

Christian leaders say Obama's Cairo speech built bridges

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Jun. 23, 2009

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Two weeks after President Barack Obama's groundbreaking speech in Cairo, several Christian leaders gave the president positive marks and expressed hope that it would open a new chapter of dialogue.

"I think it had a very positive effect. It opened new horizons for cooperation between Christians and Muslims, between political authorities, between East and West," said Father Rif'at Bader, who serves as a spokesman for the Catholic Church in Jordan.

"Bridges are being built between civilizations and between religions, and as Christians we pray that everything the politicians are saying will be realized very quickly," he told Catholic News Service June 22.

Father Bader spoke in Venice, where he and other church figures from the Middle East attended a conference on tradition in Christianity and Islam. Like others, he said Arab populations are now looking for Obama's words to be translated into action.

"Credibility will follow that -- realizing what he said in actions on the ground," he said.

Brother Michel Cuypers, a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus and a scholar at the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo, said the reaction among Muslims has been "very, very favorable." They were impressed with the president's respect for Islam, and the fact that he quoted from Islam's sacred book, the Quran -- "and they were very good quotations," he said.

The harder-line Muslims are saying, "Wait and see, what's important are actions not words," he added.

Brother Cuypers said the key to alleviating tensions throughout the Middle East was resolving the Palestinian problem. He said people are willing to give Obama some time to push the peace process ahead, but not an indefinite amount of time. Change needs to come quickly, he said, because events like the recent Israeli military offensive in Gaza can be repeated at any time.

Melkite Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart of Aleppo, Syria, said it was very important to people that Obama spoke in strong terms about settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"It's a good start. If the Palestinian problem is resolved, I think it will also remove the motive for much of the fundamentalism," he said.

But he said there was a certain amount of skepticism in Syria over the president's ability to deliver. "I'm afraid the problem is not just what Obama and the United States want, but also what Israel wants," he said.

Archbishop Jeanbart said it was good that Obama spoke in defense of Christian minorities in the Middle East, saying they must have a minimum amount of freedom and dignity.

The archbishop also expressed optimism after the Obama administration decided to open more direct talks with Syria.

"I think the United States will realize that Syria, if it is well-treated, may be an element of pacification and equilibrium in the Middle East," he said.

Jesuit Father Samir Khalil Samir, who directs a Christian research center in Lebanon, said Obama's speech was generally a good one, aimed at making friends in the region and opening up possibilities of dialogue.

"Certainly it was very positive, and the image of the United States was improved in the eyes of Muslims," he said.

But Father Samir also faulted the president for failing to make a critique of Islam, and said it was equally important for Muslims to be challenged on some issues. He said Obama's passing references to the situation of Christian minorities were too brief to be significant.

In Nigeria, which has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja said Christian and Muslim leaders were invited by the U.S. embassy to watch Obama deliver his speech on live TV and discuss it afterward.

Their reaction was generally positive, although some said they wanted to "wait and see what really happens," he said.

"I read the speech twice. It was definitely miles and miles away from Bush. Obama understands there are problems, and I hope and pray he will extend that attitude to other problems that America has with the rest of the world, not just Muslims," he said.

The archbishop added: "And when I hear him speak so well about the value of human life, I want to ask Obama: Is an unborn baby human life? And if he is, how does it affect his position?"

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