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A downward spiral, but 'Christians will remain'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 15, 2010

Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., walks by locked doors of Palestinian shops in the West Bank city of Hebron Jan. 13. The shops had been closed by order of the Israeli military. (CNS photo/Debbie Hill)

Even a casual review of the Vatican's foreign policy interests over the last few decades would confirm that the Middle East -- in Christian parlance, the Holy Land -- is at the top of the list. In part, that's because the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is key not only to stability in the region, but to relationships between Islam and the West and between Christianity and Judaism. In part, too, it's because the Christian population of the Holy Land is in freefall, with the nightmare scenario being that one day soon there will be no Christians left in the land of Christ.

As one Arab Christian told *The Jerusalem Post* recently, speaking anonymously for fear of backlash: "We're trapped between two larger peoples that don't like each other ? and they don't like us either."

Recently the Archbishop of Kirkuk in Iraq, Louis Sako, warned that unless aggressive measures are taken -- for example, to counteract growing pressure from fundamentalist Islamic groups upon Christian families to sell their land and homes -- "the Christian presence in the Middle East is destined disappear."

Given those oft-grim realities, a cherished Vatican dream is to mobilize Catholics in the world's centers of power, above all the United States and Europe, to accomplish two things:

- Pressuring Western political leaders to engineer a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, premised on the "two-state solution." Benedict XVI most recently reiterated his support for both Israeli and Palestinian sovereignty in his annual address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See on Monday.
- Finding concrete ways to support the Christians of the Holy Land. It's a long-standing lament in some circles that while Jews around the world are famously supportive of Israel, and Muslim charities and Arab states direct significant resources to the Palestinians, there isn't always a similar commitment in the Christian world to supporting the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

To that end, the Vatican launched the "Holy Land Coordination" in 1998, which brings together a group of bishops from Europe, the United States and Canada for an annual visit to the Middle East each January. The hope was that these prelates would be sensitized to the urgency of the situation, and would then go home and

lead their churches and societies in doing something about it. The visits also provide a form of moral support for the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, launched in 1992 as the bishops' conference of the region -- in effect, a way of underscoring that the Catholic world hasn't forgotten about them.

This week the Holy Land Coordination made its tenth annual visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories, with a special focus this time on East Jerusalem. (Israel has recently evicted some Palestinians from the area for non-payment of rent, though critics have denounced the moves as a "land grab" intended to bolster Israeli claims to East Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as the capital of an eventual Palestinian state. The situation is of special Christian concern, given estimates that 92 percent of the roughly 13,000 native Christians in the city live in East Jerusalem.)

In a concluding statement issued Jan. 14, the bishops from Europe and North America warned of "a growing distance between Israelis and Palestinians -- a lack of human contact that undermines trust and dialogue." They called on Christians back home "to learn about the situation, and to come on pilgrimage to witness the vibrant faith of the 'living stones' of the local church -- the 'Fifth Gospel.'"

The bishops likewise asked Christians in the West "to support public officials who take courageous initiatives for a just resolution of the conflict -- a two-state solution with security and recognition for Israel, and a viable and independent state for Palestinians."

"For us," they said, "this is not merely about politics. It is an issue of basic human rights."

The American representative was Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, currently vice-president of the U.S. bishops' conference. When the three-year term of Cardinal Francis George as president ends in November, it's widely assumed that Kicanas will be elected to take over the top spot -- meaning, obviously, that he's in a prime position to exercise leadership.

Before arriving in the Holy Land, Kicanas spent three days in Lebanon. It was a homecoming, since Kicanas is himself ethnically Lebanese. His grandparents were born in the country, some in Beirut and some in Zahleh (a city located in the Bekaa Valley, mostly populated by Eastern Rite Catholics). Kicanas was baptized and confirmed as a Melkite Catholic, and his mother spoke Arabic at home, though he never learned the language. Kicanas says he remembers only a few words from that family chatter ? some of which, he concedes, aren't suitable to be repeated in public!

Like the Holy Land, the church in Lebanon is also dealing with its own Christian exodus. A quarter-century ago the country was more than 50 percent Christian, but today it's 35 percent and dropping due to immigration to the United States, Australia, Europe and the Gulf States. Kicanas said many Lebanese Christians fear that what happened in Iraq, where the war and its aftermath have devastated the Christian community, may portend their future. In particular, Kicanas reported, many Lebanese fear another war between Israel and Hamas.

I spoke with Kicanas by phone from Jerusalem on Wednesday. The following are excerpts from our conversation.

* * *

What did you find in Lebanon?

