and the area of engagement for the church."

What exactly is intended by the "church" in this paragraph is not clear at first reading. It would appear to mean the church at large, namely Rome, but the document is not consistent in its terminology since it speaks both of the church in the Middle East and the churches in the region.

For this reader the guide lines appear to be a bit skewed. They note a lack of evangelical ardor (13) and the loss of values in civil society and among Christians (16), the need to educate our Christians in the Social Doctrine of the church (32), better formation of the clergy (34), introduction of contemplative life among religious, and the need for personal conversion of Christians (32). The basic premise is enunciated in 31:

The manner of living the faith is directly related to proper understanding what it means to be a member of the church. A deep faith is the basis for a secure, committed sense of belonging, where, on the contrary, a superficial faith leads to a casual sense of belonging. In the first case, membership is true and authentic; believers participate in the church's life and exercise every aspect of their faith. In the second case, membership is "confessional only." In this case, believers demand that their church meet every aspect of their material and social needs, leading to "extreme reliance" and passivity.

Exactly how this relates to the "prevailing political realities" of no 26 is not immediately evident. It appears more apt for the formation of missionaries than for uplifting the spirits cast down by the prevailing political realities. Instead of addressing the trials and tribulations of the Christian population in the Middle East as announced by the Pope last September, the guide lines give more space to enumerating the foibles of the Christian population.

Part II addresses the communion of the Catholic church with other churches, and the communion among bishops, clergy and faithful. It is brief, 10 paragraphs. Part III, Christian Witness, is much longer, 40 paragraphs.

Here, relations with Judaism are labeled particular because of the relation between the Old and New Testaments, but given the political conflict in the region, relations with Judaism are specific to the churches of Jerusalem. Meetings and dialogue are suggested as the means of witness. And we are told that the most important dialogue is that of the Holy See with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. However, on the political level, the guide lines refuse to engage the church, contrary to what was said in no. 26.

On this level, the political leaders concerned, with help from the international community, have the responsibility to make the necessary decisions in accord with the resolutions of the United Nations. (no. 63)

Nonetheless, we find in no. 86 that the Israeli-Palestine conflict is the center of the other conflicts which exist in the region and that:

Our duty is to denounce violence courageously, no matter its source, and to seek a solution, something which can only be achieved through dialogue. Dialogue and encounter are also recommended for relations with Muslims. In addition, no. 73 states that a simple presentation of the New Testament and Christ is urgently needed for mutual understanding.

Under the rubric, Two Challenges for our Countries, the challenges of peace and violence are mentioned. To meet the challenge a pedagogy of peace is recommended. Then a third element is introduced, modernity. We are told that for believing Muslims "the phenomenon is atheistic and immoral," and that "Modernity is also a risk for Christians." "From this point of view, both Muslims and Christians share a common agenda." Here the reader is not sure where these Muslims and Christians are located. They are certainly not very visible.

The conclusion puts all on the spiritual level. The choice to emigrate or to remain should be made in faith, detached from an earthly point of view, abandoning oneself to Divine Providence.

Where, on the one hand, global politics will likely have an impact on a decision to stay in our countries or emigrate, on the other hand, accepting our vocation as Christians within and on behalf of our societies will be the paramount reason to remain and witness in our countries. At one and the same time, it is a question of politics and faith. (87)

Hope means, however, trusting in God and his Divine Providence, which watches over and guides the course of history for all peoples, and acting in union with God, as his "co-workers" (1 Cor 3:9), doing whatever is humanly possible to contribute to the developments now taking place. Our catechesis needs to give greater expanse to the limitlessness of God's love for all; catechesis needs to form the faithful into true co-workers, under God's grace, in every aspect of public life in our societies. (90)

Abandoning ourselves to God's Providence also means a deeper communion on our part, a greater detachment from an earthly point of view and more freedom from the thorns which stifle the word of God and his grace in us. (91)

It would be rash to judge these guide lines too severely. They put together several themes to provoke reflection and discussion. It is the Working Paper (*Instrumentum laboris*) which will organize the results of discussions stimulated by the guide lines. That Working Paper will be announced by the Pope in his visit to Cyprus in June. Nonetheless, it is evident that the basic political and socio-economic problem is obfuscated by the resort to spirituality.

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