Among other things, we visited Iraqi refugees in transit to a third country. I've been deeply concerned, because we have a number of Iraqi refugees in Tucson, and their experience is almost like a second trauma. With the economic situation, it's hard for them to get a job. In the past the U.S. government provided assistance to help them get settled, but today it's totally inadequate to meet their needs. They can't pay the rent, their families are

distressed, and it's very worrisome. We've been appealing for more public support. We're also working with religious leaders in parishes, synagogues and mosques to provide some kind of transitional help. It's a very serious situation.

Their stories of trauma in Iraq are profound. We spoke with one mother who had fled with her three sons to Lebanon, leaving behind a daughter who had been kidnapped on her way to church. After the mother arrived in Lebanon, she got a call telling her that her daughter was dead. She used up all her resources to go back to Iraq to find her, and lo and behold, it wasn't her daughter. She had to return to Lebanon, still with no idea of what happened to her daughter, and now they're awaiting resettlement.

There's another mother whose son is now fifteen, who was kidnapped at the age of nine on his way to the store. The kidnappers asked for $20,000 in ransom, but the family had no way to pay. They didn't even own a house, they were just renting. Finally they raised $5000, and the kidnappers agreed but insisted that the father bring the money. When he got there, they sent the kid out but grabbed the father and demanded the rest of the money. The family never heard from him again. To make matters even worse, the woman was disowned by her husband's family because she wasn't able to pay the ransom. It's just unbelievably painful.

Were these refugees Christians?

The families we met in Lebanon were Chaldean Catholics. That's true of virtually all the Iraqi refugees in Tucson too.

Is it your impression that they're fleeing mostly because of the economic and security situation, or is there also specifically anti-Christian pressure?

In this very small sample, the trauma of war and displacement was obviously a major factor, but there are also some inter-religious fears. One of the families talked about being pressured and intimidated by their Muslim neighbors.

What's your broad impression about the situation facing Christians in the Middle East?

A constant theme in our visit has been concern about the flight of Christians. In the Holy Land itself, a lot of it is because of the occupation, the difficulties of access, the checkpoints, just the complications of life here. You don't get the impression of serious Muslim/Christian tensions. In Lebanon, there's a great concern that the slightest thing could erupt into a clash of faiths in the community.

On the other hand, there are also hopeful things. We met an interfaith dialogue group formed partially though Caritas. These are professional people from all faith communities, and they are hopeful that somehow this dialogue could happen with ordinary people. The idea is that it shouldn't just be the upper level, but that it should penetrate into the communities themselves.
It's a great challenge, because there are such negative stereotypes in the Holy Land. Young Palestinians and young Israelis see one another as terrorists or aggressors, as unlikable, mean, dirty. They have terrible caricatures of one another, and they don't have many opportunities to interact.

I met some beautiful young people at Bethlehem University, who told me that they only young Israelis they actually meet are soldiers. They said they feel sorry for them, because they have such a horrible job, but they also talked about how mean they seem. They said that the soldiers make remarks at them, make demands of them, and generally treat them as less than equal. That obviously makes an impression.

Compared to other experiences you've had of the Holy Land, what were your impressions on this trip?

I was shocked to see what's happened to Hebron. I remember it as a bustling, vibrant market town around the tomb of the patriarchs, but now it's a ghost town. All the shops are shuttered, closed permanently by the military. There are soldiers everywhere -- roughly one for every [Jewish] settler. I couldn't believe the military presence. The only vehicles on the street are settler cars and military vehicles. Some of the Palestinian residents actually have to go out a back door and climb over a roof in order to get to a street, even if they live on that street.

I was walking around with a group of eleven people, which included some students who are here with CRS. We were approached by an [Israeli] officer who told us we couldn't be there because we had more than ten people, and he said that's against the law. One member of our group knew the law very well, and explained in Hebrew that we had every right to look around, but this officer insisted we had to leave the area. It's frustrating when authorities can make up the law to suit their own needs.

The reality is that Israelis have suffered and Palestinians have suffered. All have lost family members. The loss has come on all sides, and the situation continues to seem to move in a downward spiral. I would say it's discouraging, but with some glimmers of hope. One young girl at the university quoted Oscar Wilde: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Is there a future for Christians in the Holy Land?

Definitely. Christians belong in this land, they have always been in this land, and they will remain in this land. Of course, it's critical that the broader political situation be resolved. It's a long-standing conflict that has a regional nature to it, and it will take international involvement to address.

Let's suppose the Israeli-Palestinian conflict goes on another fifty years. If so, will there be more than a tiny handful of Christians left?

Their presence has diminished significantly, but there are signs of a new determination to hold on. Talking to young people at the university, they said very strongly that this is our home and it's where we belong. Even if we go away to study, we want to come back. If that feeling endures, and it's a deeply emotional feeling, the Christians will remain. We saw the site of a new development organized by the Latin Patriarchate. It's a housing project for Christian families, with the idea being to encourage them to stay. The hope is that they will find a home here where they belong. We also visited the seminary of the Latin Patriarchate, and met the young people there who are willing to serve as priests in a church that's struggling. We heard their ambitions and hopes for their ministries, and it was inspiring.

What's something concrete American Catholics can do to support Christians in the Holy Land?

Pilgrimages are important. A lot of people don't even know that Christians exist in the Holy Land. They see an Arab, and they may not think 'Christian.' We also need to educate people in the states that there are Christians here who need our support and encouragement. We do a collection for the church in the Holy Land on Good Fridays, and that's an opportunity not only for people to make a contribution but also for priests to talk to our people about the situation in the Holy Land.

With regard to pilgrimages, isn't it important that it be the right kind of pilgrimage? You could actually spend a lot of time visiting shrines and tourist destinations without meeting any local Christians.

Sure, although I think that's changing. A lot of pilgrimages these days make a point of inviting people to meet the local Christians.

I often think about how similar the experience here is to our situation in Tucson with migrants. You run into the same misunderstandings, the same stereotypes, and you have to break them down. One of the most powerful things we do is to bring people to Mexico so they can meet people who are migrants and hear their stories. They come to realize that this person is no different than I am. Their dreams and hopes are the same, they care for their children and want to provide for them just as I do. It's phenomenally powerful in breaking down stereotypes.

Why is it that Christians don't seem to have the same commitment to supporting Christianity in the Holy Land that Jews do for supporting Israel, or Muslims for the Palestinians?

I'm not sure I agree with your premise. There's quite a bit of support sent to the Holy Land, especially through the Latin Patriarchate. There's always more than could be done, of course, and we can do a better job of raising consciousness, but I see a real commitment to support the Holy Land. The Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulcher offer an example, and they're very strong in Tucson. They make a tremendous effort to show the Christians of the Holy Land that people in the United States care about them.

Pope Benedict has convened a special Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in October. What did you pick up about the synod in your conversations this week?

I sense a lot of enthusiasm. Both in Lebanon and here in the Holy Land, the Catholic leaders I met see it as an opportunity to really focus on the concerns of the Holy Land and the whole Middle East.

When I was in Lebanon, I had scheduled what I thought was going to be a private meeting with Patriarch Sfeir. Maybe it's because I'm Lebanese, but he arranged for a big assembly of patriarchs and bishops, so I walked into this room full of TV cameras and somebody asked me for my prepared remarks. I said, 'What prepared remarks?' It was like an impromptu synod of my own! One thing that came through loud and clear, and it may come up in October too, is a desire for closer relations between the U.S. bishops' conference and the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land. They said very clearly that they hope churches outside the Holy Land will take more of an interest in their concerns and struggles.

Are there are any specific outcomes Christians in the Holy Land seem to be hoping for from the synod?

One big thing is how to deal with the immigration of Christians. Another interest is trying to bring greater reciprocity between Muslims and Christians. Of course, there's also the need to resolve the conflict and the violence in the area on a regional basis. In all these areas, the hope is that the synod can bring the global nature of the church to bear on tackling the problems.

When you say "immigration," do you mean how to stop it, or how to provide pastoral care for these people wherever they wind up?

It's both, but I think the focus is mostly on how to stop it by creating an environment that will make it less likely people will choose to leave.

[Note: The working document for the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, to take place in Rome Oct. 10-24, will be presented in a Vatican news conference on Tuesday.]

Did you pick up any Jewish reaction to Benedict's recent decision to advance the sainthood cause of Pope Pius XII?

We really didn't have those opportunities. In general, I've suggested that it would be helpful in the future when we do these visits to have more chances to listen to the Jewish narrative. For example, I'd like to have the chance to speak to some of the settlers, especially because they seem to have a significant influence on the government.

Did you discuss the bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Holy See over the Fundamental Agreement?

We had a chance to talk briefly with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Danny Ayalon. He was very hopeful. What we tried to make clear is that implementation of the Fundamental Agreement is a matter of deep concern for the church, not only here in the Holy Land but around the world. We stressed that it needs to be resolved.

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Kicanas wrote a daily blog for the Catholic News Service about his experiences in Lebanon and the Holy Land. His reflections can be found here [2].

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